*The Fourth Corner of the World*, by Scott Nadelson rev. by Tabitha Lawrence

Engine Books

There is much to be praised in Scott Nadelson’s newest collection, *The Fourth Corner of the World,* which hit the shelves in February 2018 from Engine Books. In it, Nadelson proves adept at capturing a cast of characters as diverse as the exciting or despicable—utopian colonists and pedophilic shoe salesmen—all the way to the unexpectedly entertaining mundane—grieving husbands trash talking on gardening forums and young reporters slandering a museum curator for featuring an anti-Semitic artist. Most of the stories share recurring settings, either Nadelson’s home state of New Jersey or his current home of Oregon. They also connect through recurring themes, most centered on slightly skeptical passion for protecting (or a guilty distance from) the Jewish faith.

Each piece begins in a discrete moment with promises to live up to and then slowly builds until the reader understands the integral nature of the situation. “Maginot” begins with the narrator stating, “I once made a painting disappear. There one day, gone the next. But I was no magician. I didn’t know how to bring it back. I still don’t.” The hook comes instantly and is met with rich backstory and internal dialogue. In lieu of closure, Nadelson provides an almost imperceptible shift, and when the real problem is made clear, the reader is pulled quietly out. Fantastically diluted plot twists and quick fades back into the distance characterize an ending, but not a resolution.

Nadelson is a talented author, one who trusts the readers to come to their own conclusions, to the effect of a simultaneous peak and also complete dissolution of urgency. The result is haunting enough to keep one considering where it all could have led, yet candid enough to understand that even this is futile in the face of the situation. Each ending reminds the characters that they are small even in their own stories, taunted by the world spinning quietly in the background.

What makes this work so well for *The Fourth Corner of the World* is that the characters are in the know. These are kids who know they’re stuck, and sad people who know their sadness will lessen, that ultimately everything is already there, waiting to play out. The long stream of thoughts and connections that make up the final story, “A Warm Breath,” is a good example of this. As far as plot, the story is simple: a grieving man walks with his infant daughter and remembers things. However, the spiral of emotion eventually leads the narrator to realize, “There was far too much to tell. Even if he went on speaking for the rest of his life, he wouldn’t reach the end of his story before he himself was gone. And more important, what he really wanted to say was simply unsayable.” But it never ends in the middle of the realization; rather, it’s the moment of recovery from these thoughts that show who these characters really are.

As one could predict from Nadelson’s multiple awards (The Reform Judaism Fiction Prize, an Oregon Book Award, and the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award) and his growing bibliography (three other collections, a memoir, and a novel), *The Fourth Corner of the World* reads as disciplined and intentional in all that it says and—perhaps more particularly—all that it doesn’t. As the narrator so neatly puts it in “Temporary Salvation,” “We still talked about nothing other than what was right in front of us—the clue for 96 Down, our favorite kind of olives—but we did so with an intensity that carried the weight of all we didn’t say, a code for the directness we couldn’t quite manage.” In this case, from the intensity of the selective directness becomes the work’s greatest strength.