



Things Kept, Things Left Behind (Iowa Short Fiction Award)

Jim Tomlinson

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The stories in *Things Kept, Things Left Behind* explore the ambiguities of kept secrets, the tangles of abandoned pasts, and uneasy accommodations. Jim Tomlinson's characters each face the desire to reclaim dreams left behind, along with something of the dreamer that was also lost. Starkly rendered, these spiraling characters inhabit a specific place and class---small-town Kentucky, working-class America---but the stories, told in all their humor and tragedy, are universal. In each story the characters face conflict, sometimes within themselves, sometimes with each other. Each carries a past and with it an urge to return and repair. In "First Husband, First Wife," ex-spouses are repeatedly drawn together by a shared history they cannot seem to escape, and they are finally forced to choose between leaving the past or leaving each other. LeAnn and Cass are grown sisters who conspire to help their prideful mother in "Things Kept." "Prologue" is a voyeuristic journey through the surprisingly different lives of two star-crossed friends, each with its successes and pitfalls, told through their letters over thirty-five years. In "Stainless," Annie and Warren divide their possessions on the final night of their marriage. Their realtor has advised them to "declutter" the house they are leaving, but they discover that most of the clutter cannot be so easily removed. The choices are never simple, and for every thing kept, something must be abandoned. Tomlinson's characters struggle but eventually find their way, often unknowingly, to points of departure, to places where things just might change.

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