

# [Gutshot by Amelia Gray](#)

written by Marisela Navarro | June 8, 2015



*Gutshot* by Amelia Gray  
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Amelia Gray has a knack for characters. In the thirty-eight short stories that comprise *Gutshot*, her latest collection, her characters exist in a class of their own and are hard to forget. These characters don't speak their fears and desires; they don't internalize them either. Instead, many of their deepest impulses inhabit a sort of corporeality. We glimpse characters via physical actions and exchanges with the world. I wouldn't call them idiosyncratic—they are more extraordinary than that. And they aren't simply batting at bizarre situational pitches. These characters move in specific and unnatural and disgusting ways.

Gray wastes no time pulling us into her curious creations. She has an edge to her language that can hook the most languorous of readers. But beyond all this, there's always a moment in her stories that makes us nervous for something else entirely—an impending breaking point, an insoluble feeling in an otherwise scenic progression.

Take "House Heart," for example, a story in which a couple invites a prostitute over to their house. Easy to start off believing you're reading about kinky characters who like kinky sex. This could be weird and could be normal. But then as the female narrator rubs oil on the prostitute's body, she notes: "She was tense under my hands. There seemed to be a thin layer of glowing light just under her skin, a scratch away."

Gray often poses impeccable, beautiful, and frightening observations such as this. What follows in "House Heart" is a disturbing escalation of events. These ruptures in her stories seem to point to some latent sensitivity in her characters. In fact, many of the stories in *Gutshot* carry references to breaking open the skin, of getting at whatever lies beneath the surface. It is as though her characters are millimeters away from getting through to something—themselves, another person, a belief, or state of being—and they barely need to scratch and peel to get at it. All the ugly, sweet, and inconceivable stuff in their guts is on the cusp of pouring out. And then it does.

In "Monument," an usher accidentally chips a corner of a gravestone during a community graveyard cleanup: "A line of earth clung to where the shovel had struck, and the stone that chipped off had given way to the mica sparkling inside. He laid an open palm on the place." Almost immediately, the cleanup goes haywire.

In "Western Passage," a woman invites a young girl to stay at her apartment after saving her from the advances of a sleazy guy on a cross-country bus

ride. As the girl sleeps, the woman showers: "The water drove welts into my skin but I couldn't force it down deep enough, even when I tugged my earlobes down, when I opened wide and sent it down my throat. The bus had left the kind of stain that coiled around my animal cells." A stunning passage that leads directly to an unsettling flash back and an uncomfortable interaction between the woman and the girl.

Even in the more introspective "Flight Log, Chicago/Toledo," while there are no literal references to superficial wounds or puncturing of the skin, there is the feeling that the narrator, a pilot, is moving along a course that will soon be exposed. The story, barely two pages long, seems to exist on a surface of its own, the invisible surface between earth and sky, a place where only his thoughts exist, ready to collapse: "I do wonder what the captain is thinking while we're bringing the plane into some place like that where people live their lives. I'm afraid of what he'll say when I ask."

Gray's stories are, at times, tinged with tenderness, as in the heartfelt coming-of-age story, "Blood." But this tenderness, more often than not, turns obsessive and unhealthy. In "Precious Katherine," a man has a nagging tissue removed from his shoulder by a doctor, only to discover it contains undeveloped remnants of his unborn twin. The story becomes increasingly surreal as he attempts to preserve her, but by the end we can't help but wonder—*is* it surreal? Isn't everyone a product of their self-protective beliefs? Is the distance one travels from sane to insane not that far after all? These existential posits can get a bit tiring depending on your taste or mood, but you may just want to tackle the stories on a different day. The metaphysical is bred from palpable details and imaginative slow-action; nothing you can't enjoy with an open mind.

The collection is teeming with lovely prose. You could frame Gray's sentences individually and hang them in an art gallery, especially her opening lines. And with the majority of stories in the three- to five-page range, the stories can be read and re-read in short bursts or one longer sitting. There is no shortage of fullness in their brevity. These are characters with unforgettable exteriors. In these stories, Gray shows us what the world might be like if the fears and desires people suppress on the inside are instead boosted and encouraged to work on the surface—for better or for worse.