THE ALGONQUIN READER

Original Essays by Our Spring/Summer 2021 Fiction Writers and Excerpts from Their Forthcoming Books

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What Comes after the Revolution?

AN ESSAY BY

LAYLA ALAMMAR

In early 2011, I—like countless others across not just the region but the world—watched as sparks of protest ignited into the flame of the Arab Spring.

When I use the words *sparks*, *ignited*, and *flame*, you are forgiven for thinking them metaphors; in fact they are quite literal. At around 11:30 on the morning of December 17, 2010, Tarek Mohamed Bouazizi, age twenty-six, stood in the middle of traffic in front of the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, shouted "How do you expect me to make a living," drenched himself in gasoline, and set himself on fire. This act followed months and years of harassment and extortion from authorities as well as the confiscation of his small produce cart—his only source of income and how he supported his family. Systemic oppression, being at the mercy of corrupt institutions, and the denial of a basic right to dignity drove Bouazizi to this desperate end. By mid-January, the outrage and protests in the wake of his death led to the end of President Ben Ali's twenty-three-year rule.

A wave of self-immolation followed, not just in Tunisia (where 107 persons attempted suicide in this way over the next six months), but also in Algeria and Egypt. Driven by the same grievances (high corruption, poor economic conditions, lack of freedom of expression, and political impotence), youth protests soon erupted in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere. Days of Rage—for that's what many Fridays were called—were rimmed in fire, with hot bullets and cars set aflame and Molotov cocktails hurled in town squares.

Words are a representation, a signifier; they are not the thing itself, and in using them, we mustn't forget that the thing itself exists in a material,

consequential way. There are those for whom the words *ignite*, *flame*, and *eruption* are not mere metaphors.

This is just one of the anxieties that lurks beneath *Silence Is a Sense*.

From the safety of Kuwait, I watched events unfold with a disquieting mixture of great hope and fierce trepidation: hope because it seemed this revolt (as the main character in *Silence* would prefer it be called) transcended religion and sect, tribe and origin, liberal and conservative, to become something much more elemental. It was a call for an uncompromising dignity that extended to all areas of life—economic, social, political, intellectual. It was Bouazizi's call.

Turns out it wasn't so simple, though.

A decade has passed.

My trepidation revolved around one primary concern, a question that circled my mind relentlessly. It was there as I scrolled through my Twitter timeline for updates. It was there as I chatted with friends about the protests and watched the extraordinary pronouncements on television. The question was there as I—employed at the time as a research analyst for a major investment firm—drafted reports on how events would affect oil prices and stock market performances and foreign investments across the region.

What comes after the revolution?

The question left me unnerved, confused, and almost unbearably sad. So I did what I always do: I put it to a story. I created a set of characters and placed them in a narrative for the simple reason that I needed a repository for the thoughts and feelings that assailed me, and that I suspect assail others. It's never my intention to try to make sense of things—for there is, I think, no way of making sense of the horror humans are capable of inflicting on one another—but if the novel accomplishes this, on some level, for the reader, or makes them curious to know more about the Arab Spring and all its ensuing crises, then that can only be a positive thing.

I'm not a refugee. I don't know what it's like to be physically displaced, to be exiled from your homeland and scattered to the wind, to walk across a continent and not know where you'll sleep at night. In researching this novel, I often found myself caught up in details. How many times, and in how many ways, would a female refugee on her own be assaulted? How cold does the back of a refrigerated truck get? What is it like to be fired on with

tear gas after walking for hours to get to another border? How much would you come to loathe the very idea of borders?

What's left when every kind of security is ripped away?

I'm currently writing a PhD dissertation that explores Arab fiction over the past sixty years. This literature—in English and in Arabic, from Lebanon to Algeria—is a body of work that speaks of cycles, of recurrences, of *revolutions*. War and trauma. The personal and the political. A people inconsolable before history. The literature foretells that the Arab Spring that began in 2011 would not be so simple as we'd (perhaps a little irrationally) hoped. I don't wish to homogenize the region I call home; it's not my aim to collapse the singularity of experiences in Egypt or Syria, for instance, into some overarching tableau of indiscriminate trauma. That being said, there is an affinity, a shared culture, language, and sacred history. Umm Kulthum, Darwish, ululations, and *waraq 'anab*. It is that affinity that had us rejoicing with the protesters in Tahrir Square; it's what had us holding our breath during those first few months of the uprising when possibilities seemed limitless; and it is what makes all the breakdowns and tragedies and setbacks into a kind of perpetual psychic wound that I fear may never heal.

It's a century now since the region was divvied up with arbitrary lines drawn across the sand. Nearly as long since the colonizers started to leave, making way for states of emergency, states of oppression, the vicious and the power-hungry. Stranglers of freedom and plurality. A decade has passed since the Arab Spring began, and four years since I wrote the first draft of *Silence Is a Sense*. At times I feel incapacitated by the past, by histories of pain and horror, by all the terror that remains unspoken.

And yet . . .

Poets sing. Writers write. Photographers document and filmmakers and painters and dancers all tell their stories. Bearing witness, testifying, remembering. We speak of those things that seethe in the darkness, crouch on the chest, and lodge in the throat. An intuition, our humanity perhaps, compels us to strain against that darkness, to reach for something better. There is a hope, a *countercycle* of hope, that continues to spring up no matter what vile acts saturate the ground beneath us. *Silence Is a Sense* is a representation; it speaks of pain, yes, but also, I hope, the yearning for a new way of being.

FROM

Silence Is a Sense

BY LAYLA ALAMMAR

That night I dream of Serbia.

We're out of Sombor, finally. They kept us there for hours, me and the runaway families I attached myself to—the Alis from Homs and the Husseins from Iraq who pretend they're from Aleppo and the AlKhalafs from Raqqa, whose patriarch cries long into the night about the bombing of the mosque and the sacrilege and injustice and humiliation of it all. I camp out beside these families. I don't have a tent, but some NGO-er gave me a tarpaulin, and I string it across some branches.

You don't sleep with the children tonight, says Um Hasan from the Alis. On bad nights, nights when the terror is too close and fresh in the mind, her tent is a womb she shelters her family in. Ten or fifteen of them all piled one on top of the other so that it reminds me of the raft to Lesbos. I sleep on the ground under the open sky and fuck it all if some man decides it's an invitation.

Young men shouting into the dying light of every dying day. When the struggles are done—the search for food, for water, for a place to sleep, for a smuggler and a truck to carry their families the rest of the way—they subside into their tents and give in to rage. VOILÀ LA RAGE QUI EFFRAIE LA SOCIÉTÉ CIVILISÉE! Yelling at their children for straying too far away in their games, at teenage daughters who venture out of the tents or wander by border fences and smile at guards, at old aunts and mothers and grandmothers for being stupid and burdensome and useless. Rough slapping of hands against skin. A vengeful fuck. A fist to an abdomen. A plea to Allah.

There's a woman here, older than time, shriveled as a fig in the sun. Flat face, empty eyes in hollow sockets, arms like matchsticks. She's made of paper, and her family is blowing her across a continent. She doesn't eat; her daughter or daughter-in-law or someone she must be related to in some way

shoves spoonfuls of broth between her cracked lips every so often, but most of it drips down her chin to her chest and lap. She prays all the time. More than five times a day, like she thinks the original fifty is the actual revelation. Outside their tent, by the bright wood huts, down by the muddy river, on railroad tracks so her family has to shove her out of the way of train cars coming from a long way off, when we're huddled up in groups waiting to cross a border or board a train or be given aid, on long walks through dense forests, when you can't tell where in the sky the sun is, she drops her bag, folds her arms across the crease of her midsection and starts *al-fatiha*.

Memories, or fevered imaginings. They sear me, bright white and hot. *How many months is it?* he asks. *My husband is just over there*, I lie, even as I know the opening of my legs will be required to get out of this. Scurrying by rivers and forests and marshes, begging for food and hoarding any cash I can save or steal or manage somehow to earn. Across Turkey and those terrible Grecian waters. Vomiting until my insides feel like they're twisting up and out of my throat like vines. Clinging in furious waters to a raft that is more of a balloon. The stinking heat of Macedonia, bleeding blisters and insect bites, and Kosovo with nothing but a small hip sack and every document I have about who I am.

My family finds me here, if only in dreams.

Here where it's the dead of winter and toes are falling off, where the people in the fields are breaking frozen leaves from trees to suck on while others find icicles on the poles and the tin sheets that hold up their tents and walk around with them in hand like lollipops.

The sun shines. Every day, but it's just for show.

No heat.

Nothing thaws.

Nothing melts.

I walk, dragging them all behind me, and when I can walk no more, Mama lines us up around the dead fire pit, eldest to youngest. She places us between her knees, clamping down on our hips, and scrubs us with black soot and ash.

It burns, Mama.

She scrubs down pale chests. Armpits until they bleed.

It burns.

Scalps until we are faint.

Have they made it to Alexandria? Are Mama and Baba and Nada and all the little ones sitting around a big plate of steaming saffron rice and fragrant cuts of lamb? Are they drinking cardamom tea and full-fat camel's milk? Do they sleep on feathers, wrapped in the weighty comfort of a winter *bisht*?

"Egypt is not more stable, Baba! What is happening here will happen there! Where's the law? Look at the news!"

"Ammu Ghaith is there and your tantes and my friends from university. You will be safe there. They share our language, our religion. We will be safe and you can be married and have a happy life."

I ran because I would not trade one oppression for another.

We are in Serbia.

Tomorrow or the next day is Hungary.

This is where the real struggle begins, he says. Sweat drips wet and metallic onto my face, into my mouth.

How can it possibly get any worse?

It will never happen. I will never reach the end. My life is here, in the ebb and flow of humans pushing and being shoved back across borders, shuttled from detention center to filthy campground to open fields and rocky beaches. This is to be my life.

Wake up now, the sweaty man says, pushing harder. *You're no fun.*

لاجئ

Ref.u.gee

/ˌrefyo͞oˈjē/

Noun: a person forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Synonyms: fugitive, exile, displaced person, asylum seeker, boat people

So many words. Why do you need so many words? What will I say if, when, someone asks? What will I tell them I am? I lash out at border officials, at men who push me too far, at women in village centers who spit at me in their foreign tongues. I use my words on them all, cursing them out in Arabic and English and all the other languages I've picked up along the way—Kurdish and Turkish and French and a smattering of Greek.

Fugitive and *exile* sound like I've done something wrong. *You do many wrong things*, he says, finishing up and rolling away. Yes, maybe, but fleeing across these European borders is not one of them.

Displaced person sounds too much like *mis*placed person, and though I am lost much of the time, I am not that.

Boat people is Aegean waters, and I will not claim it.

Asylum seeker

Yes: here, at last, is some truth. Asylum.

Ref.uge

/ˌrefyo͞oj/

from the Latin *re- fugere, re-* "back" and *fugere* "flee."

Noun: a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or trouble.

The synonyms here are more innocuous. They carry no judgment—shelter, protection, safety, security, sanctuary.

Consider the prefix, he says as he walks away.

Ah yes, prefixes. Those pesky English devils that gnaw at the heels and push bile up the throat.

No such problem with the Arabic. No prefix there. Just the long *la*, as though you were about to break into a lamentation. Then the sharp jerking nod of the *ji'*, the *hamza* stopping you from venturing any further into the grief that lies there, ensnared and entangled, in such little letters.

I am a refugee. Here, in Serbia, by the waters of the Danube, which sometimes are still mirrors for white fluffy clouds and sometimes are muddy with froth and blood and raindrops and sometimes carry big green lily pads down through Romania, I run my finger over the word again and again.

If *recall* and *recollect* mean to "call" and "collect" again, does *refugee* contain within it, hidden and folded in a dead language, the notion of perpetual fleeing?

SILENCE IS A SENSE
by Layla AlAmmar
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Beyond the Talented Tenth

AN ESSAY BY

KAITLYN GREENIDGE

Before I became a writer, I worked for many years at the Weeksville Heritage Center, which is a house and museum in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, dedicated to the history of the free Black community founded in central Brooklyn in 1838. Weeksville was a space explicitly dedicated to Black political power and self-sufficiency. Black landholders sold smaller lots to other Black people, hoping to give Black males enough land to qualify to vote in New York State elections and thus be able to steer the destinies of Black people in Kings County. As Weeksville expanded throughout the nineteenth century, it became a destination for people escaping slavery as well as a bedrock for a burgeoning Black middle class. Of the many accomplished people connected to the community, one was Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward.

She was the daughter of one of Weeksville's landowners—her father, Sylvanus Smith, was a pig farmer and a relatively wealthy member of the community. She was the first Black female doctor in New York State and the third Black female doctor in the US. From 1870 to 1895, she ran her own practice in Brooklyn and co-founded the Brooklyn Women's Homeopathic Hospital and Dispensary. She sat on the board and practiced medicine at the Brooklyn Home for Aged Colored People. From 1906 she worked as a college physician at the African Methodist Episcopal Church's Wilberforce University in Ohio. She was trained as a homeopath, in part because this newer discipline of medicine was especially accepting of women students and students of color. And most notably, her practice saw both Black and white patients.

All of this is standard talented-tenth, exceptional-Negro fare. That kind

of narrative is deeply, deeply boring to me—not to mention not really helpful for liberation, which is the ultimate goal of my work. My personal aesthetic will always be in favor of the stories that are strange, that are out of character, that highlight the complexities of power, that talk about the things none of us want to talk about, that would look really jarring on a Black History daily calendar.

The thing that drew me to *this* particular story was the information that is not in the official biography. One of my jobs at Weeksville was to work alongside Jennifer Scott, our Director of Research, on an oral history project in which we interviewed descendants of Weeksville residents. And Dr. Smith McKinney Steward's great-granddaughter was a famous actress, Ellen Holly, who was also an excellent genealogist and keeper of her family's history. Ellen Holly sat with us for a good portion of the afternoon to talk about her grandmother, Anna Peaches McKinney, the daughter of Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward.

What she told us was astonishing. The doctor's daughter married a family friend, the son of another prominent Black political family, the Hollys, who had emigrated to Haiti at the start of the Civil War, certain that Black freedom was impossible on American soil. In the all-Black nation of Haiti, the Hollys hoped to establish true Black liberation. The patriarch was Bishop Holly, eventually the archbishop of Haiti in the Episcopal Church. The whole family lived in a sprawling, lush homestead in downtown Port-au-Prince, a home and city that Anna McKinney fell in love with.

She did not, however, love her husband. Reportedly, Anna knew on her wedding day that she did not want to marry him and begged her mother to let her back out of the marriage. Her mother refused. So, Anna traveled to Haiti and found the promising young Black striver she had married was in fact an abuser and a womanizer. She wrote her mother many letters from Haiti relating the deterioration of her marriage, begging to come home.

After Anna gave birth to twins, her mother made a plan to smuggle her and her children out of the country. She was able to help them escape to New Jersey, where mother, daughter, and grandchildren lived together, never returning. For the rest of her life, Anna missed Haiti but dreaded ever seeing her abusive husband again. His family repeatedly sent her letters telling her she was ruining the institution of the Black family by leaving him.

To put this into context, Sarah, her daughter, Anna, and the Holly family were all members of the burgeoning Black professional and upper class soon to be immortalized by W.E.B. Du Bois as the "talented tenth." The ethos of this class—an adherence to respectability and a deep respect for white American and European cultural values, while simultaneously advocating for a narrative of deep Black pride and racial uplift—has dominated definitions of Blackness and discussions about how to navigate and fight racism, both in Black communities and outside our communities, for generations. What fascinates me about this class in the decades after the Civil War, especially in the period during Reconstruction, is the intense faith put in democracy, in the systems of American governance, in the really heartbreaking dream that white power brokers will ever play fair.

As I was writing *Libertie*, I was captivated by the belief, still possible to believe in the years after the Civil War, that equality was close at hand, that it was possible, that change was coming. You're talking about a person who had seen a three-hundred-year-old institution fall apart in less than four years, and so I was most interested in writing into that spirit of immense possibility.

I tend to approach novels as a puzzle, as a way to answer questions. For this project particularly, these are the questions that drove it, that I am still grappling with:

What does freedom actually mean?

Can we conceive of freedom without a core of domination—over other people, over the land, over groups less powerful than ourselves?

Why do we so often connect the project of Black progress and Black liberation to Black women's bodies—whether they are pure enough, chaste enough, healthy enough, controlled enough to "deserve" or "allow for" freedom?

What does Black liberation look like when we refuse those definitions of freedom?

FROM

Libertie

BY KAITLYN GREENIDGE

1860

I saw my mother raise a man from the dead. "It still didn't help him much, my love," she told me. But I saw her do it all the same. That's how I knew she was magic.

The time I saw Mama raise a man from the dead, it was close to dusk. Mama and her nurse, Lenore, were in her office—Mama with her little greasy glasses on the tip of her nose, balancing the books, and Lenore banking the fire. That was the rule in Mama's office—the fire was kept burning from dawn till after dinner, and we never let it go out completely. Even on the hottest days, when my linen collar stuck to the back of my neck and the belly of Lenore's apron was stained with sweat, a mess of logs and twigs was lit up down there, waiting.

When the dead man came, it was spring. I was playing on the stoop. I'd broken a stick off the mulberry bush, so young it had resisted the pull of my fist. I'd had to work for it. Once I'd wrenched it off, I stripped the bark and rubbed the wet wood underneath on the flagstone, pressing the green into rock.

I heard a rumbling come close and looked up, and I could see, down the road, a mule plodding slow and steady with a covered wagon, a ribbon of dust trailing behind it.

In those days, the road to our house was narrow and only just cut through the brush. Our house was set back—Grandfather, my mother's father, had made his money raising pigs and kept the house and pens away from everyone else to protect his neighbors, and his reputation, from the

undermining smell of swine. No one respects a man, no matter how rich and distinguished-looking, who stinks of pig scat. The house was set up on a rise, so we could always see who was coming. Usually, it was Mama's patients, walking or limping or running to her office. Wagons were rare.

When it first turned onto our road, the cart was moving slowly. But once it passed the bowed-over walnut tree, the woman at the seat snapped her whip, and the mule began to move a little faster, until it was upon us.

"Where's your mother?"

I opened my mouth, but before I could call for her, my mother rushed to the door, Lenore behind her.

"Quick," was all Mama said, and the woman came down off the seat. A boy, about twelve or thirteen, followed. They were both dressed in mourning clothes. The woman's skirt was full. Embroidered on the bodice of her dress were a dozen black lilies, done in cord. The boy's mourning suit was dusty but perfectly fit to his form. At his neck was a velvet bow tie, come undone on the journey. The woman carried an enormous beaded handbag—it, too, was dusty but looked rich. It was covered in a thousand little eyes of jet that winked at me in the last bit of sun.

"Go, Lenore," my mother said, and Lenore and the woman and the boy all went to the back of the wagon, the boy hopping up in the bed and pushing something that lay there, Lenore and the woman standing, arms ready to catch it. Finally, after much scraping, a coffin heaved out of the wagon bed. It was crudely made, a white, bright wood, heavy enough that Lenore and the woman stumbled as they carried it. When the coffin passed me, I could smell the sawdust still on it.

My mother stepped down off the stoop then, and the four of them lifted it up and managed it into the office. As soon as they got it inside, they set it on the ground and pushed it home. I could hear the rough pine shuffling across the floor.

"You're early." Mama struggled with the box.

"Don't start with me, Cathy," the woman said, and Lenore looked up, and so did I. No one, except Grandfather before he died, dared call Mama "Cathy." To everyone except for me, she was always "Doctor." But Mama did not bristle and did not correct, as she would have with anyone else.

"Word was you'd be here at midnight."

"We couldn't leave," the woman said. "He wasn't ready."

The woman knelt down in her dusty skirts and drew a long, skinny claw hammer from the handbag. She turned it on its head and began to pull at the nails on the coffin's face. She grunted. "Here, Lucien." She signaled to the boy. "Put some grease into it." He fell down beside her, took the hammer from her hands, and began to pull at the nails she'd left behind.

Mama watched, eagerly. We all did. I crossed the room to stand beside her, slipped my hand into hers.

Mama started at my touch. "If you'd only come later."

The woman's head jerked up, her expression sharp, and then she looked at my hand in Mama's, and her frown softened.

"I know we've done it differently. This time we really tried," she said. "Besides, my Lucien sees all this and more. If you do this work, Cathy, your children will know sooner or later."

Mama did not take advice from anyone, certainly not advice on me, but she said nothing at this softest of rebukes, only watched the woman and her son.

The boy, Lucien, pulled hard, and when the final nail was out, he and Lenore pulled at the splintering plank until it gave a terrible yawn. And then I saw:

a man curled in on himself like a dried mulberry leaf,

his skin gray, his eyes open and staring,

his pants damp. He smelled sharp,

like the spirits Lenore used to cut Mama's medicines.

The woman gasped and reached for the boy and held him close. Lenore gasped, too. Mama let go of my hand and knelt down at the side of the coffin. She held her ear over the man's open mouth, and her eyes went blank, that look she always got when she left this world and entered the one of her mind.

She stood up suddenly. "The arnica, please," she said to Lenore, who hurried to the shelf over Mama's worktable.

Lenore held the big glass jar close to her chest, then set it down beside the coffin. Without looking at her, never taking her eyes off the dead man, Mama held out her right hand.

"Thirty grains," she said. "Exactly. Don't skimp me, girl."

Lenore counted them out.

One . . . two . . . three . . .

I watched the yellow pellets move from the jar to Mama's open palm. Mama wet the fingers of her free hand with her spit, the better to gain purchase, and then pinched each grain, one by one, from her right palm and fed them into the dead man's mouth.

fifteen sixteen seventeen

"He wasn't like that when we put him in, Cathy," the woman said. Lucien turned his face into her side, and I felt a flash of pride, that a boy bigger than me couldn't watch what I could.

twenty-one twenty-two twenty-three

Thirty seeds passed between his lips.

The last five left them yellow.

Mama stood up. The man lay still in his coffin. Mama put her hands on her hips, frowned. Then she knelt down suddenly and whacked his back. The man sputtered and coughed and made the lowest moaning sound. His eyes blinked, and he rolled them up to look at all of us, from his resting place.

"There," Mama said.

The woman sighed. "Cathy, I don't know what we would have done—"

"Well, we don't have to wonder." Mama wiped her hands on her skirt. The man in the coffin was still groaning.

"He was so eager to keep going," the woman said. "He and his sister came to us three days ago. He said he should leave before his sister. That he was strong enough to make it first. But when he saw how he had to come, he got scared. He was shaking something fierce."

"I told him, 'Me and Manman took a girl not but ten years old this way, and she was brave and didn't cry the whole time,' " Lucien said. He was much recovered now and had stepped away from his mother's side. "I said, 'Be brave, Mr. Ben.' "

"Last night, he disappeared," the woman said. "That's why we left at the wrong time. He went missing and almost killed us all. He was down in Market Square, begging for whiskey to help him through. I said, 'You fool,' but he was already drunk by the time he got back. Pierre told me to wait till he sobered up, but if we'd done that, he would have kept yelling, drawing even more attention to us. It took Pierre and Lucien both to get him in the

box, and the whole time he was hollering that we were trying to kill him. He kept saying 'Damn, nigger, what'd I ever do to you?' "

Mama started to laugh but caught herself. Instead, she said, "How did you get him to be quiet?"

"I soaked that rag in some laudanum and stuffed it in his mouth, and then he fell right still. When we nailed the top on, I swear he was still breathing."

Mama shook her head. "You always overdo it, Elizabeth," she said, and then we all heard a great whoosh as Mr. Ben sat up in his coffin and began to cry.

"That black bitch right there promised to get me out. They all said she can get you out. No one ever said it was like this. In a goddamn coffin." Mr. Ben was upright, and I could see him clearly. The color came back to him—his skin was a dark brown. I liked his face. It was soft and, I thought, handsome, made more so by his cheeks and chin. They rounded in to the pout of a spoiled and much-loved baby. I could not tell how old he was—his skin was smooth, but his hair, what was left of it, was turning gray and clipped close to his skull. He wore a graying shirt and britches and no hat. His hands were enormous and calloused. He was crying, loud, racking sobs that I did not think a grown person could make. He made no move to leave his coffin, and my mother and the woman made no move to comfort him.

The woman said, "Behave yourself, Mr. Ben."

Mama pursed her lips. "Is this his final destination?"

"We take his sister to Manhattan next month."

"Then perhaps Mr. Ben can wait for her there. Mr. Ben," Mama said, "you will have to stay the night here, but I trust we can count on you to be quiet?"

Mr. Ben did not look at her; instead, he gazed up at the ceiling. "As long as I don't ever have to sleep in any coffin."

Mama laughed. "Only the good Lord can promise that."

LIBERTIE
by Kaitlyn Greenidge
978-1-61620-701-4
On Sale March 2021

A Gardenia and a Sandwich

AN ESSAY BY

POLLY SAMSON

There's a fresh gardenia in a small stone jar on my worktable. It sweetens the whole room. They are tricky plants, gardenias—hard to please and reluctant to bloom—and cutting this single flower, moon-white and waxy, and then stealing it away upstairs felt a tad selfish.

The plant has been there on the kitchen windowsill for us all to enjoy, shedding yellow leaves and limp, half-formed buds this entire lockdown year. Google what's up with it and you'll find a dizzying list of complaints: too wet, too dry, too cold, too much feeding, too little spritzing, not hard-enough praying, etc. etc. I have been longing for it to bloom.

The motif of the fresh gardenia and its partner, the sandwich, runs through my novel. The image was planted there by the Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen, when he spoke of his beloved Marianne and how she catered to his needs and created domestic harmony: "There would be a gardenia on my desk perfuming the whole room. And there would be a little sandwich at noon. Sweetness, sweetness everywhere." She's the Marianne he immortalized in his haunting song "So Long, Marianne." The fabled muse. What writer wouldn't wish for such service and care?

In a fever of creativity he wrote two novels, several collections of poetry, and his first songs while they were lovers. They lived in a whitewashed house on the Greek island of Hydra, where there was no electricity and everyone was young and beautiful by candlelight. They met there in 1960, when the island was home to a thriving international community of bickering, bed-hopping, boozing bohemians, and they meet again as characters in my novel, which is based around known events.

The king and queen of the community were the married writers Charmian

Clift and George Johnston. They were sociable and their marriage was dramatic. They had bought a house on Hydra in the fifties and managed to scrape by for a decade writing novels. Leonard Cohen later described them as an inspiration, and also noted that "they drank more than other people, they wrote more, they got sick more, they got well more, they cursed more, they blessed more, and they helped a great deal more."

There's a photograph of Charmian Clift taped to my wall with a Post-it that reads: "You know, Leonard, I was never in love with you." Leonard replies: "No, me neither." She's soulfully beautiful beneath her straw brim, cigarette and glass in hand, an old shirt with a buttonhole sprig of jasmine, gazing away from the port, preoccupied. The blur of houses rise behind her like the steps of an ancient amphitheater.

I looked at the photo often when I was writing Charmian as a character. It's from a lucky cache of over fifteen hundred images by the photojournalist James Burke, all taken on Hydra in 1960 for a *Life* magazine assignment about the artistic community. You can't look at them without wishing yourself there: to meet these people and know their stories, to feel that sun on your back.

Some of James Burke's photographs are on the internet because Leonard Cohen is in them. In some he's pictured in a group with Marianne riding donkeys to the monastery, in others he's with Charmian and her family swimming at the rocks, or in the Taverna Douskos with his guitar. He sits with his back to the white-painted trunk of a tree, Charmian beside him. Her head is on his shoulder while he plays to an enchanting and enchanted circle of young people.

Before the photographs there had been Hydra itself, an island for dreamers, ten miles long and mountainous, with neither roads nor airport but the clearest water for swimming and streets that smell of white flowers. I visited for the first time in 2014 and stumbled upon Charmian Clift's long-out-of-print memoir of her life there, *Peel Me a Lotus*. She is an extraordinarily captivating writer, perceptive and acidly witty, her voice so intimate I had to know more. And the more I read by and about Charmian Clift and the community, the more certain I became that I would write about her.

Spending time on Hydra was no hardship, and through a serendipitous friendship I even stayed in and wrote part of *A Theater for Dreamers* in the

house that had been Charmian and George's. Leonard Cohen had also lodged there, when he first arrived on the island to write his novel. For a while I was hamstrung at the thought of having him in mine, in the way that only a true fan could be.

I made progress at first by identifying everyone in the photographs. As so many were writers—and writers tend to write—the research became labyrinthine. There were biographies and a wealth of published as well as unpublished novels, diaries, and letters. Charmian Clift and George Johnston published fourteen books during their decade in Greece.

There was plenty to read, but a couple of years went by and I still hadn't found the voice to tell their story. Then Marianne died and the letter Leonard wrote her went viral.

Dearest Marianne,

I'm just a little behind you, close enough to take your hand. This old body has given up, just as yours has too, and the eviction notice is on its way any day now.

I've never forgotten your love and your beauty. But you know that. I don't have to say any more. Safe travels old friend. See you down the road.

Love and gratitude,
Leonard

In November 2016 I returned to Hydra. As I took a coffee at the port, watching the mules being led away with their cargos, the news of Leonard Cohen's death and the American presidential election results hit me at the same time. "At least Leonard's been spared this," said a voice in my head. This was the first time that Erica, my narrator, made herself known. She was giddy with fear and foreboding that a world she had fought to change would be spinning backwards.

Erica Hart comes of age in 1960. She isn't much older than friends of mine, women who are not so very much older than me, and yet who were not

able to get a mortgage or a loan or rent a flat without the guarantor signature of a husband or a father. She, like my friends, came of age without access to reliable contraception or legal abortion.

The final gardenia and sandwich in the novel are the ones Erica places on a desk of her own. I think many women still find it hard to recognize and cater to their own needs, but maybe it's the best thing of all, to be one's own muse.

Across the pond there are glimmers of hope as a new presidential term begins, and here too it is time for something new. The gardenia is on my desk, and downstairs in the kitchen the bread is new and the butter soft.

FROM

A Theater for Dreamers

BY POLLY SAMSON

We are all embarked on our journeys . . . shooting out on the current, out and away into the wide blue frightening loneliness of freedom, where every man must navigate for himself. Still—the thought is consoling—there are islands. —Charmian Clift

I'm living. Life is my art. —Marianne Ihlen

It's a climb from the port and I take the steps of Donkey Shit Lane at a steady pace, a heart-shaped stone in my pocket. I walk alone and, though there's no one to witness, I resist the urge to stop and rest at the standing posts after the steepest part. I watch my step, a stumble can so easily become a fall, a thought that disgusts the gazelle still living within my stiffening body.

The marble slabs shine from centuries of use; the light is pure. Even on a morning gloomy as this, with the sky low enough to blot out the mainland and clouds crowding in on the harbor, these whitewashed streets dazzle.

Two young lads skip, arm in arm, down the steps towards me. I'm as anonymous as a shepherd or a muleteer in Dinos's ancient tweed jacket, my hands bulging its pockets, my boots comfortably laced. The lines on my face have been deepened by these years in the sun and my hair hasn't seen dye, or even the hairdresser's scissors, for who knows how long, but so what? It's off my face, in a loose tail, the way I've always done it. I'm still here, a little bruised, a little dented, but remarkably the girl who first set foot on this island almost sixty years ago remains. I suspect only those who knew me then can see through the thickening patina and it breaks my heart how rapidly the crowd of seers is diminishing.

The call about Leonard came last night. I sat quietly for a while, listened to the owls. I took out my old notebooks, the threepenny jotters that came with me to the island in 1960, found him in my hopeful, curly scrawls. My neck got cricked. The cocks crowed all through the night. I slept badly and woke to a morning crowded by dreams.

The summer visitors are long gone; there's unrest in Athens as austerity bites, refugees, lost children, fires in the streets. Boats are going out, pulling people from the water. There's plenty for us to chew over so you might think we'd let the American election slide by. But at the port this morning, as I idled with my one good bitter espresso of the day, watching the mules being led away from the boats with their cargoes, the news of the new president found me. It slithered from the water with the morning pages and spread rapidly like a stench along the agora. There were horrified groans, even from the donkeys, disbelieving splutters from every table, passer-by and boat. For a moment it was a comfort to think that at least Leonard has been spared this.

I stop outside Maria's shop at Four Corners and listen for voices. I would feel a fool if anyone saw me approaching his front door with my heart-shaped stone and I prepare to walk straight past as I turn the corner from Crazy Street. The street isn't actually named Crazy but something that sounds similar and that's what we heard when Leonard came fresh from the notary, pulled off his sixpenny cap and landed the deeds to his house beside it on the table, his grin a little bashful at first, self-conscious, like we might all think he was showing off.

Later that day we came armed with borrowed pails and long-handled brushes for whitewash and Leonard had new batteries for the gramophone that he'd placed in the center of the stone floor. Some of his records had warped like Dali's clocks and become unplayable but there was Ray Charles and Muddy Waters and a woman singer I liked but whose name I don't remember. Later still, a fire of lumber among the lemon trees on the terrace, jugs of retsina, a little hashish, dancing. Paint-spattered shorts, brown limbs, bare feet. War babies, most of us even younger than him and him just a cub, really. We lapped up the freedom our elders had fought for and our appetites reached well beyond their narrow, war-shattered shadows.

Was it drugs and contraception that made change seem possible? Was it

a conscious revolution? Or were we simply children who craved languor and sex and mind alteration to ease the anxiety that was etched into our DNA, detonating in each of our young brains its own private Hiroshima?

Ha! To my dad I was a bloody beatnik.

We asked little of this island except days sunny and long enough to keep the Cold War from biting, a *galloni* of wine for six drachmas, and a solid white house for two pounds and ten shillings a month. We paid only lip service to its name: Hydra. A name that means "water" though an ancient earthquake buried its springs and turned it dry but for a few sweet wells.

In Greek myth, the monstrous Hydra is doorman to the Underworld.

"A many-headed serpent with halitosis so bad it kills with one breath," I say when it's my turn to set a riddle.

Leonard laughs. Someone has a bouzouki, someone else a guitar. There's ouzo, stars, a slice of moon as thin as the edge of a spoon. Some old brushwood burns with a resinous crackle; our eyes brighten in an explosion of sparks. We grow wilder, smash our glasses to the wall of Leonard's new house. For luck!

But Marianne, fetching a broom, asks: "What is this crazy custom?" And not one of us—not American or Canadian, not Greek, English, French, Swedish or Czech, not even the Australian brain on stilts that is George Johnston—can come up with an excuse for this rain of broken glass, except that Marianne threw hers first.

I give the stone heart in my pocket a squeeze. I'm trying to remember why they left so soon after he bought his house. Little more than a month, and Marianne's skipping through my memory and slipping the stone from her hand to mine. I'm guessing November.

A Russian wind with icy breath, waves scattering across the stones of the port, octopus strung like old tights along a boat rope at the jetty. Leonard in his raincoat (yes—blue, though not remotely famous yet), passing his leather case to the boatman, and here comes Marianne, in rain-splotched and rumpled shirt and sailor pants, hefting several large bundles, lithe and quick as a boy. She turns and calls my name; the wind streaks hair across her face.

It's the first time she's even looked at me for weeks. "No, no. I can't bear it if you cry." She dumps the luggage, comes running back, the rain pretty

on her skin. I can't stop hugging her, I'm so relieved that she doesn't want to leave on bad terms.

"Please don't look so lonely," she says, pulling away and closing my fingers around the stone. She tells me it was the first thing Leonard ever gave her. The stone fits in my palm, meat-colored and marbled with white and mauve. It truly is a heart, and by the way she's looking at me I know that now she and Leonard are leaving together, I have been forgiven.

Her smile is so sweet, so full of hope. "Just when the one in my chest had been pounded to pieces by Axel. He said I could probably use a replacement."

Marianne's eyes are blue as summer skies; her hair is the startling sort of blond. It's hard to believe she'd ever think of me as a rival.

"So much has changed, be happy for me, please. My baby boy waits in Oslo but my heart stays here on the island with you until our return . . . Oh, sweet Erica, you mustn't cry."

Leonard offers me his handkerchief and directs my gaze from the wet port and up to the streaming gray and purple mountains. This place has been kind to him. This island. This woman. He's pointing back the way they came. "There is my beautiful house, and sun to tan my maggot-colored mind . . ." He ruffles my hair like you might a little girl's and tells me he isn't planning on staying away long.

Leonard doesn't look back, not even once, but Marianne's waving and waving until the boat is lost in churning foam. It's simultaneously yesterday and ancient history, thinking about this. I'm swept by a surge of loneliness. Too many goodbyes.

A lemon tree grown taller than the wall is hung with strips of insecticide. I pretend to myself that she's still here, just the other side, picking tomatoes on the terrace. Leonard and that tragic boy of hers too. Marianne was happiest making a home, bringing flowers to his table and calm to his storm, sewing curtains, pouring wine, baby Axel lulled to sleep by the strings of his guitar . . . I think of Axel Joachim, or Barnet as Leonard took to calling him, sleepily sucking his thumb, his sun-bleached hair as white as his pillow.

Leonard brings his guitar out to the terrace, watches us dancing. The embers glow beneath the lemon trees, just the other side of this wall, but the bellowing of a workman snaps me back to earth and it might as well be Mars. We were heady with ideals, drunk with hopes of our languorous lope into

a future that had learned from its past. I reach the door of Leonard's house feeling quite giddy and a groan escapes me at the thought of that man in the White House, of a world turning backwards.

The nightmares will always find you even if you do live on a rock.

There's nobody about to hear my muttering, though flowers have already been left on the step. The white walls of Leonard's house rise blankly, gray shutters shut. By the look of it, Fatima's brass hand has recently been polished. I hope someone has been in to cover the mirrors. I bend to the step and place the stone among other offerings: drying carnations, teabags, oranges, a single gypsy rose. I think about snatching it back but it was his and Marianne's, and not mine at all.

"A talisman," Marianne said, and added with a giggle, "maybe it's the petrified heart of Orpheus."

I kneel at the step. The other side of this door, in the hall, the mirror keeps its secrets above a polished table with a lace cloth where they laid out their treasures.

Marianne and Leonard made up stories; along with Orpheus's heart, they had a fossilized goat's horn Dionysus had drunk from, gold and blue fragments from Epidaurus, an iron monastery bell that Marianne once found buried in a pine forest in Santorini, a large rusting tin box with a relief of a blindfolded woman playing a harp without strings. The carved mirror was their oracle. Leonard painted in gold ink: *I change. I am the same. I change. I am the same. I change. I am the same.* He once made me stop and look into it. He lit candles and said some sort of prayer, bid me to keep looking until I knew who I was.

I change. I am the same. I guess he meant well even though he got carried away and Marianne hated me for a while. Ah well, that's how it was in those days.

That was the last year without electricity up here. Sometimes it seems a shame. An hour or two after sundown the town generators fell silent and we were lit only by moon and flame. Lanterns, charcoal braziers, icons flickering above bowls of oil with little flames floating on corks. Everyone is beautiful by candlelight. I take my cooker and fridge for granted these days but my memories are golden. I change. I am the same.

I was here one Shabbat. The lighting of the candles, the little dishes of salt

and oil, olives, fresh anchovies. Marianne had somehow managed a challah loaf from his temperamental oven. Leonard's benedictions were not misplaced. The hand-embroidered tablecloth, sweet water from the wells, the glass of the kerosene lamps sparkling, white anemones gracefully dipping their heads from an earthenware jug; even the air around her was luminous.

I think of those nights lit by lamps, music and dancing, of Magda's mournful Russian songs, shadows leaping on the walls, of guitars and bouzouki and accordion, Mikhailis with his fiddle, Jewish songs known to both Magda and Leonard, and sometimes, strumming his guitar, a few hesitant lines or verses of his own that seemed to stalk him like cats to the creamery.

I don't think he's been here for almost twenty years so I'm surprised to find myself weeping like this. I haven't even brought a tissue. But then, unlike Leonard, who leapt right in with this house and another man's wife and child, I didn't expect this place to become home.

A THEATER FOR DREAMERS
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Love on Ice

AN ESSAY BY

JONATHAN EVISON

I have three kids, ages three, eight, and eleven, and make no mistake, I want them to be confident and curious. I want them to experience life to the fullest, and be independent and adventurous, and discover things on their own, and I want them to take risks—once they're adults.

I can't help it. I'm a helicopter parent and have been since day one. That's me walking behind my infants and toddlers as they climb, then crawl, then waddle up staircases; that's me standing below my grade schoolers, ready to catch them when they're scrambling up trees; that's me riding on the outside anytime we're biking around traffic (even the mere possibility of traffic); that's me barely out of arm's length in the swimming pool.

I'd like to think I'm not suffocating about it. I go out of my way to offer them extraordinary experiences and opportunities. I give them space, I really do. I don't try to influence their every move or discourage them from exploring the world; I just keep my eyes peeled for trouble at all times. I've seen firsthand how fast an accident can happen to young people, and the irreparable damage it can do.

My helicoptering is by no means limited to the realm of physical safety. I constantly worry for my kids' mental and emotional well-being, especially when they're away from me at school, or out playing, or staying at a friend's house—anywhere and anytime they're out of my sight, really. While I am mostly powerless in these situations, I can't stop trying to prepare them for heartbreaks, or reassuring them that they are loved, and respected, and seen. I don't want them to get bullied, or hurt, or ever question their own worth, or feel depressed about climate change or rampant human suffering. As fanatical as it may sound, I'm guessing most parents feel the same way. And

yes, our motives are selfish. Because we love them so damn much that the idea of anything bad ever happening to them is unthinkable. It would break us completely. Without them we wouldn't want to live.

When I write a novel I always try to get out of my own way and give myself to the characters, which can make it both a painful and revelatory process, but always expansive. Invariably I feel like I come out the other end a better, more experienced person somehow, a better husband, a better dad, a better friend, having learned lessons and overcome obstacles not just on the page, but in my heart and mind, just as sure as if the experience of the novel were real life. That's why I write in the first place, to live beyond the purview of my personal experience. And for the whole enterprise to work, I've got to allow myself to be vulnerable.

The toughest thing about writing *Legends of the North Cascades* was imagining situations where children were in peril, particularly Bella. Like my own kids, Bella is precocious, and extremely thoughtful, and empathic, and tends to take the world a bit personally at times. She asks the questions and says the things my kids might say or ask. She's got an active imagination and a voracious curiosity. But unlike my kids, Bella was born into a lousy situation, one that keeps getting worse, forcing her to confront things beyond her years, and as a result she's compelled to start acting like an adult long before she should ever have to. Likewise with Dave's character, I have a lot in common with him, in terms of his passion, yearning, and disillusionment, and especially in his intense love and sense of responsibility for his child. But as an Iraq war veteran, Dave's baggage is heavier than mine, his situation much more dire than my own, and it gets progressively worse, in part by his own doing. Who knows what decisions I might make under the same circumstances as Dave, suffering trauma, irredeemable loss, financial ruin, and constant physical peril? For Dave and Bella, while it seems like the final solution, living in a cave in the high country of the North Cascades only exacerbates the issues already tormenting them.

It was heartbreaking living inside Dave and Bella under such circumstances. But what carried me through and ultimately saved me was the same thing that saved them: their fierce love for each other, their dependence on each other, their unshakeable faith in each other despite how bad things might get. While the novel is unquestionably an adventure story, at its core

it is the story of the love between parent and child, a love that is tested at every turn. And so it is with Dave and Bella's Ice Age counterparts, S'tka, the young mother, and N'ka, the fatherless child, as they try to eke out an existence alone in an icy world that seems intent on forsaking them.

I wrote *Legends of the North Cascades* in 2018, so when I chose self-isolation as a theme I wasn't being prescient. I didn't see what was coming for all of us in 2020 (and likely most of 2021). The fact is, no matter how different each of my novels may seem on the surface, I've got only a few themes that preoccupy my work as a whole. I've always written about self-isolation. Whether overtly or not, nearly all my characters are in one guise or another dealing with the fundamental conflicts that comprise the dictates of self versus humanity, individual versus collective, alone versus together. But never have I explored these themes quite so directly as in *Legends of the North Cascades*.

I love adventure stories. Having grown up on a heavy dose of Jack London's Yukon, I always wanted to write a novel with a rugged northern setting, and I have dabbled there in the past, such as in portions of my 2011 novel *West of Here*. But *Legends* offered me the perfect opportunity to fully immerse myself in a frozen wasteland, to virtually experience the thrill and urgency and peril of isolation and survival in a harsh environment, and to explore how these extraordinary conditions might test the love and trust of a parent and a child. The result, I hope, is a timeless story that will stick with readers for a long while and leave them altered in some small way, as I myself was changed by the act of writing the novel.

Because of Dave and Bella, S'tka and N'ka, and the brutal and unforgiving forces that shaped and tested them, whatever obstacles life might throw at me as a parent going forward, whatever circumstances fate might ask me to navigate to ensure the well-being of my children, I feel more prepared than ever to face them.

FROM

Legends of the North Cascades

BY JONATHAN EVISON

Once Bella had broken her silence and returned to school, Dave escaped into the backwoods almost daily, hiking fifteen and twenty miles at a go, in spite of his lousy hip, up the canyon, and over the rock-studded ridge, into the sprawling high country of the North Cascades, their precipitous peaks and cornices buttressed by glacial ice, white and windswept against the late winter sky.

As long as Dave was moving, putting distance between himself and the world, he could endure living in the moment.

One afternoon, while taking refuge on a small plateau high above the canyon, he paused in the clear, cool, afternoon to eat a heel of bread and a tin of sardines, taking in the remarkable panorama through the cloud of his breath; the great, yawning jaw of the canyon, and the ruffled blanket of spruce and fir sprawling clear to the bottom of the basin and beyond. Behind him, the peaks of the Picket Range reared up like spires: Ghost, and Phantom, and Fury. To the west, beyond the frozen silence, lay the inland Pacific, with its labyrinthine waterways.

Here, in this spot above it all, he lingered as long as the day would allow, basking in isolation. When he finally hefted his daypack, and turned to resume his progress, his eyes lighted on a narrow cleft in the side of the mountain.

In a world that seemed all out of mysteries, the gash in the hillside demanded his attention. Tentatively, he poked his head in, sniffing the chalky air, wary of bear, or cougar. Sensing no danger, Dave entered what amounted to a stone chamber, the size of which was difficult to ascertain at first. By the paltry light of his phone, he eased his way along the near wall for four or five steps, until the rock began to close in on him from above. After a few more steps, he arrived at the rear of the cavern. Stooping, he doubled back

along the opposite wall, feeling his way along the cold rock, before stationing himself in the very center of the space, which he estimated to be roughly four hundred square feet. The stillness of the place was overwhelming.

Dimming his phone, Dave sat down upon the cold, hard earth in the darkness, only a narrow blade of sunlight slicing the foreground diagonally in front of him. For the first time in weeks he drew a deep breath, and clutched it in his chest, and stared at the back of his eyelids for a good fifteen seconds. Rather than exhale the breath deeply, he absorbed what he could of it, letting it pass slowly through every pore of his body, his shoulders slackening, as he released it gradually.

He spent the next twenty minutes repeating this exercise until finally, he let go a deep sigh. While the experience did nothing to buffer him from the future, he found comfort in the stillness, and in the tomb-like depths of the cavern, which immediately took on an almost holy significance. Here was sanctuary, and shelter in the realest sense; a divine cathedral of rock to soothe the aches and pains of the temporal world.

Dave would visit the place again and again in the weeks that followed, hiking eighteen-mile days for a few precious moments of shelter from the outside world.

It was upon Dave's third visit to the cave that he began to consider and calculate the possibility of leaving his life behind and taking shelter in the inexhaustible wilderness of the North Cascades. Yes, to turn his back on the world was a rash course of action, but what was left for him and Bella down below? Their lives were a smoldering heap of rubble. The only woman Dave ever loved, the only mother Bella would ever know, was two weeks in the grave. And in spite of Bella's naïve insistence, she wasn't coming back. The days of his employment at Terminix were numbered. The prospects for future employment were fraught with unknowns. He was down to nineteen hundred dollars, roughly a third of which would be eaten up by the mortgage payment due in two weeks. Each possibility he contemplated for the future seemed bleaker than the last.

To leave the civilized world behind seemed like a natural extension to the escape Dave had been gradually charting for a decade, a course that had accelerated in recent years. He started tuning out the news cycle before

the last election. He shut down his Facebook account shortly thereafter and taped over the camera on his laptop. He stopped engaging in political discourse of any kind. Eventually, he stopped returning calls, or paying social visits, or attending the occasional Sunday service at Saint Barnabas to appease his mom.

Now, with Nadene in the grave, life in V-Falls had become altogether untenable. Dave no longer wished to be around anybody, except for his daughter. And what was left for a child down there but a world that would likely forsake her, a world that would wring the wonder and humanity right out of her, as it sought to reduce her life force to an algorithm? The modern world held no more promise for Bella than it did for Dave. Reverend Hardy had it wrong: It wasn't third and long. It was fourth and forever. Time to punt.

It only took a matter of days for Dave's unlikely speculations to harden into a conviction; to live in isolation suddenly seemed like an imperative, and the only future he could bear to contemplate. The decision itself proved to be a morale booster. If not hope, it gave Dave's life new purpose and direction. Thus began the six supply runs in two weeks; through the steep canyon and over the wooded saddle, thirty-five hundred vertical feet up the mountain, eighteen miles round trip, a third of it in snow shoes, to town and back, packing sixty and seventy pounds per load: vintage hand tools—two saws, a planer, a drill, a mallet, a hammer, a coffee can full of hardware. Fishing tackle, rods, a pair of Winchesters, .22 and .458 Magnum, a hundred and thirty-six rounds. Skinning knife, nylon rope, parachute cord, binoculars, butane lighters, wooden matches, three flashlights, three headlamps, and five pounds of batteries. Topo maps, bear spray, fire starter, ibuprofen, a first aid kit. A pair of old Coleman lanterns to be used sparingly, three gallons of kerosene, a hatchet, a wedge, a shovel, three pairs of work gloves (two large, one small), two sleeping bags, two inflatable Therm-a-Rests, four wool blankets, four tarps, clothing for all seasons, a transistor radio, and every trip, two or three empty water jugs. Oats, flour, rice, sugar, and books, cumbersome, heavier than tools, awkward, backbreaking books. The least he could do was improve himself with all the time he'd have on his hands. He devoted one whole trip explicitly to the printed word: used books, new books, library

books, children's books, textbooks, medical books, survival books. In two weeks' time, Dave hauled anything and everything a body could think of to survive in the backcountry of the North Cascades.

Almost everything.

LEGENDS OF THE NORTH CASCADES
by Jonathan Evison
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Perfect Ruins

AN ESSAY BY

RACHEL DONOHUE

I have an enduring fascination with ruined buildings, a consequence perhaps of too many afternoons spent reading ghost stories and mystery books. A locked gate, an overgrown driveway, some shuttered windows—they were all childhood invitations to trespass, the hazard signs ignored as I went in search of something hidden.

Pinterest and Instagram have encouraged my interest into adulthood. It is a desktop pursuit both mournful and strangely romantic, like the "ruin-wanderers" of Arabic poetry. I have lost time clicking through photographs of eerie, broken-apart mansions in Russia or the midwestern United States. Disused train stations, deserted factories, and forsaken hotels also appeal. They tell a story of something forgotten, though what that story is you are never completely sure, as there is only the ending to work with.

I think of them as unexpected daylight dreamscapes, a world where things are almost familiar but not quite. A tree grows through the floor of a shattered ballroom, or an elaborate stairwell rises to blank, open sky. They are apparitions of the past, a lost world I strain to imagine and understand—a glimpse of one way of living before a fall of some sort. It is a reminder that people and possessions come and go.

In Ireland, too, we have abandoned buildings that tell a hidden and complex story of the past. The "Big Houses" of the ruling Anglo Irish that were burnt out or vacated during the War of Independence against the British in the 1920s. All that remains of these mansions stand damp, hidden, and mostly unnoticed in fields and down country laneways. When you come across one, it is almost always by accident. They seem embarrassed to exist;

they shrug and hide behind a cluster of trees, their silence a plea to avert our eyes. We are the former people, they seem to whisper.

In my novel *The Temple House Vanishing*, Louisa and her art teacher, Mr. Lavelle, are former people of a sort too. Their faces peer out of tattered photographs and yellowing newspaper reports, beautiful and lost. Their disappearance from an isolated school in the early 1990s is the ending no one can make sense of—the debris and ruins of their story scattered and confusing. The rumors of what might have happened grow thick, dense, and ever more distorted and salacious as time passes.

Temple House is the abandoned mansion that holds their story. It is a Catholic boarding school, a Victorian redbrick with a turret on one end for good measure. Lonely and isolated, it becomes another character, watchful and severe. Perched on a cliff above the sea, it's crumbling even in its supposed heyday, with damp walls and drafty windows, a cloistered place of lemon polish, prayers, and incense. At night the only sound is the wail of a foghorn far down the coast, a warning of dangerous rocks and currents ahead.

Temple House is oppressive in its shadows and its call to conformity, the perfect gothic mansion in which to explore the intensity of obsession. It is here that Louisa, the missing scholarship student, will attempt to find her place amidst the rituals of prayer and teenage envy, her vulnerability and need to belong leading her to desire someone she should not.

For much of the story the school is a ghoulish echo of its former self. The secret of what happened to Louisa and Mr. Lavelle is locked away, the soul of the building tarnished, the windows broken and gaping. It waits for a demolition that never seems to come. It is a world of strict Catholic ritual and belief that, like the student and teacher, vanished almost overnight, though in this story no one is really able to forget. The house and that which it conceals haunt everyone.

The journalist who seeks to uncover Louisa and Mr. Lavelle's story will come to learn this. You can grasp what was once complete only by understanding what is missing, and why. There is a forlorn hope in searching in remnants, and there is the thrill of the unexpected: nothing is quite what it seems. Like the locked gates and long grass of my childhood adventures,

the journalist must be willing to ignore hazard signs if she is to uncover the stories that may wish to remain hidden.

When alive, buildings have their own character, I feel sure. There can be pride, beauty, cruelty in those that stand tall. We can admire or cower before them. But it is only in their death, when abandoned and ruined, that we see into their souls. You begin at the end in a way, and with all formal function gone you can explore the essence of what came before.

FROM

The Temple House Vanishing

BY RACHEL DONOHUE

Mr. Lavelle, my favorite teacher at Temple House, once said there is something inherently dark and powerful at play in adolescence. A kind of alchemy that takes place underneath the surface of everything, including your skin. It bursts out in different ways and, depending on the era in which you live through, it will be met with hysterical fear and damnation or just attempts at coercive control. It's the necessary thwarting of an emergent power.

I told him that's why they tell us fairy tales when you're young. They tell you that you are powerless so as to make you less powerful. Don't go to the woods, for if you wander you will get lost and there is darkness everywhere. Wolves in the undergrowth. And be warned, only the pure and the lucky will be rescued.

He laughed at this and said of course we were the perfect fairy tale. The girls in the Victorian mansion on the hill, surrounded by fields, trees and the sea. A world of lemon polish and silence, incense and martyrs. The black wrought-iron gates locked to keep out the world and the changes he said were coming.

It was a life where in the last class on a Tuesday we typed job application letters to fictitious companies on large computers. Phones were attached by thick black cords to walls in drafty corridors and every few weeks we would kneel in the dark before a man to tell him our sins. It was a hermetically sealed universe of tradition and ritual, prayers and devotions, where the individual was born into Original Sin and required to examine their conscience and seek forgiveness. Endlessly. And we as teenage girls had much to make amends for. As Mr. Lavelle said, alchemy was everywhere.

Those first few days, of course, I had no idea of the extent of this. As I

dressed that first morning after my sleepless night thinking about the dead nun, I became convinced I needed a backstory, one that would be unusual. I couldn't fake being rich. Instead I thought I would go the bohemian route and claim my father was a writer and my mother a painter. We would be unusual. I would reinvent myself.

The first full day began with breakfast in the long hall, followed by a short assembly at eight fifteen that was led by Sister Frances, the Deputy Principal. We stood in lines in front of the stage. I accidentally joined the third years before hissing from several of the girls indicated I had made a major error. I briefly saw one of the other new girls who I had met the afternoon before. Her eyes looked huge and uncertain. I found my place at the back of the correct line. The girl in front of me smelled of sweat and her hair was greasy, tied up in a limp ponytail. The back of the line was clearly for the losers. The girl in front of her had spots on the back of her neck that every now and then she would pick at.

The prefects stood at the top of the Hall and for about three minutes they pointed and directed us until the lines were perfectly straight. All the while, Sister Frances stood on the stage, her head nodding up and down with each direction given. Her face was almost completely round and shiny, like a kind of ruddy apple.

When the lines were deemed appropriately straight, the prefects took their places and we waited for Sister Frances to speak. I expected the kind of sentimental speech that my old school principal would give, one where she told us we each had a talent that they, the teachers, would endeavor to excavate over the next year, while also warning us not to smoke or take drugs. But it was not to be.

Sister Frances spoke a prayer in Latin for a few minutes. I was oblivious to its meaning though charmed by the enigma of the words. Then she went silent and bowed her head. A strategic pause that lasted for two minutes. I knew this because I kept watching the clock on the wall in the corner. No one moved or even took a breath, it seemed. Finally, she raised her head and led us in a decade of the rosary. The hum of the voices in unison was vaguely comforting though the words over time became mangled and indistinguishable and every now and then I would lose my place. When it was finished she

made a sign of the cross that we copied. She then left the stage, disappearing behind the dusty red velvet curtain that had framed her.

It was a dispiriting end. We didn't even get a timetable.

We were divided up into small classes that switched between subjects every forty-five minutes. Anyone who did make eye contact looked away quickly enough. I felt like a ghost. With each ring of the bell, I had to try and find my way down back stairs and corridors. The house had clearly never really been adapted to be a school. Some of the classrooms had fireplaces in the corners and cornicing, or a lone chaise longue under a window. French class was on the first floor in what must have been a drawing room at one time. Mustard-colored curtains framed the large windows that faced the sea and a chandelier with some of its crystals missing hung at an awkward angle in the center of the room.

The teacher of that class was somewhat glamorous and very thin. She had short blond hair and was tanned. She was also French, which the teacher in my last school had not been. She was not friendly in any way and when she asked me to describe my summer holidays she winced openly at my accent. A few people laughed and the teacher frowned at them. She disliked us all equally, which was some consolation.

As the day wore on I did get some sense of who was in my class and what they were like. The few conversations I overheard offered fleeting glimpses of boats moored on rugged coastlines and hotels with terraces that hung over lakes. I also began to get some idea as to who was who. There was a group of three girls who moved as one in the corridors. They were leisurely and commanding in their ease, with the dull, listless expressions of those who know too early they are beautiful. They all had fair hair and wore small pearl earrings and the same brown brogues, their white socks perfectly straight. The others always left three empty seats for them at the back of each class. Then there were the duds, the ones who had stood at the back of the line with me. They had spots and cold sores and hair that seemed less shiny. And in between was everyone else, the blurred masses of the average.

The final class of the day was art. By then I was exhausted and presumed I could just sleep through it as I had done in my previous school. To reach the art room we had to leave the building and walk through a walled vegetable

garden at the back of the house. Unlike the gravel drive and manicured lawn at the front of the building, this seemed surprisingly unkempt and scruffy. We followed the path through the garden and out of a gate in the wall that led to the edge of the woods to a small summer house. A thick vine grew over the door, which was open, and a man stood, smiling and waiting for us. He was tall and lean, with fair hair. He looked young. The air was filled with the smell of wood and peat burning. A kettle was whistling in the gloom behind him.

It was here I met Victoria. And Mr. Lavelle.

After that, everything changed.

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Gentrification, Capitalism, and the Swirl of Soho

AN ESSAY BY

FIONA MOZLEY

Soho, the district of central London sometimes known as the West End, has long been the capital's playground. Its streets are lined with theaters, restaurants, cafés, music venues, clubs, and bars. There used to be bookshops too. Lots of them. These have largely disappeared, with a few noticeable exceptions, as have record stores, gay bars, and many of the delis and food stalls selling produce from around the world. The district has long attracted immigrants: French emigrés fleeing revolution, Italians in the nineteenth century, and Jews, such as Karl Marx, who lived on Great Windmill Street and spent much of his time working in the British Library to the north. Soho is also the city's red-light district. Women and men have sold sex here in various forms for centuries, from the salons of the 1700s right up to the present day, but this too is changing. The English Collective of Prostitutes has recently produced a zine covering their work in Soho over the last thirty years and the most recent spate of evictions, deportations, and arrests. If you want to learn about the real Soho, the real women who live and work there, the real issues they face, I encourage you to buy a copy of the zine (learn more here).

In my new novel, *Hot Stew*, I wanted to create a fictional, surreal, at times fantastical picture of Soho's changing landscape. The novel centers around a crumbling seventeenth-century town house on an unnamed Soho street where a new underground railway is being constructed. Drills are boring through the bedrock and sending tremors up to the brick and concrete above.

The people living in the town house's basement feel the quaking first: they are squatting there, making a living however they can. On the ground level is an old, traditional French restaurant. The snails sitting by the hot stove know it's time to leave even if the proprietors don't. Above this are flats inhabited by women who make a living selling sex.

The owner of the building, who of course lives elsewhere, is the daughter of an infamous gangster who bought the property when it was still cheap. She wants to kick everyone out and convert the building to luxury flats. In gentrifying the area, she hopes she will gentrify herself. She wishes to be unstitched from her father's grubby coattails and step out into a bright world of property, business, high finance, and international shipping.

There are others struggling to find their way too, from reformed thugs to privileged party boys, actors and writers and recent graduates. Everyone is flailing, one way or another. They are caught in the strong winds of capitalism and gentrification, opting to sail with them or against.

I lived and worked in Soho from May to October 2013, when I was twenty-five. I occupied the garret of a crumbling seventeenth-century town house. There was scaffolding up one side to stop the building from falling down, and if I climbed out of my window onto the scaffolding I had a makeshift balcony. I was never really meant to be there. The owners (or tenants—I wasn't sure) thought they'd make some money by leasing it (without a contract) to those (like me) foolish enough to live in a building on the brink of collapse. The tip-off about the room came from my friend D, a longtime Soho-ite who managed to hang on for longer than most, being forced out only in the last year. I drank with him at his local pub or else at the lesbian bar round the corner, until that eventually turned into a strip club for straight men.

Anyway, it was during this summer—before I was chucked out of my Soho garret by the council and hastily returned to my hometown, York—that I first thought of writing a novel set in the district. Although I didn't start writing *Hot Stew* until 2016 (the day after I finished my first novel, *Elmet*), I'd spent the intervening years thinking about it, constructing characters, reading, having conversations. I visited D frequently and noticed the closure of venues, the ongoing evictions, the fight against them. I realized that if *Hot Stew* was going to be a novel about gentrification, it also had to be a novel about its resistance. Thus two initially minor characters, the sex

workers and reluctant activists Precious and Tabitha, came to the fore, and as I wrote, it became clearer to me that they were the book's heart and soul.

Protest movements have always fascinated me. I grew up on stories of my parents' participation in the protests of the 1960s. I've been a part of a couple myself, though I fear that I don't have the kind of personality that allows me to be of much use—I'm too shy and don't like crowds. Maybe because of this, I have a lot of admiration for people who take a more active role, those with the mental and physical fortitude to organize and lead. That said, I'm also interested in the way political campaigns can get co-opted by various incompatible factions, or else taken over by personality cults or those with a talent for self-promotion.

What is more, I had begun to consider the long view, and found glimpses of similar disputes across the centuries, in London and other cities. I'd commenced an MA at the University of York and wrote my dissertation on land grabs in fourteenth-century London, where the mayor and alderman frequently justified the seizure of tracts of common land by citing the presence of immoral women, many of whom may have sold sex (we can't be sure). This historical research, along with books about contemporary sex work such as *Playing the Whore* by Melissa Gira Grant and *Revolting Prostitutes* by Molly Smith and Juno Mac, informed *Hot Stew*'s themes.

But what about Soho itself? What about the neighborhood? People have likely been bemoaning their "lost" cities or hometowns for as long as such places have existed. New Yorkers reminisce about bygone days when writers could afford apartments in the East Village; Parisians scoff as districts that once housed painters become little more than tourist traps.

There are valid criticisms of nostalgia: a desire to cling to an often-imaginary past can lead to reactionary politics. But nostalgia can also prompt us to interrogate the forces at work behind the shifts. There seems to me something rather nihilistic about shrugging our shoulders and coming out with wry comments about the inevitability of capitalism's all-consuming reach, about how we should get on with it, get real, grow up, move on. But this attitude isn't neutral; it favors those already in power, or on their way to it. While it might be acceptable—witty, even—to ridicule those who cling to obsolete technologies or the fashions of past decades, it is quite different to be blasé about the death of communities, livelihoods, and about people

being priced out of the neighborhoods in which they live and work. We can't ignore the material, emotional, psychological impact these changes can have on people and communities. As I wrote *Hot Stew*, tracing these very different lives on this small patch of ground, I hoped it would contribute to this conversation.

FROM

Hot Stew

BY FIONA MOZLEY

On the corner of the street, there is an old French restaurant with red-and-white checkered tablecloths. Des Sables has been there for decades and has changed very little in that time. It has served the same dishes, with ingredients sourced from the same suppliers, and wines from the same vineyards. The bottles are stacked on the same shelves, and when they are pulled out and dusted off, the silky liquid is poured into the same set of glasses, or ones of a similar style, bought sporadically to replace those that have smashed. The plates are the same: small, round, porcelain.

When the weather is good, tables are placed outside. There is a space between the public thoroughfare and the exterior wall, and the tables are set tightly, with two chairs tucked beneath. One of the tables wobbles. Over the years, thousands of napkins have been folded and placed under the offending leg, hundreds of customers have complained and moved to alternatives, and thousands more have quietly put up with the inconvenience. They have spilled glasses of wine, grumbled, and considered asking to move, before deciding against it.

The restaurant serves escargots. The restaurant has served escargots since it opened. Hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions of snails. They have been thrown into boiling water, and their carcasses scooped out and served with garlic butter. The chewy pellets have been picked with forks and fingers, and the curled shells discarded.

It is lunchtime in midsummer. A box of snails has been taken from the fridge and placed on the side, its contents ready to be immersed and scalded. It is left unsupervised as chefs bustle around the kitchen with sharp knives, pots and pans, bunches of parsley and stalks of celery. A single snail, on the small side, wakes from its chilly slumber and climbs over the edge of the box, down the side, and onto the stainless-steel counter. Slowly, it descends

to the floor, then to the back of the kitchen, where there is a door to the street. After about twenty minutes, the little snail finds itself in the alley behind the restaurant, feasting on the discarded outer leaves of a savoy cabbage. Once sated it continues its journey. It begins to climb the wall, flexing and releasing.

The building stands in Soho, in the middle of London. The foundations were constructed in the seventeenth century, during the Interregnum, in the space between a father and a son; the ampersand between The King is Dead & Long Live the King. Bricks and plaster overlaid onto a now-crooked timber frame. There are wormholes in the timber and snail licks on the bricks.

The district was once a suburb. London was enclosed by a wall, and to the north there was a moor. There were deer and boar and hare. Northwest of London; northeast of Westminster. Men and women galloped out from the two cities to hunt, and their cries gave this place its name: So! Ho! So! Ho!

The stone came. Bricks and mortar replaced trees; people replaced deer; sticky gray grime replaced sticky brown dirt. Paths carved by the tread of animals were set in stone, widened, edged with walls and gates. Mansions were built for high society. There was dancing, gambling, sex. Music was played and plays were staged. Bargains were struck, sedition was plotted, betrayals were planned, secrets were kept.

New people arrived. Émigrés from France came to escape revolution, guillotine, war. Mansions were divided and subdivided. Drawing rooms became workshops; parlors became coffee shops. Whole families lived in single rooms, and disease spread. Syphilis erupted in sores on the skin and delusions in the mind. Cholera hid in the water, crept through the drains, came out of pumps and down human throats.

Books were written, ripped up, rewritten. Karl Marx dreamed of utopia while his wife cooked dinner and scrubbed the floor. His friends met on Great Windmill Street where wind was once the means of production.

When the bombs fell on London, Soho took a few. Dark lesions appeared in the lines of Georgian town houses and people sheltered beneath ground.

After the war, the concrete came, and parallel lines, and precise angles that connected earth to sky. Houses were rebuilt, shops were rebuilt, and new paving stones were laid. The dead were buried. The past was buried. There were new kinds of men and new kinds of women. There was art and

music and miniskirts and sharp haircuts to match the skyline. Films were made; records were cut. Soho came to be filled with the apparatus of sound and vision. Electric currents ran through cables and magnets and copper coils and pushed rhythmic air into dark rooms where people danced in new ways, and drank and smoked, and ingested new drugs imported from old places. And they spoke again of revolution.

And they spoke until the winds changed. Trade and commerce and common sense and common decency prevailed, and men and women availed themselves of all opportunities. New roads were laid; office blocks shot up. And luxury flats stood on crumbling slums like shining false teeth on rotten gums.

At the top of the building, whose ground floor is occupied by the restaurant, there is a secret garden. It was planted by the two women who share the garret, where the ceilings are slanted and dormer windows jut out. Outside the windows is a ledge, where the roof meets the exterior wall. The windows are large enough to climb through and it is possible to stand on the ledge. The woman called Tabitha discovered this. She is an intermittent smoker and the other woman, Precious, won't allow her to smoke inside. Tabitha found that, along the ledge, there are steps and, if you climb the short flight, you come to a flat terrace, sheltered by the adjacent slanting roofs but exposed enough to trap the midday sun.

Precious and Tabitha have filled the space with life. It began with a cheap chili plant Precious picked up from the supermarket. The chilies did better than expected and Precious bought others, then the generic herbs of a kitchen garden: parsley, rosemary, chives. She bought a rose and ornamental grasses. When the weather is good and Precious and Tabitha have free time, they sit out together.

"Do you know what I find really quite rank?"

"What do you find really quite rank, Tabitha?"

"The fact that you put crushed snail shells around your plants to stop snails eating them."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's weird. Don't people use eggshells?"

"Yeah, but I get the used snail shells from the restaurant downstairs. They also give me mussel, and clam and cockle shells. It's what's available."

"I get that. I'm just saying: I don't like it. It would be like someone building a fence to keep out people, and instead of using wire or wood, they built it out of human bones. Do you know what I mean?"

"Not really."

Tabitha has a cigarette in one hand and an e-cigarette in the other, holding both as if they are glasses of expensive wine and she is sampling each in turn. She takes a drag from the real cigarette, holds the smoke between her cheeks, makes a whirling motion with her pursed lips, and exhales, then repeats the process with the e-cigarette. She frowns and pouts, deep in concentration.

"It's not the same," she says.

"It's never going to be. The question isn't whether you can tell the difference but whether you think you could make the switch."

"Well, no, then. The answer is no."

"For god's sake, could you at least give it a proper try?"

"I have done!"

"For longer than, like, five seconds."

"I don't like the way it feels in my mouth. It feels artificial. Like detergent."

"Because the others are one hundred percent natural, organic carcinogens."

"It's real tobacco, at least. Plant-based."

"Give those to me.' Precious snatches the packet of cigarettes from the table next to the older woman. She looks down at the grim warnings and harrowing images printed on the side of the carton, pulls back her throwing arm and pelts the cigarettes off the roof. The little box tumbles in a graceful arc over the side of the building and out of sight.

Tabitha's eyes widen, incredulous. "That could seriously injure someone."

"There was hardly anything in it. The most it will give someone is a paper cut."

"Paper cuts can hurt," Tabitha points out. She returns to the lit cigarette still in her hand, and takes a long, ostentatious drag. She blows the smoke towards her friend. "What's it to you, anyway? Me smoking."

"I don't want you to die?"

"Would you miss me?"

"Funerals are expensive."

"Just chuck my corpse in the river."

"It'd scare the tourists. They'd be chugging down the Thames on a sightseeing cruise then see your ugly mug bobbing around in the shallows."

"Simple solution: weigh me down with bricks."

"It might be easier to give up the cigs."

"For you, maybe."

"Well, at least don't do it next to my rose. She doesn't want your exhaust fumes."

"Oh, for god's sake. Not allowed to smoke inside. Not allowed to smoke outside. Is this a totalitarian regime?"

A phone rings. It's a landline but with a cordless receiver which Tabitha has brought outside. She puts down the e-cigarette and picks up the receiver and continues to smoke the real cigarette as she talks. She says "yeah" and "uh huh" a couple of times and nods as if her gestures can be seen by the person she's speaking to.

Tabitha hangs up and puts down the receiver. "John," she says simply.

Precious is bent over the flowerpot pulling out weeds. She straightens her back and peels off her gardening gloves. She digs the trowel into the soil and throws the dirty gloves onto one of the folding chairs. She sticks a leg over the side of the building and, clutching the railings, lowers herself down the ladder then squeezes through the open window into the flat.

Down on the pavement, a woman and a man sit at the wobbly table. Having sat here before, the woman has placed a paper napkin beneath the offending leg. The furniture is now still, but the checkered cloth moves with the breeze. There is a bottle of red Bordeaux, two glasses, a bowl of green olives, and another for discarded pits.

"You must be joking," says the woman. Her name is Agatha Howard. She is in her mid twenties, dressed elegantly but in the style of an older woman—a politician or a business executive. She is wearing a linen trouser suit, the jacket removed and folded on the back of her chair, and a white blouse buttoned to her neck. There are jewels around her wrist and hanging from each earlobe but these—rubies set in gold—age her. She holds a small photograph loosely between a thumb and forefinger. The photograph is of a piece of fabric. The fabric may once have been a handkerchief but it is now

old and shapeless, and ragged at the edges. It is mostly gray, but at one corner there is a dark brown stain.

"I am not joking," the man replies. He is an antique dealer.

"Hand me that letter of verification."

The man hands the woman a letter of verification pertaining to the square of fabric. It is typed on headed paper, and signed. Agatha reads to the end, frowns, then looks closely at the signature. "I haven't heard of this historian," she says.

"He's at Durham. He is young but very well regarded."

"If he were well regarded, I would have heard of him."

Agatha looks again at the letter, then again at the photograph of the rag. It was supposedly dipped in blood at the foot of the guillotine, taken as a keepsake of the dying order.

"It's the kind of money I would expect to pay for a relic of the Bourbons, not for a minor member of the nobility."

"Not a minor noble. A descendant of the Valois kings through the female line."

Agatha considers. She studies the photograph again, and then the man. She sits back in her chair and looks out to the street, then up at hanging baskets of red geraniums. Inside one, there is a discarded packet of cigarettes. The box is lying among the dark green foliage, and one of the cigarettes has become caught between the soil and the metal wire of the basket.

People these days have such a fundamental lack of respect.

She looks back at the man.

"No," she says.

"What?"

"I said no."

"Would you like to come in and see the original?"

"I'm not interested."

He has dealt with her before, so knows she is serious.

"Fine," he says. "Keep the photo in case you change your mind." He seems neither affronted nor disappointed. He shouldn't be—Agatha has spent huge amounts of money at his dealership.

"I have to go," she tells him.

"You're not staying to eat?"

"I can't, but you should. This place won't be here for much longer. I'm redeveloping most of the street. Restaurants like this are quaint, but they aren't profitable."

The man looks at her as a disappointed teacher might look at a wayward pupil. He asks her what he should order.

"The escargots are excellent."

She gets up, knocking the wobbly table. She says goodbye and makes her way to the end of the street where her driver is waiting for her in a blue Rolls Royce.

Just along from the French restaurant, there is a grate in the pavement, and along from the grate there is a hatch. Beneath the hatch, which opens and shuts on rusty hinges, there is a dark cellar, and inside the dark cellar there are a number of people. Two of the people come out of the hatch, and race each other down the street. They are making their way to an old pub: the Aphra Behn.

HOT STEW
by Fiona Mozley
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