ForeWord Reviews

SHORT STORIES

Venus in the Afternoon
Tehila Lieberman
University of North Texas Press
978-1-57441-466-0
(Oct 1, 2012)

What if stories weren't really stories but rooms into which you could peer like God "lookin' in on his creation"? What would you see? That image unifies this fine collection of short fiction.

Winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in 2012, *Venus in the Afternoon* orients a "whole bunch of different worlds smack up against each other." And then invites us in.

At times, it's a literal ability to see into other people's lives, as in the story "The Way I See It," where a window washer views a young office worker like the daughter who marched out of his life, "like a freakin majorette."

Other times, the voyeurism is more subtle, as in "Reinventing Olivia," in which the narrator is a writer entering a fictional world inside the fictional world of the story—"A world slowed so that it could not rush past itself, so that it had to stop and see." Even the cafe where he writes has floor-to-ceiling glass "so that it wasn't clear whether one was within or without, object or voyeur." In "Waltz on East 6th Street," secretly watching conversely becomes concealing oneself from being seen like a spy.

Tehila Lieberman's work has appeared in several journals such as *Colorado Review* and *Nimrod* as well as in an international anthology of Jewish fabulist fiction. In stories like "Anya's Angel," religious themes emerge as in the image of recognizing destiny as a door springing open to reveal the "winding cave-like grotto that it was."

For the most part, New York City forms the backdrop for these stories. The author shifts easily between male and female points of view. And she delights in tipping her characters into adventures that "unravel their harsh urban armor." In the title story, a man falls all over again for a woman who doesn't have "emotional room" for him and yet whose bond with him includes a kid who provokes in him bittersweet feelings of recognition.

"What is it about heartbreak that allows you to see so clearly?" he asks. The author's gift is the ability to use fiction as a portal through which her characters come toward us "like lovers, mysterious, confessional, lusting, or fragile."

Trina Carter