



## Naked, with Glasses

*Alexandria Constantinova Szeman*

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The same dark humor, morally ambiguous subject matter, and sophisticated treatment found in Szeman's novels and poetry collections are present in her stories. Quirky characters abound. "BusMan," in the story of the same name, re-invents himself as a superhero after an unexpectedly frightening incident on his daily route. Vincent, "Hunchback of the Midwest" and member of a traveling freak-show, regales his audience with tales of conquests over beautiful women, all the while longing for the one beauty he fears he will never possess. Thirty years after the end of the violently protested 1960-70's "conflict," the Vietnam War comes to a small town's Convenience Store in the surprisingly affecting and disturbing "VC in the USA."

Biblical characters populate many of the tales. Wandering in the Wilderness after escaping Pharaoh's enslavement in Egypt, the Hebrews begin to doubt their leaders, Moses and Aaron, as well as God Himself, in "Rebellion in the Promised Land." Jesus, his followers, and the Romans who occupied Judaea during Jesus' lifetime frequently appear, involved in encounters not mentioned in biblical stories. "Passion Play" recounts Judas' and Mary Magdalene's attraction to and avoidance of each other, as they struggle with their mutual love for Jesus. Sleepless and agitated, Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate is plagued by nightmares, doubts, and crumbling self-confidence after his unsettling encounter with Jesus in "Slaying the Dragon."

As in Szeman's other work, the universal themes of family, love, loss, loyalty, and betrayal are visited in this collection as well. The narrator of "Me and Mom and JFK," now a grown man, recalls his childhood, when he competed with President Kennedy, before and after his assassination, for his own mother's love. The spunky, unforgettable narrator of "St. Jerome Emiliani Comes to the Church Picnic" is reluctantly thrust into adulthood by a staggering "initiation." Equally mournful and outraged, the mother of a suspected serial killer makes the rounds of TV talk-shows in "Midwestern Madonna and Child," trying to explain why she's not to blame for whatever crimes her son's accused of, despite the media's incessant questions and insinuations.

Edgy, memorable, and engagingly written, these award-winning stories display another aspect of Szeman's talent — that for short fiction. This collection is filled with distinct voices, unique characters, surprising plot-twists, and successful experimental writing innovations (such as "Sorry, Wrong Number, Redux," which is entirely in dialogue). Grand Prize Winner of UKA Press' International Writing Competition ('07), this collection secures the author's critically acclaimed reputation in this genre as well, adding to the accolades she has already garnered for her novels, poetry, and non-fiction.

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