

Thirst

Ken Kalfus

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"Have you ever been so thirsty...that you cannot take another step, you cannot even think. That is how thirsty you must be in the desert before you allow yourself the most tiny ration of water. Just a taste really, only enough amount to live and remind you that you remain thirsty." This is the inquiry from Henri, a Moroccan sexology student, to a reserved, naive Irish au pair, Nula, in Ken Kalfus' title story "Thirst." It is the sort of question that, although simple in context, demands firsthand experience of a very intense nature. Such is the appeal of several of the stories in this, Kalfus' first collection. "Thirst" is the sequel to the opening story "Bouquet"; both combine for a rather slant-of-view approach to the beginnings of an unusual relationship. An undercurrent is present in this story, as well as much of the work in this volume that is akin to the gravitational pull of moon on the earth — always present yet almost undetectable.

It would appear that much of Kalfus' work is the result of direct experience, which accounts for its intrinsic appeal. Currently residing in Moscow, Kalfus hails from the Bronx, yet has lived in Belgrade, Paris, Dublin, and Bosnia, as well as New York. This collection of stories has that same well-traveled feel. For example, "No Grace on the Road" and "A Line is a Series of Points" both allow for a certain verisimilitude in regards to the experience of being a refugee or armed-conflict bystander, if such a thing is possible. A surrealness also exists within these stories, specifically "Cats in Space" and "Night and Day You Are One." The former deals with an adolescent coming of age within the bonds of a sort of vicious, insensitive teenage prank, while the latter explores the concept of parallel existences that are connected through walking dreams or a dreamer's existence.

Thirst is a collection of captivating fiction that reminds us that there are some truly talented writers out there who have the ability to draw us in and quench a little of our thirst for the contemporary human experience. Once again, Milkweed Editions has brought to light a new talent worth our investigation.

JIM FILKINS (July / August 1998)

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