

Apples from the Desert: Selected Stories

Savyon Liebrecht

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“They let him talk, blocking his stories from the path to their hearts,” writes the narrator in “Hayuta’s Engagement Party,” one of the 12 stories in this first English translation of Liebrecht’s jolting yet beautifully rendered short fiction, originally published in Hebrew.

The silence of the grandfather in this story (one of many Holocaust survivors appearing in the author’s tales) suddenly found voice during family celebrations at the sight of tables laden with food. His declamations stir anger and embarrassment amidst family gatherings. The not-wanting-to-know of new generations in many of these stories is ironic given their current stress in Israel—the demand for confirmation about to whom the state of Israel belongs and continual distrust of the “other.”

In her foreword, Grace Paley notes that Liebrecht “tells everyday stories about what those cultural and political facts are doing to the characters and ordinary lives of both groups of people [Israelis and Arabs]—the way in which both are deformed; one by pride, one by despair.”

The reader is immediately drawn into a personal conflict: In “A Room on the Roof,” a young woman is attracted to one of the Arab construction workers adding a room onto her home. She is ambivalent about how to react to him when he demonstrates tenderness toward her son who has fallen; her feelings are governed by a well-developed fear. Could he be one of those who has set a bomb down the road? In this, as in other stories, the young woman is unable to communicate on a basic level of human concern. She is overly wary that every Arab must be the enemy.

All of Liebrecht’s stories delve into conflict—between older and new generations and viewpoints, the lasting impact of the Holocaust on its survivors and their families, and on living in a country manifested with many layers of political and religious directions creating unending tensions.

In Liebrecht’s stories, new generations want to efface the horrors of the past—a past that still grips those who lived through it. We care about these people, who are “oppressed or disempowered by society...,” as Lily Rattok writes in her introduction. It is silence Liebrecht seems to want to break through—the silence of those who cannot speak of what they recall. Their silence is given a voice in this perceptive, stirring collection.

HANNAH MERKER (September / October 1998)

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