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Torres, Justin. We the Animals

Written in a series of short stories and vignettes, *We the Animals* is not what you would expect from a coming-of-age story. It delves deeply into the lives of a family continually balancing on the edge. Set in an unknown town in upstate New York, the unnamed seven year-old narrator and his two older brothers, Joel and Manny, experience a freedom foreign to most children their age, roaming the streets day and night while their mother works the graveyard shift and their father disappears for days at a time. What the boys fail to see is the dark reality of their situation; that their freedom is really neglect, their mother?s deep love for her children is also a form of her desperation, and their parent?s relationship, while passionate, is also volatile and dangerous.

Through glimpses we see the boys experience seemingly traumatic events: learning to swim by being abandoned in deep water, watching their father dig a grave in the backyard for no one in particular, packing up and leaving with their mother only to return after not knowing where to go, and understanding them as nothing extraordinary, as every-day life. As the boys grow they come to learn what it means to be an adult. While the narrator?s older brothers fall into their family?s vicious cycle of failure, aggression and indifference, he is desperate to separate himself from them, but at what price?

Even though the novel is slim, it packs an emotional punch. If you?re a fan of poetry, you will appreciate how Torres structures his novel and delicately navigates the story with a sensitivity that will stay with you long after you have finished it.

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