

Haaretz

Throwaway Lines

The heroine of all the stories in Coussin's book is an inseparable part of a world where love, and human relationships more generally, can be described in terms of trash.



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"Picnic" by Orna Coussin. The Saf Series, Hakibbutz Hameu'chad and Sifriyat Poalim, 176 pages, NIS 72

In her previous book, "Bemerchak halicha: hibur al tarbut hatzricha" (Within Walking Distance: An Essay on Consumer Culture), Babel Publishing, Orna Coussin wrote: "We live in a culture that celebrates disposability, and so materiality, along with the spirit, loses some of its essential value. We use and we toss away, offhandedly, leaving nothing behind, for ourselves and for others, besides garbage ... We despise anything that lasts: concepts like veteran, old and continuous." Later, the author also notes the proliferation of products in our lives, products that "are distinguished by the rapidity with which they become trash ... The new industrial attitude toward the product ... has gradually permeated ... relationships of love and the depths of consciousness."

Coussin's earlier book might be suggested as a kind of introduction or cultural background to her new short story collection. Some of the 25 stories in it are excellent, and one of them, which I will mention later, is truly wonderful. What the non-fiction book describes from a critical perspective, "from the outside," becomes in the new volume an "internal" daily reality. The power of the collection lies in

the fact that the author completely abandons the critical stance of her previous book. Her heroes and heroines, in all the stories, are an inseparable part of a world where love, and human relationships more generally, can be described in terms of trash.

This is a book about "dangerous liaisons," but without the romantic and erotic aura. The relationship of every couple (in the broadest sense) in the book is bizarre, fragile, ruined, problematic, violent, frustrated. In the opening story, "Savlanut" (Patience), this happens in the erotic relationship between a brother and a sister and inside the consciousness of the mother, who speaks in the first-person plural ("It's been a year since we saw either of you," she says to her children). The siblings are two that are one ("We breathe" - together), and the mother is one that is two (the doubling deformation, it seems, is hereditary).

The same pattern develops from story to story: between parents and children, between women and women, between women and men, between people and animals. Perhaps these are not so much "dangerous liaisons" as "malfunctioning liaisons." Take, for example, the story "Leyad etz hash'a'am hagadol" (Near the Big Cork Tree), in which a woman responds without hesitation to the summons sent by her female lover and flies from Israel to New York. What seems at first like an innocent love story, however, is replaced suddenly by the understanding that what we have here is not innocence, but submission and emptiness on the part of the Israeli woman ("These are the rules. She tells me, and I do it") and cruelty on the part of the American one. The couple's relationship here, if we translate it into algebraic terms, is not $2=1+1$, but $2=1-1$: it is a relationship in which one partner erases the other. The whole book can be read as variations on this formula.

The most unusual and beautiful story is the one that gives the book its title. In this story, the stooped, "grounded" human relationship is momentarily replaced by a glance at the sky. A boy in the Ben Shemen forest suddenly spots a bird. "Rami is not listening. He says, your loss. I saw a golden oriole. One of the most secretive birds in the forest. A golden-black bird that lives in treetops and never comes down to the ground. It eats almost nothing but figs and plums. Very few people get to see it."

It is obvious to the reader that this view-from-above belongs to the woods and to childhood, as opposed to adulthood and the city. But even there, in the forest, the early signs of the fall are already evident: the bird is gone, and the gaze that followed it is replaced by exchanged human looks and silence. The opening gaze gives way to a closed-off one. Finally comes the necessary rupture: "Oh, never mind, why am I even trying, two little retards," says the boy who saw the bird. It is a shocking enunciation, one that immediately banishes the girl from the paradise of the forest and the bird to the terrain of human relationships, to the human ground where the oriole never descends.

And indeed, in the next story come death and sexual harassment and menstruation, that is, an entry into human time in all its unpleasant physicality; and (in the next story, "Pitango") there is a hole in the fence and a rupture in the family, and the narrator's father lusts after her underage friend, and the wondrous oriole is replaced by chickens that "can't really fly" and are "bound to the earth," chickens that in another story will be eaten by a dog. Reading the story, it becomes obvious that the narrator, too, is that kind of "chicken," tethered by a cord that keeps her from flying. A chicken in another story lives, along with the rest of her kind, in a densely packed industrial coop. Tel Aviv, too, is

that kind of coop in this book. A coop in which a picnic is possible only as the memory of a missed chance.

Then comes maturity, including sexual maturity, and people (mainly, in this book, women in lesbian relationships) begin to use each other. Sex here is almost always intrusive, not always satisfying, sometimes degrading. In one story the narrator asks the gas station attendant for "oil and water. And windows" - that is, filling up and cleaning. These two activities are a kind of analogue for "love" in the book. The house has "so much room" that an elephant would fit inside it, but it is room in the sense of a space, a lack, an emptiness. And the relationship is supposed to fill this void, over and over. Love in these stories unfolds between the desire to erase the other or the self (cleaning) and the desire to contain or be contained (filling up).

Alongside the sense of filling (expressed mainly as different kinds of violent penetration), women in this book want to be cleansed by the power of sexual encounters ("Your teeth are white, tiny bars of soap," the narrator fantasizes about the maid whom she pesters, trying to buy her with money). The tiny substitution between the maid and the materials she uses in her job (soap) is symptomatic. "She has to understand ... I don't need this. I need Gadi." The word *tzricha* in Hebrew means both "need" and "consumption"; here it is used in the context of an interpersonal relationship. Ultimately, I think, "need" here is indeed synonymous with the consumption Coussin discussed in her previous book. The discerning reader will also note the not-accidental similarity between the images on the covers of the two books.

Dror Burstein's novel "The Murderers" was published by Babel Press.