Clarion Review

Literary

Between Eden and the Open Road
Philip Gaber
Philip Gaber
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Four Stars (out of Five)

A sharp, pithy debut that seeks to capture the disillusionment of Generation Y, Philip Gaber's collection blurs the line between prose poetry and flash fiction. Its jumbled form well reflects the flightiness and egoism of his diverse cast of characters.

In *Between Eden and the Open Road*, the narrative vacillates between first-person confessionals and voyeuristic peeks into the lives of others. Gaber's liminal characters, intermittently mad or self-absorbed, are often meditating on their wounds and sloping toward discernment. His first piece, titled "she's alone but chemically imbalanced" (the author puts all titles in lower case), sets the tone for the rest of the book and focuses on an ill-at-ease woman of diminishing beauty who postures, wanting to be understood, though glimpses into her psyche and diary reveal that she hardly understands herself.

Such is characteristic of the people encountered on Gaber's pages—whores, misanthropes, addicts, and seekers, many connected only in that they are lost and without a compass. They parrot Bukowski, flirt with mysticism, and make declarations like "I didn't believe in romantic love," though they date frenetically. Their dissatisfaction is perpetual, impervious to even artificial escape: The narrator in a piece called "serious freedom" walks out of a smutty film, finding no character to root for, while a character in "comfort" shoots up in front of a priest, hoping for release.

Their frequent insubstantiality doesn't prevent them from judging one another harshly, though. "I practice vanity, haste, impatience and excess," pronounces Gaber's dominant narrator, "and hold any man who possesses less than I in contempt…for committing the sin of sloth." His first-person scenes are often comprised of brutal breakdowns of the women he dates, critiques he sometimes intends to be retaliatory: they treat men "like fruit salad," judge and pick, often induce nausea even as they seduce, and in their narcissism, harry him away from intimacy.

He—often between employment, with a hazily defined past and a muddled family life—excuses his own shortcomings with “I just never applied myself” and variations thereof. “Aren’t you getting a little old for this?” asks a girlfriend who bails him out one morning, and though he offers only an incoherent mumble in response, the tacit, developing reply throughout the book, on behalf of all of his characters, is “yes.”

Gaber succeeds in capturing the disturbing commotion of a generation in flux, as well as its moral ambiguities and interminable search for meaning. Line breaks in prose-poetic sections don’t always support the narrative flow, and an overindulgence of certain grammatical tendencies, as with the pervasive use of ellipses, similarly inhibits the project’s luster. Nevertheless, the collection maintains a dark appeal throughout, and it stands to be appreciated for its unbeautiful authenticity.

Michelle Anne Schingler