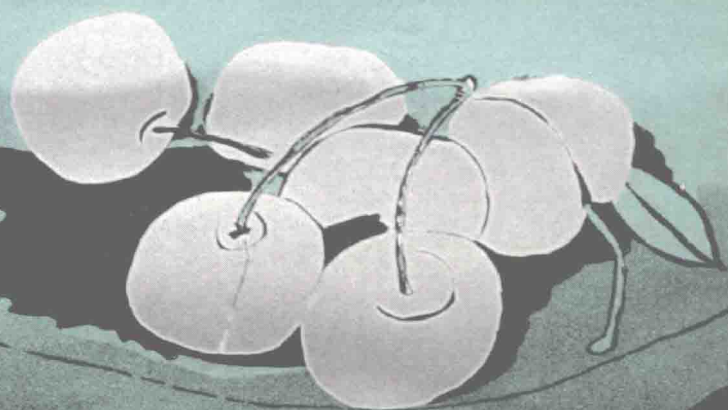


Cherries in the Icebox



Contemporary Hebrew Short Stories

Edited by MARION BARAITSER & HAYA HOFFMAN

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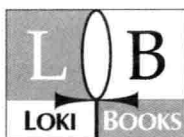
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Introduction by Haya Hoffman

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INTRODUCTION

In this era of the Internet, cable and satellite TV and DVDs, it seems that Israeli literature has never fared so well. Dozens of new writers are discovered each year, and the publishing houses are inundated with manuscripts. The pace of publication is also swifter than in the past, and quite a number of writers publish a new novel or short story collection every year or two. It appears that there is a demand for this bounty, and that reading a good book is still an important component of Israeli leisure culture.

The characteristic features of contemporary Israeli fiction began to emerge a little over fifteen years ago, in the mid 1980s, when a new generation of writers took their first literary steps. It soon became evident that, for the large part, this generation of writers is not continuing the poetic tradition of the veteran writers Aharon Appelfeld, Avraham B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, Amalia Kahana-Carmon and Yehoshua Kenaz; nor do they share the intellectual world of those writers. They write differently.

Most of the new fiction writers who emerged in the mid 1980s and the first half of the 90s were in their twenties and thirties, but several were in their forties and fifties when their first novels were published (for example Batya Gur, Meir Shalev, Gabriela Avigur-Rotem and Yoel Hoffman). In what way do these writer, particularly the younger ones, differ from the veterans, the generation of the 1960s?

Until quite recently, it was customary to define the work of the new writers as post-modern, and the term post-modernism has resounded in the domain of Israeli fiction since the late 80s. In the past few years, it is gradually disappearing from literary debate, since the techniques and language of contemporary Israeli fiction are far more conventional and conservative than those to which we were accustomed fifteen years ago. Etgar Keret, one of the most talented and influential of the new writers, whose first short story collection appeared in 1992, once said in a radio interview that he envies the veteran writers Amos Oz and Avraham B. Yehoshua, because of the assurance he senses in their writ-

ing. 'I am a little confused,' he confessed. In his book of essays, *A Dispirited Rebellion* (1997), Gadi Taub, perhaps the only member of this group who has tried to formulate and define the upheaval that his generation has wrought in Israeli fiction, says that it was forced upon young writers. They write in a spirit of dejection rather than enthusiasm, sensing that they are unable to provide an alternative to the means of expression of their predecessors, which are no longer relevant to their own experiences.

The new Israeli fiction offers its readership no magic cures. It is not ideological writing in search of redemption or of the sole truth. Ostensibly, it faces the reader empty-handed, avoiding sweeping generalizations, refusing to propose utopias or to indicate goals. It does not appear to be seeking higher meanings and it views all that world culture has to offer as both valid and unimportant at the same time. The sense of hollowness and the mocking view of experiences that should be significant, are strikingly evident in the writing of Orly Castel-Bloom, who is regarded as the outstanding representative of the new direction in the 1980s generation. Her story that appears in this anthology, clearly illustrates the mood, the narrative skill and the 'meager' language of the new writers. At the same time, this sense of a lack of significance, of confusion, and the refusal to adopt a clear intellectual stance, finds expression in a rich imagination, in an audacious adoption of whatever comes to hand from the history of culture, in a variety of intermingled genres, in abundant inventiveness, and in numerous attempts to shatter literary conventions. This can be seen, for example, in the writing of Judith Katzir represented in this collection.

It has been said that the work of the new writers is cinematic, reminiscent of video clips, influenced by pop culture and the local popular press. Yet, together with the infiltration of these elements derived from mass culture, we can see references (sometimes parodic) to elitist culture, to history, to myth, to philosophical and scientific texts. Alex Epstein's stories, one of which is included in this anthology, retell from an ironic viewpoint, the stories of biblical or modern cultural heroes.

The world of the new writers sometimes resembles a joyous masked

ball that can turn threatening, or nightmarish—women are disguised as men and men as women, Arabs as Jews and vice versa. It is a fantastical, recycled world rich in parody, filled with clichés and quotations from the treasures of both world and Hebrew literature. It is not surprising, therefore, that humour predominates in the work of many of these young writers, but beneath the humour and irony lurks either a nostalgia, a yearning for some irretrievably lost perfection, or a trenchant protest—even if that protest is not always focused on a clearly defined target.

The element of protest, together with the undermining of hierarchical order in the world outside literature, has brought new voices to the center of the literary arena. Gender and feminist issues are dominant features of the new Israeli literature, not only because these issues have gained momentum in world literature, but because, in recent years, Israeli literature has been ‘conquered’ by women. Most of the new writers are women preoccupied with the female world, so that the predominant phenomenon in contemporary Israeli fiction is what is known as ‘women’s literature’—fiction written by women for women. This literature, which is sentimental or feminist in character, is in great demand, and novels of this genre star for months at a time on the bestseller lists. This, however, is not essentially avantgarde literature; it is popular and mainstream fiction, written according to conventional formulae. It poses no challenge to readers but rather tries to appeal to their tastes. However, feminist sensitivity and discussion of the condition of women can also be found in more complex texts, and cuts across the division between male and female writers. This can be seen in this anthology, not only in the lyrical short story by Mira Magen but also in the story by Yoav Katz, whose machoistic style emphasizes the threat hovering over the main female character in his story.

The homosexual theme also comes into play. One of the most prominent of the new writers who has introduced this subject into contemporary Hebrew literature is Yossi Avni, some of whose stories are semi-autobiographical. The theme is also latent in Uri Tzaig’s writing. Tzaig, however, focuses not only on problems of sexual identity, but also on

those of national identity. Symbolically, the character of 'the other' in Tzaig's story in the collection, and the main character's attraction to him, reaches the point where the 'I' is obliterated, and his sense of centrality is lost.

It is interesting to note that the Zionist narrative and the focus on 'the Israeli condition' have been relegated to the margins. The new writers avoid political themes or deal with them in parodic or deliberately clichéd fashion. Their main creative resources are directed at the world of the individual, at everyday life, at colourless defeated characters who have no interest in politics or affairs of state. Such, for example, is the protagonist of David Grossman's story. It should be noted that Grossman, whose first short story collection appeared in 1983, is to a large extent a writer who bridges the gap between the veteran generation and the new writers.

This move towards the margins and the transformation of those margins into the centre, which is discernible today in other Western literatures, has certain clearly local features. The 'other' can appear as an Arab, as a character from a development town or, as in the case of Alona Kimhi, as an immigrant child from Russia. Israeli society is still non-homogenous, composed as it is of immigrants, or the offspring of immigrants, from dozens of countries. As a consequence, the literature of this society still maintains its Jewish character. Moreover, some of the writers place emphasis on this Jewishness at the expense of being Israeli. Since the mid 1980s, for example, we have been witnessing intensive preoccupation with the Holocaust among writers of the second generation. Nava Semel is one of the main figures in this trend, and she is represented here by a story from her first collection, which appeared in 1985; but the 'other' in Etgar Keret's allegorical story also represents the Jew persecuted by the proponents of racist theories and their disciples.

This anthology includes stories by some of the major writers of contemporary Israeli fiction, some of whom will be familiar to the reader from English translations of their work: David Grossman, Nava Semel, Judith Katzir, Alona Kimhi, Orly Castel-Bloom and Etgar Keret. The

others are well known in Israel, and it is to be hoped that in the future they, too, will, in turn, be translated into English.

Haya Hoffman (January, 2002)

David Grossman

CHERRIES IN THE ICEBOX

Born in Jerusalem in 1954, Grossman studied philosophy and drama at the Hebrew University and later worked as an editor and broadcaster on Israeli radio. His first novel, The Smile of the Lamb (1983), reflects the politically committed literature of the 1970s and 1980s in Israel. In addition to five further novels, including See Under: Love (1986), a play, a number of short stories, and children's stories, Grossman has compiled two controversial books of interviews with Palestinians and Israeli Arabs. His books are translated into many languages.

Tonight, after we made love, Tamar cried. What is there to add ? The wounded pillow ravaged in her mouth; the foul sap oozing from her wounds; perhaps the bristling tension of my muscles, or the hiss escaping from the cracks in my body as they are hastily scaled against the particles of pain that float in the room. Or this: my lying there beside her, splayed on my back and snoring lightly, rhythmically, exuding the manliness expected of me as I lie there, stupid with pleasure and exhaustion, a naked man devoid of all desire beside a seeming-woman, beside her nine-faces, which are now reabsorbed into her resting features—the face that was drawn into his own cries when he clenched his teeth tight so that he would cry out the correct name of the nine, of the ninety, so that, afterwards, he would sink, masking his face with contentment.

Tamer cried soundlessly. I felt the sting of sweat behind my knees and neck. I snored insistently. When we were making love, everything was as usual. Before that, too. We brought the twins from Tamar's mother: then came the bedtime ritual, the gurgling over the sink, the

car pool arrangements for tomorrow— and then—the tears.

I shift slightly in my place, sigh at the echo of a dreamy unease. There, a woman is crying. She'll calm down in a minute. These deep sobs, they rend her body. Furrows are ploughed slowly, rustling over the marzipan surface of our bed. Tamar is crying.

Seven years of marriage. That afternoon, I picked up the girls from kindergarten and brought them to Tamar's mother. The young waitress smiled when I said we were celebrating a private holiday and so would order the finest wine. Tamar screwed up her face grudgingly, but I gave her a lengthy stare, making her smile. We're not watching our pockets today. It's not just the money, Tamar said, and don't drink today.

The girl brought us two violet cyclamens. Her fingers were long and brittle. From the management, she said, and all the best to you. While we ate, she never ceased darting loving, moist glances at us. She's writing our story, I said, and drank from the pungent wine. Tamar followed the movements of my hands. I ask for the best wine, I said, and she brings me *havdalah* wine. Don't make a scene, Tamar said. I poured another glass.

Tamar sliced her quiche with precision. One for Daddy and one for Granny and an itty-bitty one for Annie. Tamar's hair is a bit sparse and short, her forehead white and smooth. What are you looking at me like that for? Here, the dance of the time-honoured glances has already begun tracing a delicate pattern on the cheeks' parchment. What do you mean—'like that'? The lines of separation beginning to show, even in her. Like *that*, like you've never seen me before. This, too, should be remarked: a faint, tired wing of destruction on the childlike chin; the earth, gently tempting, draws the corners of the mouth to it. Hey, Tami, you're cute.

It was in this vegetarian restaurant that we sat seven years ago, the afternoon of the wedding. Tamar was then twenty-three, and I was twenty-six. But I love you much more today, I say to the red silhouette of my face on the wineglass. We were such children, says Tamar. I drink my winy, wavy image. Such children, she repeats.

We ate. That morning someone had hinted that next month my employment at the university might be terminated because of the cut-backs. I didn't mention it to Tamar. Rumours like that had come and gone. I didn't want to see her nostrils flare as if in anticipation of great danger, to see the determined responsibility well up in her eyes. The soup came.

What did we talk about then? I promised you I would be unfaithful within a year; I said I wouldn't pretend, not even on that day, and that I detested the idea that anyone would think so little of me as to trust me. Really lovely things to hear the morning of your wedding day, Tamar said, leaning her chin on her hand and glaring at me. And I'm ready, I said, gulping some soup so that steam would fog up my glasses, to renew that promise today. But I know you, she said, and I believe in you even more, now. She smiled. I smiled.

Spoons touched plates. Back then, I held to the absolute honesty of evil. Things need to be said, even painful ones. Especially painful ones. Terrible, Tamar said, grinning, you were a terrible child, and I don't know how I fell in love with you. It was my money, I said. Somewhere in the basin of my brain, pain began to pound. And my mother's letter of recommendation. How impudent you were—a haughty, worldly, spoiled brat. Uh-uh, I raised a finger, that confidence is what captured you. No, she said sweetly. It was the fear behind it.

Seven years. The body is now smoothed. The rings of age only add beauty, case our movements, one inside the other. Saturday at your parents. Maya drank the syrup by herself. Go to bed Tamar, I'll write a little longer. Suddenly, it's easy.

But I'm lying, she giggles. Now: the loving joy kindled in her eyes; her guileless, luminous knowing that together we overpowered it, overpowered me; my diving inside, my slack, circular trawling to the cadence of pain. You used to taunt me, she giggles, because I thought Osnat was the best and most perfect of friends, because for years I let her torment me in the pretence of love. *You* used to blanch to hear me talk about my parents—about us, too—with a tongue like an ice-pick—that's what you called it. And you revelled in feeling like a cursed man,

the definitive exile and outcast. And you, and you.

The girl brought tea of fragrant herbs. We're getting married tonight, I told her with a smile. Tamar's lips pursed under the girl's slim arm. I moved slightly, catching them inside the curve of the teapot handle. I knew it, said the waitress, it's written all over your faces. Her watery eyes welled up a bit. I sipped some wine.

And those compulsive little lies of yours, Tamar said briskly, brusquely, the incessant writing of life, the cunning for its own sake. And, I said languidly, your aversion to my writing; your childish hostility toward me on the days when I have a story. Why are we bickering today? Tamar asked, her eyes suddenly extinguished. I extended a hand and drank straight from the bottle. Festive days depress me, Tamar said. I'm actually happy today, I said. A fleeting searing in my temples now joined each dull thud of pain. Someone had welded the exposed edges of the nerves together by accident. I rhymed to myself, quickly: Last hired, first fired. Why not fire the one you just hired? Also (this is pretty good)—'The prof. is in the pudding.' By then Tamar had noticed that I was blinking nervously, but didn't say a word. She touched a finger to my finger. You're having a hard time now that you're not writing, she said.

Now she cries into the pillow. A continuous, honeyed drop of sorrow drips from her, evaporating in its own warmth until it is a thin whistle, a thought, cooling and freezing like a sharp, glinting shard of glass above my carefully closed eyes. We love each other, I repeat. No outside force could spoil the movement of this relationship because we have a kind of incessant love, I continue, etching the words on the soft inner shell of my eyelid. Now and then it creates hardship and doubt, but only so they can be resolved wisely, with a controlled flare of pain and desire; it has, I whisper to my frightened self, a complete understanding, a deep grasp of the whole process.

Afterwards, we went for a walk in Yemin Moshe, down streets paved with stone. We walked hand in hand, and at every third step swung an imaginary child who kicked smooth legs. But there were no children that day. I sat down on a stone bench. The orange beak of a blackbird

flashed on the grass. You've changed a great deal, I said; of the two of us, you've changed more. Thanks to you, she said and sat down, placing her purse between us, her thin hair lifting as if fluttering in the wind, her eyes grayer than they were blue. The clouds caused that. Thanks to you, she said again. And in spite of you, because at first, I lost myself beside you. Everything about you was clear and absolute, even your fears; only when the first years of shock had passed, did I begin to fight. And you're still fighting, though sometimes it's unnecessary, I said. After all, I'm an enlightened dictator; I've learned to do it without getting too tired. No; with you, she jokes with cunning, one has to fight constantly. I've learned to do it without getting too tired. With a weary hand, I dragged myself for anger and bitterness, but dredged up nothing.

You were so—she says with wise sorrow—so aggressive, so demanding. I had to fight for a me-I-didn't-know. And now, I said, the results I've achieved sometimes frighten me. I know, she said, but this is the only way, adding, surprised: I really have learned. You've changed more, I said.

After that we got up, leaned into one another, and embraced. The skies greyed. Let's go to the four o'clock show and kiss in the dark, Tamar said into my coat. Let's go to the train station and go away, I said in a pensive Russian accent. I hope my mother's coping with the girls. Today we have no girls.

On the way to the café, we passed a playground. It was empty, and its shrubs and benches were furled. The slide shone like the outstretched tongue of a child, breathing and curving with steely torpor. We sat on the rope swings, side by side. The wind whispered at our backs. The swings shifted a bit, and their damp ropes squeaked. Closing my eyes, I flooded my brain with the thick reek of a seaport. Legs kicked at the layer of gravel; muscles stretched from the gut to the tips of the toes and beyond; suddenly, the air freshened.

I remained faithful to her in an old-fashioned way. Even when the expanse of the world was for me a humid, close hothouse; even when

the scented trails of glances and veiled meanings were wound around my face, I stitched my desire to her. But the heat of the body melts the iron threads, and the slivers that don't totally evaporate, float in the veins, and wound. The wounds of women's eyes. Perfume's wounds. The wounds of a lover who protects himself from the wounds of women.

And this too: the potent agility of the imagination's sexual conscience; the longing for a sense of revulsion that might hint at a chance of salvation; the body that rebels against you. That grows desire at you. At what is left of you. Only the bitter exile in Tamar's placid loins. Only your love of her, her love of you, a childish pain-reliever that you doubtfully swallow.

Stretching, bending the knees, leaning, Tamar passes me with blissful languor, her head arched back, her eyes closed, and I—already I sense the sinewy consistency of my muscles; already this flight sends balls of fire through me that burst in my guts and my groin and under my arms. I've been kidnapped, I'm flying, I'm the eye of the storm, I'm devoured. I drag after me the slackened and the rotted. Again, I weld to my body the splintered slivers. Even though I can hear Tamar's legs thud against the gravel, hear her clumsy braking; even though I can picture her wondering, still-smiling gaze. I let wildness wail in the arc of my throat, make leaden the iron weighting my body, until I become a giant pendulum slicing the air with my movements, slicing space and time in the semicircle of the swing's arc, again and again slamming against impotence to which the ropes give way at the peak of flight, as they hurl me backwards with determined softness.

Nevertheless, Tamar said at the café, we're much more alike now. Because you've managed to contaminate me a little with your dismal outlook, and I've taught you to love; you're not all sharp angles, and I'm not all soft circles.

We insisted on sitting in the café garden. Rain cubs tussled in the bellies of the clouds (I should write that down). An older waitress, short and short-tempered, was forced to clean the bird droppings off the blue plastic table. Beyond the fence, the street cleared the mucus