

Spotlight on Fiction: The Tenth of December

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In his most recent collection of short stories, *The Tenth of December*, George Saunders parodies the nullity of consumer culture and the bottomless anxieties of ordinary Joes and Joesephines caught living through the collapse of the middle class. His style is dark, twistedly funny and microscopically observed.

In the story “Escape from Spiderhead,” we get a Saunderian glimpse into a near future of life style enhancement by cognitive pharmaceutical tweaks. We don’t see the new consumers of these wonder drugs. Saunders instead imagines for us hapless human subjects undergoing trials of new compounds like Verbaluce—a pharmaceutical enhancer of lucidity and verbal expression. Our protagonist tests out a new drug that intensifies the appreciation of nature. Under its influence, the garden looks “nice” and then:

“He added some Verbaluce™ to the drip, and soon I was saying the same things, but saying them better... It was as if I could suddenly discern, in a contemporary vignette, the ancient corollary through which Plato and his ancient contemporaries might have strolled, to wit, I was sensing the eternal in the ephemeral.”

Turn off the Verbaluce drip and the garden is again “nice”, not a Greek pastoral brought to life. Turn off the love drug and your new soul mate is once again “nothing special.” All is not enhancement in this brave new lab. “Darkenfloxx” is your blackest depression raised to the tenth power. A little “Docilryde” will make human subjects obey every order—but frustratingly requires special authorization from senior management. It’s just the trick when your subject is refusing to “Darkenfloxx” another subject for yet more data collection.

“Escape from Spiderhead” represents a world of criminals trading out prison time to serve as research subjects in a dystopian Pharma-Industrial complex. Saunders gives us a rat’s-eye of view their servitude. They are means used to an end—the design of synthetic emotions and a chemical push against limits of free will.