



# Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs

*William T. Vollmann*

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## **Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs** William T. Vollmann

This stunning new collection of stories confirms William T. Vollmann's growing reputation as the American writer whose books "tower over the work of his contemporaries by virtue of their enormous range, huge ambition, stylistic daring, wide learning, audacious innovation, and sardonic wit" (Washington Post Book World). All these qualities are in evidence in this collection in which the character of the writer and that of some of his intimates - both real and imaginary - surface and resurface in a series of extraordinary situations and encounters. Two astonishing stories frame this collection. The first, "The Ghost of Magnetism, " tells about a young man leaving San Francisco to become a sort of literary hobo living on his freeze-dried memories. The last, "The Grave of Lost Stories, " describes the death of Poe in a fungus-encrusted tomb somewhere deep in the earth. Here is the colorful and disreputable group of people familiar to us from Vollmann's earlier fiction - pimps, tramps, pornographers, witch doctors and massage-parlor girls. Within these stories, Vollmann gives us one of the most searching, bizarre, and subversive views of America today.

## **Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs Details**

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# From Reader Review *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs* for online ebook

## Cody says

What do Edgar Allen Poe, skinheads, sadists, prostitutes, mercenaries, San Francisco, Ford LTD's, and John F. Kennedy have in common? William T. Vollmann, of course.

A fantastic collection featuring some old favorites. You have bootwoman Marissa, Ken, Jenny, et. al alongside a new cast of characters, including Poe, that are sure to haunt your subconscious long after closing the last page. What can I say? It's the logical continuation of *The Rainbow Stories* in many ways. This is Vintage Vollmann Voodness! What's not to love?

I have to say that the Epitaphs are the real stars here. To a one they are brutal, beautiful miniatures. "Epitaph for a Jaguar" enters my personal Vollmann jukebox. Perfection. I have to cop to the fact that a few of them really tore me up, but I'll let you enjoy these elegies for yourself without tainting your opinion with my own.

All of Vollmann's different stylistic 'idioms' are present: 10-page paragraphs with writing so florid and gravity-defying you swoon; declarative and stark *vérité*; bugfuck crazy pseudo Sci-Fi; etc. The way that WTV tailors his entire stylistic timbre to his subject matter may very well be my favorite thing about this master. Today. Ask me tomorrow and it'll be something else. I've long drank the Kool-Aid.

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## Anna Prejanò says

Dai materiali usati in questo libro, uno scrittore meno generoso e più metodico ne avrebbe tratti tre o quattro. Ma Vollmann dimostra un grande cuore caldo, e il magma fluido e incandescente delle sue parole si lascia cavalcare come le onde di un oceano ribollente di vita.

Da questo magma emergono esperienze comuni raccontate in modo insolito (la nostalgia per il luogo che sentiamo come casa è il "fantasma del magnetismo", il punto di attrazione della nostra bussola mentale, e solo un quinto punto cardinale ci permetterebbe forse di allontanarcene davvero) e storie bizzarre raccontate in modo realistico, in cui proprio la concretezza dei dettagli parla all'inconscio (quella delle manette immaginarie).

A dare coerenza a uno stile apparentemente discontinuo è l'esteriorizzazione completa dell'interiorità, resa immediatamente visibile in modo a volte disarmante:

"Non appena le misi il braccio intorno alla vita, mi girò la testa. I miei sentimenti erano così intensi che quasi svenni.

Ero felice persino nelle punte dei piedi.

Andammo a vedere i broccoli mossi dal vento, e non riuscivo a levarle il braccio di dosso. Pronunciai il suo nome. Dissi: Se la mia mano ti dà noia, dillo. Se non lo fai, io ce la tengo tutto il giorno.

Lei sorrise e non disse nulla. E non lo fece mai.  
La mia felicità era verde come succo di mela inglese."

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## **Srdjan says**

*Centralna Evropa* upoznala me sa Vilijamom Volmanom kao piscem koji nema teme o kojima piše, ve? opsesije kojima se kroz beletristiku (a ni *non-fiction* mu nije stran) gotovo manijakalno posve?uje, tako da se moja namjera da ga nastavim ?itati podrazumijevala. Me?utim, utisak je da u ovoj relativno ranoj zbirci Volmanova energija još uvijek nije bila dobro artikulisana, da su pri?e neujedna?ene i po svemu previše razli?ite – pokušaj da ih se poveže ubacivanjem kratkih proznih sekvenci „epitafa“ skoro da daje kontraefekat. Zapravo, mislim da je najvrednije ?itala?ko iskustvo saznanje da Volman teško da može da funkcioniše u kratkoj formi, njegov medijum je roman i to onaj dugometražni, ?iji se obim mjeri prije kilažom nego brojem stranica, tako da ?e moj sljede?i korak kad je Volman u pitanju biti u tom pravcu.

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## **SL says**

Vollman rules!

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## **David M says**

I started feeling down on my adopted city today - this land of precious yuppie scum - but Vollmann helps me see the bright side. It's not just yuppies, this city is also filled with junkies, hobos, pornographers and whores (as well as people who somehow manage to fit into all these categories at once).

If Vollmann has lunch at a diner in SF, he's likely to give the name of the establishment and the intersection where it's located. And it always seems to be a real place. All the information is accurate. Which makes it kind of funny that in this collection he can't even bring himself to name that other city, New York. I would call that a coup for the west coast.

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## **Hadrian says**

Exactly what it says on the title - thirteen stories, each with their own coarse epitaph appended after each one. Obsession, fragile and 'impure' love, whores, war, tragedy. I hesitate to use the phrase 'standard Vollmann', since there is little typical about his writing, but it's a fine sample of what he does.

The Chinese tunnel system in Mexicali, described in his thousand-page *Imperial*, makes an appearance here, as does the Tenderloin and Thailand and Vietnam and Guatemala. His favorite haunts. I almost got bored with him for a moment. This is like the other stuff he's done.

But then, he does something deeply amazing and astonishing which shocks you. Maybe it's a sentence or a paragraph or a page-long stretch, of some beautiful tragic haunting writing that tears at your chest and knocks you dead and burns you up into a little pile of sulphates, like the men in his stories.

My favorites, personally, are the Edgar Allen Poe story, the Vietnam/Thailand ones, and the jaguar and Kennedy epitaphs. But you will have to find some for your own.

As good a place as any to start with Vollmann.

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### **Christopher says**

This is the least interesting work I have read by William Vollman. Some of the stories were pretty good, but most seemed like crumbs from other, better works.

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### **Patrick McCoy says**

13 Stories, 13 Epitaphs is the second book by William Vollmann that I've read and I still am not quite sure what to make of him. The first was Butterfly Stories, a sordid tale of a journalist and photographer in Thailand chasing hookers, looking for the one with a heart of gold. 13 Stories is somewhat similar, homeless, jobless, addicted to drugs, and several whores. It's hard to judge his writing without considering the content he writes about, which is usually derelicts and people on the fringes of society. It makes me feel uneasy and uncomfortable, I can't relate with the characters and don't find much redeeming about his stories, it doesn't seem like he has an overall plan, it's not necessarily a morality tale. Has anyone else read him and what do they think? I think I've had enough of his novels.

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### **Cath Murphy says**

There's a fine line between experimental and unreadable and Vollman, for reasons which are probably personal to me, falls on the unreadable side of the line. I know many people love his prose, and I laud any writer's attempt to push the envelope, but this collection of portraits alternately baffled and bored me. It was only near the end of the volume, when Vollman writes about his Norwegian grandfather that the words came alive for me. Whether that has to do with me or with him, I cannot say.

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### **Eric Phetteplace says**

Pretty good stories and Vollmann has a unique style which I like, sort of a combination of the Joyce/Gaddis em dash dialogue and free indirect discourse, no quotation marks at all. He adapts the content to the style in several places and writes in dialects well but most of the stories are just quick character sketches that get redundant in their movements (he did this, he did that). Also, he has a serious problem with naming people. Blackwell (he's black), Elaine Suicide (she's suicidal), Gun City (a city where they make guns), Abraham Yesterday (just dumb). Sometimes that's funny but it gets old and you feel like you're getting hit with the ol' symbolism sledgehammer.

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## Orsodimondo says

### TRIP PER NULLA LISERGICO

#### L'immagine di copertina.

William Tanner Vollmann compirà sessant'anni quest'estate.

I suoi ritratti fotografici mostrano un omone con testa imponente, spesso con taglio di capelli in stile militare, una faccia butterata quasi sempre seria, severa, ma anche accigliata, ingrugnata, aggrottata.

Ha cominciata a pubblicare prima dei trent'anni e da allora non ha più smesso con ritmo più che sostenuto: si contano otto tra romanzi e raccolte di racconti, la serie narrativo-storica *I sette sogni: un libro di paesaggi nordamericani* arrivata già al sesto volume, la cosiddetta Trilogia della Prostituzione formata da tre romanzi, circa una dozzina di titoli di saggistica.

Non è solo la quantità di pubblicazioni che fa impressione: è il peso di ciascun titolo, composto spesso da centinaia e centinaia di pagine, anche sopra le mille (il trattato sulla violenza *Come un'onda che sale e che scende: pensieri su violenza, libertà e misure d'emergenza* da solo conta sette volumi per un totale di tremila trecento pagine).

Sterminato e mostruoso sono aggettivi spesso riferiti alla sua opera.

#### Classico ritratto fotografico di William T. Vollmann.

Quella che segue è una tipica descrizione di questo scrittore:

*William T. Vollmann è un caso unico nella letteratura americana contemporanea: nonostante sia considerato a ragione uno dei più grandi scrittori del nostro tempo, e nonostante il suo romanzo "Europe Central" abbia guadagnato una certa notorietà grazie al National Book Award vinto nel 2005, la sua produzione letteraria non ha ancora ricevuto l'attenzione che merita. Del resto, non è facile tenere il passo di un grafomane tanto geniale quanto compulsivo, che dal 1987 a oggi ha scritto oltre trenta libri, quasi tutti di mole dickensiana.*

#### Ernest H. Brooks II: Winged Wall, Antarctica, 2010.

Confesso il mio spavento.

Perciò ho cominciato da un titolo breve, qui edito a se stante, ma in realtà parte di una raccolta più consistente, il sesto racconto da *Tredici storie e tredici epitaffi*, pubblicato da Fanucci nella collana AvantPop, e io mi chiedo se non sarebbe più corretto chiamarla PostPop, ma anche se non sarebbe meglio lasciar perdere queste definizioni tirate per i capelli.

Non è stato un incontro felice il nostro, almeno da parte mia: direi che si è piuttosto trattato di uno scontro, abbiamo ingaggiato un combattimento, per restare in una delle tematiche che più interessano Vollmann, la violenza - ho faticato molto a leggere queste centoventi paginette, non finivano mai, e ho dovuto inframezzare svariate altre letture per superare l'impasse.

La storia è ambientata a Gun City (si può non pensare subito a Gotham?), città che è il trionfo del

militarismo – e delle armi che arrivano da guerre recenti, come quelle del Vietnam, del Nicaragua, dell’ Afghanistan. C’è un lui che si chiama Abraham Yesterday, soldato figlio di militare e fratello di soldati. Conosce una lei che si chiama Elaine Suicide (i cognomi non sono scelti a caso) e cerca di ricostruirsi una vita con lei dopo la carriera militare (che avrebbe potuto finire con più gloria). Ha abbandonato le piastrine donategli dal padre (il quale le aveva prese a dei nazisti che aveva ucciso) per sostituirle con le manette, modello invisibile. Elaine accetta le manette, ma essenzialmente le subisce, si tratta di una forma d’imposizione che avvicina la vicenda al porno d’autore (spesso tra le cose più noiose, pretenziose e meno stimolanti che esistano).

La storia finisce male, nomen omen. Ma non era certo cominciata bene.

## **Gun (Gotham) City**

Il tono è costante, cupo, freddo, distaccato, quasi dimesso, senza impennate (non ne ho percepite), come un forte rumore di fondo che non si smorza mai, ma neppure diventa più robusto.

La scrittura mi ha ricordato certa narrativa di genere (ucronia, e quindi fantascienza), incluso il fumetto (le spaziature, certi dialoghi, le parole onomatopiche).

La mia impressione è che il suo ‘messaggio’, l’intento a monte della narrazione prevalga sul racconto.

L’aspetto che mi è piaciuto di più è che mi ha messo voglia di rileggere William S. Burroughs. ?

**Alcuni scatti da “The Book of Dolores”, dove Dolores è l’alter ego femminile di William Vollmann in questo esercizio di cross-dressing.**

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## **Mala says**

4.5 stars.

This book is a mixed fare, both in terms of form and content.

Short story is a challenging format—for the writer – to achieve perfection within a limited space, & for the reader (if they be reviewing it)— in that how to convey a coherent sense of a diverse & loosely-connected potpourri.

Thankfully, the number 13 provides a clue— tales of longing, nostalgia, loss, despair— ominous in the sense that existence itself can be, sometimes in a major key as in the S & M tale, The Handcuff Manual, sometimes in a minor key, as in the tales of quiet desperation, Flowers in Your Hair , & My Portraits, My Love, My Wife.

Each story is followed by an Epitaph— as Vollmann writes in the Author's Note:" A good story is only a hearse to carry you to the ending where the epitaph waits."

This collection is bookended by two masterfully done stories— The Ghost of Magnetism, & The Grave of Lost Stories. In the former, the narrator (Vollmann), in the midst of his farewell party in San Francisco, tries imagining a life away from his friends & the "state of grace" i.e. SF— he conjures up all kinds of future scenarios for himself- East/West/North/South— but there's no relief anywhere. The story climaxes in Las

Vegas, where the author figure vomits out memories of his friends in a pool full of the "beautiful people". Nostalgia drives this story & a desire to know & be part of the inner lives of people, which is also true of the rest of this collection as most stories here are portraits of people & of moments in their lives. One can not help but compare & contrast the sharp differences in attitude displayed towards San Francisco by two genius writers– Vollmann & A. Theroux! ( As in Laura Warhol or, The Sexual Intellectual) It's worth pondering.

The Poe story, The Grave of Lost Stories, astonishingly recaptures the cadence & baroque horror of Poe's own prose- a wonderful homage!

It's hard to separate personal from the fictional here as the \*Bill\* character appears in so many stories & so do his many friends, especially Ken Miller\* & Greenglass\*\* –in fact, the book is dedicated to these two. This book features many Vollmann staples– whores, pimps, druggies, hobos, diverse geographical locales, white man chasing Asian woman/Third World prostitute etc.

The story, The Bad Girl, featuring Ken Miller & his Thai prostitute 'wife' Yummy, presents an integral aspect of Vollmann's whore fixation– a white man trying to 'save' a third world prostitute, to give her a better life– ends up slumming it in Bangkok & then you realize what's the big deal here? This guy was earlier slumming it in the Tenderloin area of SF with his Japanese lover Satoko- he has always been a marginal character– *it's the whore who saves him!*

You can find out a lot about Vollmann's personal views on friends & life in general as the authorial voice is present through out– it might annoy some readers but I enjoyed it, it's the way DFW reveals himself in his essays. I also got a taste of Vollmann's humour- it's playful, very tongue-in-cheek!

I had an issue though, when he tarrs all the "beautiful people" with the same brush in the Las Vegas projected scenario– not all rich folks are bad, not all poor folks are good. For all he knows, some of those holidayers might've scraped together money for years for that Vegas holiday. What gives him the right to puke in their pool & thus symbolically puke on their very existence?

Still, I enjoyed reading this book. There are prose passages of amazing grace & beauty esp. the pastoral scene in the story called In Omaha & so many lines here & there that make you go wow! I also loved the epigraphs chosen by WTV for each story- such wide learning!

My personal favs– Flowers in Your Hair ( Maybe cause I like wearing flowers in my hair!), In Omaha ( A very personal story), The Ghost of Magnetism, & The Grave of Lost Stories. My fav Epitaphs– Jaguar, a Rajasthani Palace, a Coward's Heart, Kennedy, & a Loved Book. The only story I didn't like was Tropicana– I couldn't make any sense of it!

How I wish both Bill & Ken had visited Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia & also the red- light areas of Mumbai & Kolkata- who knows what stories & pics those people & places might have inspired!

But now-a-days, Ken Miller makes his living via wedding photography!!! Open All Night

And Billy boy's whoring days safely behind him, he's happy dressing up as a woman!!! The Book of Dolores

As Hemingway famously wrote: "The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places."



(\*)Ken Miller is Bill's photographer buddy from his Tenderloin days.

(\*\*) Greenglass is the controversial guy who was ( wrongly) accused of child pornography by the F.B.I.

\* \* \*

...even the most shining of all peacocks must eventually fold his fantail, exhausted, and let it drag on the wet and dry grass.

So you blew the dust off the sighting mirror of your compass, whose precision lines framed your face as if you were looking at yourself through the reticule of a sniping rifle.

Satoko was a beautiful vampire who said nothing, did nothing, absorbed him like a lake into which he, a stone, fell with scarcely a ripple. There was nothing about her to understand: she was the infinity of emptiness.

In the suburbs of Gun City, "lovely loveless housewives took phenobarbital and lay curled in bed all day like frozen shrimp."

Inside Elaine there were brick walls with arches as in Poe's wine cellar; there the telltale hearts had once beat like trembling liver-coloured water balloons, bulging through the opening like Mishima's intestines when he committed *seppuku* ; but everything was dry now; Elaine had let the blood out.

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## **Mark Enderle says**

One day I will have read every book Vollmann has published, and on that day I will be quite sad.

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## **Alexander Weber says**

"... you left home, in short, and went north to Gualala among the blueberries and the huckleberries, and you liked Gualala because it was only half a day's drive from San Francisco and the smell of sun on the clay of the pygmy forest was so good; you loved the way that trees leaned against trees and the way that tree-twigs fared downward like the ribs of fishes, and you fed your compass sweetheart the pale young needle-shoots of spruces and hemlocks because those were the sweetest, and the earth was so luxuriously giving that you could run down an almost vertical slope without fear because your heels sank deep in the loam with every step to make steps for you; you hugged the azaleas for fun; you ate some miner's lettuce, and there was a breeze and the soft hills were like birds waving their fern-wings, but then the blackness that Elaine chew so much about was clawing at you and your heels slipped and you tumbled down the hill cutting your face on prickles and falling farther and farther north, past Willits where you and Seth had set up a tent one night and been scared by a racoon, magnifying it into a brown bear, a black bear, a grizzly bear, a polar bear, a softly terrifying monster of immense cunning prepared to smother you with its night-bulk;..."

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## **Nathaniel says**

I read William T. Vollmann because he occasionally gets everything right, all at once. Tucked between pages

of overwritten and sometimes annoying prose, he'll pull everything together for a few sentences that are crass, ethical, devastating, beautiful and true. I wonder if he will ever be constrained by himself or an editor to pack his finest moments into a novel all their own; it would be a formidable work.

13 Stories and 13 epitaphs, like a few other Vollmann "short story collections" is awfully close to being a shredded novel (perhaps another place where an editor less overwhelmed by Vollmann's fame might have made some suggestions). Characters recur throughout and the narrative voice is more of a presence and more of a character than, say, Anderson is in "Winesburg, Ohio."

A longer excerpt from the beginning of the eighth story offers a particularly unobscured example of Vollmann's subject matter and point of view:

"Admittedly, whatever help I offered has rarely succeeded in accomplishing anything; yet I myself have benefited so much from the generosity of friends and strangers that I have never seen reason to be pessimistic about what one human being can do for another. There are always instances, good and bad, that prove that the world does not work the way we expect it to. I remember the case of Sheet-Rock Mark, who went with my friend Ken to a Vietnamese restaurant, and Mark kept yelling what the fuck do you want to take me to this gook place for? why do you want this goddamned gook food? and I imagine that the Vietnamese lady who served them understood very well the drift of Mark's words and feared and hated Mark, and then after lunch Mark saw that the door was broken and he said to her oh you want me to fix your door? He got his tools and worked on that door for a good hour, and when he was finished the door was fixed and the Vietnamese lady was happy. It seems to me that Mark did more good than one of the people who have despised Mark for calling her a gook, who would have been polite to her and smiled at her encouragingly when she tried to speak English, but who would never in a million years have repaired the door."

This is Vollmann, matter-of-fact and confrontational, sitting amongst the people who concern him. At another point, also concerned with a war veteran, Vollmann writes with more intensity:

"Nonetheless, he had kept the dog tags of the last German that he'd killed, one minute before Hitler committed suicide. They were two cold black strips of metal, joined by a chain; they were heavy and slick with gun-oil; they had the smell of handcuffs about them. Sometimes, when the rest of the family was watching the blue adventures of Lone Shen on the old television and everybody got killed in action all over again, he went out to the garage to hold them in his hands. It was strange, the way they could suck the warmth out of him. He told no one about them, least of all his wife, because they had power and were magic. A houselight from across the featurlessly white-walled driveway shone green in the window, which was grey and of a varying texture, like pond ice. He held the dog tags up to the light and watched them glow. but they sucked him dry somehow. they left him so tired that when he pissed he could not even tell whether the ringing in his ears was piss striking the bowl or a sound in his head or maybe the ringing of a telephone."

Of course, within a minute's read, you can be mired in a twelve page, chopped up whore-dialogue of broken and accented English. Or your narrator might ask, "Which of the umpety-ump million flavors of pussy would he taste tonight?" But this multi-colored, unapologetic mess has characterized much of the Vollmann that I have read--and when I see that it characterizes another of his works (and when I see that I am not about to read a mythologized book about an icelandic power vest), I will read it.

Sometimes you are embarrassed for Vollmann and sometimes he embarrasses you. He is earnest, thoughtful, far away from what you know and allergic to the cheap laughs and the garbagey referential humor of his contemporary American novelists.

