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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆

The Rocky Hill

Ilana Haley
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Ilana Haley takes readers from the Israeli desert to metropolitan New York City, from the confusions of a little boy to a woman torn between her husband and her lover, accomplishing these disparate journeys in a mere seven stories and thirty-three poems.

Many of Haley's free verse poems are steeped in angst and anger, while others shine with strong imagery, relying on everyday language to construct resonating visions. For example, in "Crazy Sun," she writes, "In the vortex of consciousness / You are a glowing gallop / In the abyss of my youth / You are an orchid / Of the sun."

The seven stories are somewhat melancholy, dancing through emotionally wracking narratives to end in amorphous post-modern non-resolutions. In the title story, "The Rocky Hill (Rita)," a young boy lives on a kibbutz with his mother, Rita, and her husband, the brother of the boy's dead father. The boy's resemblance to his father, a man the mother loved more than her husband but never married, sends the mother into an emotional spiral.

In "Strawberry Omelet," a little girl, the boy's best friend on the kibbutz, attempts to thwart her beloved grandmother's impending death, coaxing her grandmother from a hospital bed to fix her favorite egg dish:

"More jam," said Nati. The child's voice entered Marta's body and stayed there.

"It'll burst," Marta said; her eyes wide open, and she is taking leave of the clouds and the trees and the birds and the mountains. She heard Nati's voice saying into her back, "Let it burst."

Two of the more affecting stories are "Bury Me, Gabriela" and "Desert Dance (Liat)." In "Dance," readers meet Liat in New York City and learn of her service in the Israeli Defense Force. In her youth, assigned as an instructor at a desert outpost, Liat meets Emil, a Moroccan Jew, and becomes embroiled in environment she does not understand.

In "Gabriela," the protagonist descends into guilt over being absent when her father died in Israel. She attempts to carry out his funeral wishes, but alienates her mother in the process. Her unrelenting grief apparently destroys her marriage, and then on a trip to New York City, she finds herself tempted both by a ménage à trois and a lesbian encounter with her best friend: "'You should have seen the expression on your face, Gabriela,' Alexandra said. 'Mockery? Disdain? You who is in search of the center, the umbilicus, the lost connection.'"

As above, the author occasionally stumbles over grammar or syntax, and it is sometimes necessary for the reader to keep a close eye on point of view, but the writing is deeply emotional, especially when presented in the female voice.

The Rocky Hill offers readers something out of the ordinary, a blend of the exotic and the personal, rooted in the experience of modern Israel and leavened by a Western perspective.

GARY PRESLEY (May 18, 2010)

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