

THE ALGONQUIN READER

INCLUDES ORIGINAL ESSAYS



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The Algonquin Reader

Author essays and excerpts from forthcoming fiction by

GABRIELLE ZEVIN • C. MORGAN BABST

HALLGRÍMUR HELGASON • TAYARI JONES

CHRISTOPHER SWANN • JESSICA KEENER

ROBERT OLMSTEAD

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Dear Reader,

In this issue of the *Algonquin Reader*, our fall 2017 fiction authors discuss, in entertaining original essays, the inspiration behind their forthcoming novels. A short excerpt from the book follows each essay. We have a dynamic and diverse lineup this season, and each story behind the story further illuminates how lucky we are to be sharing these authors' works with the world.

Gabrielle Zevin, the bestselling author of *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry*, is back with a new novel that taps into the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century. In *Young Jane Young*, twenty-one-year-old congressional intern Aviva Grossman makes a big mistake, and the Internet won't let her — or anyone else — forget it. Smart, funny, and incredibly engaging, Zevin's novel follows three generations of women, capturing our current political moment and the double standards that affect every aspect of a woman's life, at any age.

The Floating World, C. Morgan Babst's heartbreakingly beautiful debut, will take you deep into the heart of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. It's a mesmerizing and visceral reading experience — one that immerses you in the story of the Boisdorés, a family nearly shattered by the storm, who struggle to unravel the mystery of what exactly happened to Cora Boisdoré during the hurricane. Think Faulkner meets Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*, set to the strains of Louis Armstrong.

We couldn't be more excited to publish Hallgrímur Helgason's *Woman at 1,000 Degrees*. Already an award-winning and bestselling novel in Europe, this darkly comic story set in Iceland opens with a bang. In a Reykjavík garage, eighty-year-old Herra Björnsson lies alone on a cot with a laptop and a hand grenade in her lap. As Herra contemplates her death, readers are treated to the unexpected and mordantly entertaining story of her unconventional life, which spans the major events of the twentieth century.

With *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones, author of the celebrated novel *Silver Sparrow*, returns with a profoundly moving love story that looks into the hearts and minds of three people who are at once bound and separated by forces beyond their control. The result is a masterfully told

novel that grapples with themes of loyalty, reciprocity, and race — one that prompted author Michael Chabon to proclaim that Tayari Jones has “found a new level of artistry and power.”

There’s tremendous in-house excitement for Christopher Swann’s literary thriller, *Shadow of the Lions*. In this novel, Matthias Glass returns to teach English at his alma mater, a boarding school in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. Matthias is swiftly drawn into the past and becomes determined to solve a decade-old mystery: the disappearance of his former roommate. Praised by David Liss as “a taut emotional roller coaster, and a hell of a debut,” this irresistible page-turner will appeal to the many fans of Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*.

Jessica Keener’s *Strangers in Budapest* follows four Americans — a young couple, their adopted son, and a mysterious elderly man — who have relocated to Budapest in the 1990s. The husband and wife soon find themselves tangled in the old man’s search to find his daughter’s murderer, and there seems to be no limit to how far he will go. A spellbinding plot, a rich, atmospheric setting, and characters plagued with secrets all make for an unforgettable read.

Savage Country, Robert Olmstead’s latest, bears witness to the collision of human greed, violence, and desire that played out on the Western stage in the late 1800s. It’s a novel of tremendous power — a profoundly American tale that will call to mind works by writers like Ron Rash, Cormac McCarthy, and Jim Harrison. But we can assure you, when it comes down to it, this riveting work is like nothing you’ve ever read before.

We hope you enjoy discovering the many treasures in our forthcoming list. Thanks for turning our pages.

The Algonquin Staff

The Suit

— AN ESSAY BY —

GABRIELLE ZEVIN

When I was sixteen, I ran for student council president. I had worked on student government for two years, and I was certain it was my time. I could already feel the plastic gavel in my hand. I could imagine myself pulling into the student council president's parking space, which was the closest one to the school except for the principal's. I could already see "Student Council President" typed out on my college resume. I could visualize my framed picture on the wall of the student government classroom alongside the previous presidents of Spanish River High School — mainly, but not always, young men. The future was palpable; my victory, an inevitability.

My best friend, Courtney, and I made posters by hand, using three-inch-thick markers and fluorescent pink and green paper. We came up with creative slogans like "Vote for Gab" and "Zevin for President." Posters were very important and not important at all. Important, because what else advertised you to be president? Unimportant, because nothing stuck to the walls of my high school. At least not for very long. The walls were made of cinderblock, and the only permitted affixing agent was masking tape.

In the weeks leading up to the election, people thought I was something of a front-runner. There wasn't scientific polling, per se — for all the good scientific polling seems to do (I'm looking at you, 2016). But, if you asked around, the few people who were paying attention might have said, "Yeah, sure, I'm voting for whatshername." It was also in my favor that the two other front-runners were Maggie Bishop and Troy Hartman, who were best friends and whose social circles overlapped, thus canceling each other out with the electorate.

The most important event of any student council election is speeches day. I don't remember that much of what I wrote — it had vague ideas about

change and making a difference and something about the reallocation of pep rally funds. However, I remember very specifically what I wore.

I had decided to wear a man's suit. In my lifetime, I had never seen a president who *didn't* wear a man's suit, and so I didn't even think I was being particularly bold. It seemed obvious to me: if you wanted to be president, you wore a man's suit.

I borrowed a white dress shirt and a suit jacket from my dad. I wore a nearly matching pair of wool pants that belonged to my mom. From my dad's closet, I also chose the necktie that seemed the most presidential — it had navy and crimson stripes.

As I walked into the school gymnasium, I began to wonder if the suit had been a mistake. I saw my competitors on the dais, and none of them were wearing suits. Maggie, a floral dress. Troy, the ubiquitous 90s-era Dockers and blue shirt and tie, like someone who worked in a Blockbuster. I considered the crowd. There were about two thousand people out there. I couldn't see my friends, but I did see a boy pointing at me. Even from a distance, his pointed finger did not seem to indicate "Yes, *her*! She's the one I'm voting for!"

The speeches were given in alphabetical order. The only one I remember is Maggie's, which was not so much a speech as a dramatic recitation. She wore a brown paper bag over her head and pretended that she was too shy to remove the bag unless the crowd cheered for her, like a student council Tinker Bell flying for applause. My sixteen-year-old self found this to be incredibly gimmicky and crass. Where were her ideas? What was she going to *do* to improve the school? However, her speech was met with a warm reception — they wanted Maggie to get her head out of that paper bag! Later, I would find out that Maggie had "borrowed" the speech from one she had heard at the state student council meet-up. Her gimmick wasn't even her gimmick.

And then, it was my turn. I grabbed my note cards and made my way to the podium. Just before I got there, someone — a male voice — screamed the word *dyke*. And then he shouted it again for good measure, just in case I hadn't heard. *DYKE!*

Now, to be clear, I didn't care and don't care if someone thinks I am a

lesbian. I don't subscribe to simplistic notions of gender or sexual preference, in theory or personally.

In that moment, though, I felt irritated with the boy's ignorance. *There's a difference between cross-dressing and lesbianism!* I thought. *And, by the way, I'm not actually cross-dressing because this is what presidents wear!* I remember wondering if I should explain these distinctions to the two thousand students who were in attendance on speeches day.

In that moment, I also knew that I had lost the election. No matter what I did, I would not be able to win that crowd back to my favor. In a 90s-era South Florida public high school, a girl dressed in a suit did not become student council president.

I gave my speech.

After the assembly, a friend's mother came up to me and said, "That totally would have played in New York." This proved meager comfort. I hadn't been trying to do something that would "play in New York." I had been trying to win a student council presidency in Boca Raton, Florida.

We voted the next day, and by that afternoon, I learned that I hadn't even made the runoff, which would be between Troy and Maggie. Ultimately, Troy won. The paper bag could take Maggie Bishop only so far. (Troy ended up getting impeached. In a fit of Clinton-era squishiness, he was caught cheating... *on a Spanish test!*)

Because of my service to the school and my failed presidential run, I was appointed student council parliamentarian, the equivalent of receiving an ambassadorship to a minor island nation. Despite hitting the student council glass ceiling, I was accepted to Harvard in the fall. My freshman year, I lived in John F. Kennedy's dorm room in Weld Hall. I never ran for office again.

I hadn't thought about that election for many years — not until I started writing *Young Jane Young*. The novel is about a young woman named Aviva Grossman, who imagines having a brilliant career in politics but instead finds herself disgraced. *Young Jane Young* is about all the traps a woman in politics can fall into that her male counterpart never even has to consider. A man puts on a suit and a tie and an American flag pin, and that's the end of the story. He is a politician. A female politician's appearance is always a disputed territory, a matter of discussion.

While writing the book, I began to wonder what would have happened if I had won that election. Would I have run for more and higher offices? Would I have become a politician instead of a novelist? Would I have even tried to become president myself?

But I don't think so. It is unimaginably hard to do a thing if you have never seen it done, and for a woman coming of age in the mid-90s, there were relatively few examples of American female politicians. I knew what a political wife looked like, but what does a woman who becomes president herself look like? I know she doesn't wear a man's suit, but does she always have to wear a pantsuit? Can she wear a pretty dress? Can she have long hair? Or ethnic hair? Can she be Jewish? Does she have to believe in God? Can she be Asian? Or mixed race? Does she have to be married? Does she have to have children? Can she be a "dyke"?

We still haven't seen it, so we still don't know.

FROM
Young Jane Young

BY GABRIELLE ZEVIN



W*hat an honor to be here with you this afternoon . . .*

With few alterations, Embeth's speech was the same one she had given for the last fifteen years. She could do it without notes. She could do it in downward-facing dog. She could do it while making love to her husband, though that happened pretty rarely. She was called upon to give the speech far more often than she was called upon to make love to Aaron.

*. . . never occurred to me not to work. My father was the Sturgeon King of Milburn, New Jersey. My mother built bridges. Literally. She was a civil engineer.
[Pause for laughter.]*

She savored the quiet time alone at the podium. Alone, but with people. She looked into the audience, a sea of soft, shapeless neutrals, and she wondered how many of those women loved their husbands as much as she loved Aaron. Yes, the irony to end all ironies! Embeth *loved* Aaron.

. . . I am proud that I was a working mother. It's interesting, that term, 'working mother.' Working becomes the adjective; mother, the noun. We don't say worker-mother, and we certainly don't say mothering worker. . . . People expect you to put the emphasis on the mother part at the expense of the worker part. I was proud of my children, but I was equally proud of my work . . .

How many people over the years had called it a "political marriage"? Yes, it was a political marriage, but that didn't mean she didn't love him. She wondered how many of them had been cheated on. She wondered how many of them had forgiven their husbands after they were cheated on.

. . . the first topic that comes to mind is often a woman's right to choose, or sexual assault, but I believe the most important women's issue is the wage gap. I believe this is the root issue from which all other inequalities stem.

The truth was, being cheated on was not that bad. It was being cheated on *in public* that was hard. It was wearing the ill-fitting shroud of the wronged woman. It was standing next to him, meekly, when he apologized. It was figuring out where to cast your gaze, and choosing the right suit jacket. What suit jacket would say “supportive,” “feminist,” “unbroken,” “optimistic”? What one effing suit jacket could possibly accomplish that? She still, fifteen years later, wondered if they judged her for staying with him after Avivagate.

... but you all know the statistics ...

She wondered if the summer-weight cashmere sweater she had been eyeing at J.Crew was still on sale.

She wondered if her eyebrows were sweating off.

She wondered what to do about Ruby.

... proud we have sons. And they are exceptional, strapping young men in every way. Not that I'm biased. [Pause for laughter.] But do I think they deserve twenty percent more money than a comparably qualified young woman? I do not!

She liked the girl, but she knew that she could not have Ruby meet Aaron today, or this week, or this month. Aaron needed to keep his head in the game. The best thing to do would be to dispatch the girl to her grandmother's, that idiot Rachel Grossman. With any luck, Tasha would have found her number by now.

... True conviction is believing something to be right even after it becomes disadvantageous to you. This is what I tell my sons. This is what ...

Also, Aviva Grossman was running for mayor? In a way, Embeth had to admire the girl's chutzpah. She hadn't thought about her in years, not in a future way.

... as a mother, my greatest accomplishment will be to have raised sons who are feminists ...

When she did think of her, Aviva was locked in a perpetual 2002. Twenty-two years old and slutty and needy forever. She had not conceived of her as a mother, let alone as a candidate for public office.

... I was a woman before I was a mother. I was a feminist before I was a politician's wife. I was ...

She had known that girl was trouble from the first time she had laid eyes on her. The first thing Embeth remembered was her mouth. The big mouth, with the slight pout. The red punch of lipstick. She was holding a can of

Diet Coke, lipstick traces around the tab. The way those curves taxed the seams of that good-quality, sales-rack suit. Many of the interns dressed like that, though. Their professional wardrobes came from big sisters, mothers, friends, neighbors, and the fit betrayed these origins.

That couldn't have been the first time she saw her, though. They'd been neighbors.

Applause.

Applause indicated the speech was over. Alumna Jeanne thanked Embeth and announced the start of a Q&A. Why had Embeth agreed to a Q&A? All she wanted was a nap.

A gray-haired woman in a shapeless gray cardigan and shapeless gray pants stood up. These clothes, Embeth thought. These women look like they are dressed for a funeral at an insane asylum. In fact, Embeth dressed this way, too.

The gray woman asked, "Listening to you talk. You're so intelligent. When are you going to run for office? Can't there be two politicians in a family?"

Embeth laughed her public laugh. Inside, a private joke: *There may already be two politicians in this family.*

Once upon a time, a question like that might have flattered her. A long time ago, she had harbored such ambitions. She burned with them. She had pushed Aaron forward, and then resented him when he actually succeeded. As a politician's wife, though, she had had her fill of politics. But then, there was no worse job in politics than politician's wife. Literally, there was no job that paid less — which is to say, nada — and demanded more. At the peak of Avivagate, she'd once attended a Women in Politics panel on human trafficking, and they'd had a PowerPoint presentation with screening questions to determine if a person was being human trafficked. The questions were: 1) Are you paid for your work, 2) Are you never alone, 3) Do other people answer questions for you, 4) Can you leave your house when you want, etc. Based on her answers, Embeth had determined that she was a likely victim of human trafficking.

YOUNG JANE YOUNG
by Gabrielle Zevin
978-1-61620-504-1
On Sale August 2017

The Road Home

— AN ESSAY BY —

C. MORGAN BABST

I had never seen a handgun before, though I pretended otherwise as my uncle unhasped the latches of the aluminum case sitting on his kitchen counter. Inside, a pistol nestled in the topographical foam like some sort of cursed artifact. I wrapped my hands around my mug of coffee as my father backed away.

“I don’t think we’re going to need that, Walter,” he said.

My uncle shrugged. “Better safe than sorry.”

I rolled my eyes — that same attitude had driven him and his family from New Orleans into rural Louisiana years ago — and yet I did not protest as he slid the gun case under my seat in the Suburban for the drive home.

All the way across Lake Pontchartrain — all twenty-four miles of bridge — I felt like I was sitting on a bomb, not afraid that it would go off, but terrified of what it told us about the story we were in.

FOR TEN DAYS, we had been sitting on a sofa in a Tennessee farmhouse, watching the news. The city that we’d left in bumper-to-bumper evacuation traffic — our city of boisterous tubas, red beans, and resurrection fern — had become a ruin, literally overnight, and the twenty-four-hour news had become New Orleans. We heard rumors about suicide in the Superdome, where the lights had gone out and the toilets overflowed, and of murders at the convention center, where people waited days for help. We heard stories of snipers stationed on the rooftops of nursing homes and of mercenaries flown in on private jets to guard the houses of millionaires. Meanwhile, no one told us that Jefferson Parish police had fired warning shots at people trying to cross the Crescent City Connection bridge to safety, while New Orleans police had shot seven unarmed citizens on the Danziger, killing two.

As we drove across the long bridge from the Northshore, I checked the

manila envelope my father had locked in the console. In it were our driver's licenses, his business registration, our passports. Technically, the city was still under an evacuation order. We were not sure yet how we would talk our way through.

From the I-10, we could see the remains of the flood glinting across the lattice of low-lying neighborhoods near the lake. The city was deserted, and on the high ground of the natural levee, the only sign of the storm was the debris of broken branches and ripped power lines piled along the curb.

We weren't stopped until we were mere blocks from our house, at the intersection where, every Mardi Gras, a group of men dressed as Tarzan swung on a gigantic plush boa constrictor hung from one of the live oak trees. There, a Humvee blocked the street, its back wheels hitched up on the neutral ground. A National Guardsman ducked her head through the driver's-side window, smiling as she glanced at our driver's licenses, and nodded at my father's stuttered explanations.

"Welcome home," she said, the warning shots not for us—white, professional-looking, dismayed.

I felt the weight of the gun case shift against my feet.

IT IS HARD TO CONVEY the surreality of such a disaster, hard even to remember it. Lichens grew from the walls of my bedroom. Through the ceiling we saw sky. In the front hall, uninvited, an FBI agent stood with one hand on his pistol, one hand on a chair. He said my mother's name.

For months we felt as though we were dreaming. As a second storm spun in the Gulf, images began to shift, slip under one another. The cracked mud lying over the city transformed again to lake. The blank lots behind the playground filled with smoldering ash, then town houses, flickering with flame. Above them, a helicopter hovered, its gigantic water balloon mid-fall.

Overwhelmed, many New Orleanians dreamed flood and abandonment into easier threats to manage—a looter, a trespasser—disaster on a more human scale. Vigilantes prowled Algiers; police officers burned a man they'd murdered in the trunk of a car. Bodies with bullet wounds lay beside the bodies of the drowned.

And the media drummed up that fear. All over the world, people thought they saw us in the images of people pushing shopping carts through

knee-high water, in interviews with “refugees” sleeping in shelters in their own country, but what they were seeing was real lives transformed into an apocalypse movie, made available through a glassy screen. *This is America?* everyone asked. No one believed this was the sort of thing that could happen here.

It was possible, even for us, to pretend it couldn’t, that it hadn’t. Some of us struggled to believe that what had happened in New Orleans was merely a natural disaster, and not the product of three hundred years of discrimination, incompetence, and neglect. It was possible to close your eyes, pick up a bottle, go back to sleep. But that was only another evacuation, another way to abandon one another.

I had literally run away. After my father and I cleaned out the maggot-infested refrigerators, we drove back to my uncle’s house, then back to Tennessee, and from there I took a plane to New York, where I met my husband and remained for eleven years. But the farther I went, the more people I encountered who asked *How is it down there? What is it really like?* And as I explained, as I corrected misapprehensions, provided context, welcomed friends and acquaintances to join me on trips home where we danced late to funk in small tin-ceilinged clubs, ate cold oysters and bowls of russet gumbo, walked the sandy batture watching the cargo ships on the river, I realized that this was something I could do on a larger scale. What we needed — what New Orleans needed, what America needed — was a story about this catastrophe written from the inside. A story of New Orleans and for New Orleans, offered, like the best things we make in this city, to the world.

When I sat down with my notebook on the side of a hill one fine autumn day, Vincent Boisdoré came to me — an old man stumbling through a forest of fallen pines calling for his dog, buried many years before. Back at home at my desk, I found Vincent’s granddaughter, Cora, sleeping in a hand-carved bed, her legs scarred by the floodwaters. Her sister, Del, stood over her, called home by the hurricane from self-imposed exile. Downstairs, their parents argued: Why had they evacuated without Cora? Why had they allowed her to stay? No one knew precisely what had happened, what act of violence, what failure had brought them here; they only knew that what they loved — their home, their family — was draining away, and that they had to find some way, one by one, to stem the flow.

Over the eight years it took me to write *The Floating World*, these people I'd made kept me company in my own slow mourning. I raged with Joe, Cora's father, over the country's intractable racial divide and resolved with him to make art anyway. With Cora's mother, Tess, I escaped into childish fantasies and cold glasses of bourbon, sharing her desire for a quick fix — and her shame. Through Cora I lived the immediate trauma I had avoided in my evacuation — my uncle's unloaded pistol became the rifle in her hands. When I needed it, Vincent's fugues of forgetting gave me passage to a time before Katrina, when all we had to worry about was having enough change for a pocket pie. Finally, Del, who rushed home to care for her family and her city in its worst hour, helped me gather the strength to come home.

Now, twelve years out from the storm and the levee failures, I hope that *The Floating World* might give anyone who experienced our televised tragedy a way to pass through the screen. I invite you to grieve with us, yes, but also to dance with us to the sound of trombones, to climb the live oaks with us, to sit down at our table while we remember together what happened here, and pray that next time — wherever we are, whoever we are — we will be spared.

FROM
The Floating World

BY C. MORGAN BABST



Forty-Seven Days after Landfall
October 15

The house bobbed in a dark lake. The flood was gone, but Cora still felt it wrapped around her waist, its head nestled on her hip. She laid her hands out, palms on its surface, and the drifting hem of her nightshirt fingered her thighs. Under her feet, lake bed slipped: pebbles and grit, mud broken into scales that curled up at their edges. Her legs dragged as she moved under the tilting crosses of the electrical poles, keeping her head tipped up, her mouth open. Her fingers trailed behind her, shirring the water that was air.

Troy's bloated house reeked of flood. Dirt, mildew, algae, the smell of the dead. On the dusty siding, she traced the line of sediment that circled the house, high up where the water had come. Beside the door was the mark of the storm:

9-6
TF3 0
1D

The broken concrete of the driveway seesawed, and the kitchen window was still open as she and Troy had left it when they came for the children, the shutters banged flat against the weatherboard. The little boy had jumped at her from the windowsill, naked except for a pair of water wings, a frenzy of brown and orange. She closed her eyes — *Blot it out* — but even in the dark, she could feel his head cupped in her hand. She could hear Reyna screaming.

She saw herself rocking in the pirogue in the thick air, the little boy nestled against her chest. The flood had floated them high.

Now, she got up and put one foot against the siding, two hands on the sill. She strained, scrambled, jumped. She hauled her body up and perched in the window, her muscles trembling.

The moon cast Cora's shadow, long and black, across the kitchen floor, where a woman lay, her face no longer a face, only a mess of blackened blood. She shut her eyes. *Blot it out.* But when she looked again Reyna's body still lay curled, as if in sleep, around the shotgun that was missing from the house on Esplanade, her arm trailing awkwardly behind her like something ripped apart by a strong wind.

Blot it out, Mrs. Randsell had told her. So she had been sleeping. Drugs like a dark river to drown in. But now she felt again the gun recoil against her shoulder. Saw again the light of the blast in the high hall. *Blot it out*, but she could see as clear as if it were happening again in front of her now: Troy standing above her at the top of the stairs, the little boy reaching out to stroke his mother's smooth, unmaddened brow. She saw Reyna press her face against the window, her eyes plucked out by birds. Cora looked down from the window, and the pool of blood whirled through the woman's face, through the kitchen floor, pulling her under. The storm threw a barge against the floodwall. The surge dug out handfuls of sand. The Gulf bent its head and rammed into the breach until it had tunneled through to air. *The lowest pressure ever recorded*, the radio voices said, and the vacuum pulled at her, her nightdress snapping against her body like a flag.

Night poured in through the window. Stars streaked down through the sky. She would fall. She was falling. The flood's reek rose.

Thursday October 20

Today, Tess told herself, they would make it to the hedge.

The confederate jasmine that Laura Dobie had trained along her iron fence had begun to insinuate itself into the boxwoods, and ripping it out was the least they could do. *The least we can do*, Tess told Cora, *considering the Dobies are lending us their house.* The main objective, of course, was just to get Cora out of bed, but Dan Dobie really had been so sweet — the way he'd

just thrown his house keys at her through the car window as he and Laura headed out of town.

“Keeping their house from falling down in their absence is really the very least we can do,” Tess said, petting her daughter’s arm, and Cora slid her skeletal legs off the mattress of her childhood bed, let her feet fall on the padded floor of Dan’s home gym. Cora then stood up under her own power and walked, her bony knees trembling, all the way to the hall door.

Cora’s nightgown was half tucked into the seat of her underpants, but Tess had not made a move to fix it, worried that that would break the spell. Her daughter was on her arm now. They were descending the stairs. Tess held on to the banister, feeling a bit unsteady herself.

She saw how one might think neurosis could be catching. They used to joke about it in the office — *I think you’ve caught Verlander’s kleptomania, Alice* — but emotional contagion was a real thing, at least according to Hatfield. Since moving alone with Cora into the Dobies’ house, Tess had had to fight not only against the ubiquitous grief but against the urge to sink into the mattress and disappear, as Cora was trying so desperately to do. Tess had to remind herself that Cora had experienced a direct trauma — had seen the storm with her own eyes, had been out in the flood in a pirogue, and to top it off had had the tremendous bad luck to rescue Mrs. Randsell, only to watch her die of a stroke just one week after they’d finally made it to Houston. Still, when Tess tried to be happy that Del was coming today — that in a few hours her healthy daughter would be here with her feet up on the Dobies’ coffee table, helping her drink a bottle of chardonnay — she only felt exhausted.

For now, though, she and Cora were going down the stairs. They took one at a time, Cora staring hard at her toes. Her feet were dirty again, God knew why. Again, her dinner tray had not been touched. Again, she smelled oddly of river mud. But they reached the bottom of the stairs without incident — Tess told herself that this was progress.

When she tugged her daughter’s nightgown free so that it fell over her legs in a muslin cloud, however, Cora stopped short in the middle of the foyer and, as Tess had feared, refused to budge. But yesterday, they’d gotten as far as the front porch; today they would make it to the hedge.

“Cora, come on now,” Tess said, her hand calm in her daughter’s hand. “Your sister’s coming today. We need to make things pretty for her.”

Cora didn't move.

"We can't let Del see how we've been letting ourselves go, can we?" she asked, offering Cora a chance to agree. "Won't it be nice to just work a little while in the fresh air?"

"Fresh," Cora said, her face full of stubborn sleep, like the face of an awakened child. She shook her head slowly. "No."

Tess could admit that she would have liked to stay in bed. The world outside was hot and sour, and it was nice to take refuge in the air-conditioning, among the old mahogany furniture she and Joe had rescued from their house on Esplanade. The curtained rooms were quiet, and Laura's ugly high-pile carpets were so soft beneath your feet. But you couldn't just sleep. Already, Tess had cleaned the Dobies' kitchen cabinets with Murphy's Oil, washed the mustiness out of all the sheets, polished the Marylebone silver that had traveled with her to Houston and back again. You couldn't sleep. She had been telling Cora this since Houston, even as she handed over the Ambien. You couldn't just sleep until it was over, even if you were drained beyond your last drop, reamed out like a lemon down to the pith. You couldn't just sleep, even if that was the only thing that felt good. Even if, alone on the Dobies' nice pillow-topped mattress, Joe not in it, Tess slept like a baby. Every morning now, she woke up clutching her pillow, sprawled out and drooling. But she got herself out of bed.

"Come on now —" She reached out her two hands, remained upright, cheerful. *Project the affect you would like to see echoed in the patient.* "It's like cold storage in here."

Tess turned and opened the front door, let a rectangle of yellow sun swoon across the bargeboards, but Cora backed away.

"Cora," Tess said, in the same calm, conspiring voice.

Cora's eyes, ringed in dark circles like the city's flooded houses, were blank.

"Cora," she said again, more forcefully now.

But Cora just stared straight ahead as though she knew no one by that name.

THE FLOATING WORLD

by C. Morgan Babst

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The Woman in the Garage

— AN ESSAY BY —

HALLGRÍMUR HELGASON

Being a novelist is a bit like being a doctor, a journalist, or a firefighter. At work or not, you always have to be ready.

In the spring of 2006, municipal elections were held in Iceland. I was living in Reykjavík with a woman who had just entered politics, and she asked me to help out her party in the campaign. I went down to the headquarters of the Icelandic Social Democratic Party and joined their team of volunteers. They handed me a list of phone numbers and told me to ask people to vote for the Social Democrats. I started calling and it was going well, until I got an elderly lady on the line who told me flat out that she would never vote for “those damned communists.”

Still, she got to me, with her honesty, stubbornness, and clever humor. I was curious and started chatting with her.

She turned out to be an eighty-year-old woman who was bedridden by a lung disease and living in a garage all by herself. She had been living there for over a decade. The garage did not belong to her family — she just rented it from strangers. Yet, she was not isolated at all: she had satellite TV and a PC. She was constantly watching news channels, movies, and historical documentaries, all while being online around the clock, communicating with people all over the world. She even ran her own language school, teaching Icelandic to young men in Argentina and Malaysia. (I later learned that one of her students showed up in Iceland and wanted to visit her “school,” but got the answer from her that it was “closed for summer.”) At one point she explained to me the difference between Yahoo and Google, informing me that Yahoo was “a much better search machine.”

I was blown away by this fascinating woman, by her no-bullshit attitude and the original way she described her life. I ended up talking to her for

almost an hour, wrote down her name, and seriously thought of visiting her in the garage.

For two years I could not stop thinking about her. I was fascinated by the idea of someone who was completely cut off from the world but still a participant in it. For me she was almost like a human god, invisible and above, but still very active and omnipresent.

Maybe here was an idea for a novel? At least it was a wonderful setting. When I had finished the book I was writing (*The Hitman's Guide to Housecleaning*), I finally decided to check up on the woman in the garage. I had forgotten her name and could not find the piece of paper where I had written it down, and I had only a vague idea of the street where she lived.

After some phone calls, I sadly found out that she had passed away in 2007. I had missed the chance to meet her. But I would always remember our conversation. I was desperate to find out more about her.

I discovered that she had once been a prominent figure in Icelandic society, and that her family was one of the best known in the land. Her grandfather had been elected the first president of Iceland, when we gained our independence from Denmark in the summer of 1944, and her father had fought on the side of the Nazis in World War II, a fatal decision that had been kept as a state secret in the decades after the war. This dark chapter in the life of the president's son had also affected his daughter's life a little too much. It had uprooted her childhood, forcing her to live with strangers on a foreign island during the war, and sent her to South America after it was over. She never found home again, until she made the garage her home.

By making calls for the Social Democrats that day in 2006, I had stumbled upon a remarkable story, a story that would enable me to write a broad historical novel that would take the reader from the innocent but primitive times of prewar Iceland to the continental horrors of World War II, to Germany, Argentina, France, and the affluent years of postwar Iceland, all the way to the garage.

But first and foremost, circumstance had presented me with an incredible character, a larger-than-life woman whom I have tried to do justice in *Woman at 1,000 Degrees*. I named this heroine Herra Björnsson. In Icelandic, Herra is both a woman's name and our word for "mister." As Herra sits in her

garage with a laptop computer and a hand grenade, recalling the events of her magnificent life, she decides that when she dies she will be cremated — at the temperature of 1,000 degrees.

Yes, this story was inspired by real events and people, but in the end it is a work of fiction, taking all the necessary liberties to make a good story even better.

Writers, beware: sometimes your next book is only a phone call away.

FROM

Woman at 1,000 Degrees

BY HALLGRÍMUR HELGASON



I live here alone in a garage, together with a laptop computer and an old hand grenade. It's pretty cozy. My bed is a hospital bed and I don't need any other furniture except for the toilet, which is a real drag to use. It's such a long way to travel, all along the bed and then the same distance again over to the corner. I call it my Via Dolorosa and I have to totter across it three times a day, like any other rheumatic ghost. My dream is to be hooked up to a catheter and a bedpan, but my application got stuck in the system. There's constipation everywhere.

There aren't many windows here, but the world appears to me through my computer screen. E-mails come and go, and good old Facebook just keeps on going, like life itself. Glaciers melt, presidents darken, and people lament the loss of cars and houses. But the future awaits at the end of the baggage claim carousel, slant eyed and smirking. Oh yes, I follow it all from my old white bed, where I languish like a useless corpse, waiting to die or to be given a life-prolonging injection. They look in on me twice a day, the girls from Reykjavík Home Care Services. The morning shift is a real darling, but the afternoon hag has cold hands and bad breath and empties the ashtray with a vacant air.

But if I shut my eye to the world, switch off the lamp above me, and allow the autumn darkness to fill the garage, I can make out the famous Imagine Peace Tower through a narrow window high up on the wall. Because the late John Lennon has now been turned into a pillar of light up here in Iceland, lighting up the black strait on long nights. His widow was kind enough to place him vertically in my line of vision. Yes, it's good to doze off to an old flame.

Of course, you could say I'm just vegetating in this garage like any other old vintage clunker that has run its course. I mentioned this to Gudjón one day. He and Dóra are the couple who rent me the garage at 65,000 kronur a month. Good Gudjón laughed and declared I was an Oldsmobile. I surfed the net and found a photo of an Oldsmobile Viking, 1929 model. To be honest, I hadn't realized I'd grown so darn old. It looked like a slightly revamped horse carriage.

I've been lying alone in this garage for eight years now, bedridden because of the emphysema that's plagued me for three times that long. The slightest movement cuts my breath away until I'm on the point of choking — not a pleasant feeling, *the discomfort of the unburied*, they used to call it in the old days. The result of decades of smoking. I've been sucking on cigarettes since the spring of 1945, when a warty Swede first introduced me to these wonders. And their glow still makes me glow. They offered me a mask with nasal tubes that was supposed to make it easier for me to breathe, but to get the oxygen cylinder they told me I'd have to give up smoking "because of the fire hazard." So I was forced to choose between two gentlemen: Nicotine, the Russian Count, and Oxygen, the British Lord. It was an easy choice. Consequently, I draw my breath like a steam engine, and my voyages to the toilet remain my daily penance. But little Lóa likes going in there and I enjoy the tinkling music of her maiden's piddle. She's my help.

Oh, I'm rambling. When you've lived through a whole Internet of events, a whole shipload of days, it's hard to distinguish one thing from another. It all flows into one big muddle of time. Either I suddenly remember everything at once or I remember nothing at all.

Oh yeah, and then our nation collapsed, been a year now. But it's all relative, of course. Dóra and the nurses assure me that the city is still standing. There are no visible signs of the crash in Reykjavík, unlike in Berlin when I roamed through it as a silly young lass, after its fall at the end of the war. And I don't know which is better — an overt crash or a covert one.

Personally, I reveled in the crash. Throughout the boom years I'd lain bedridden while the greed around me was devouring all my savings, so it didn't upset me to see them disappear into the bonfire, since by then I'd developed a slight indifference to money. We spend our entire lives trying to put something away for old age, but then old age arrives with no dreams

of luxury beyond the ambition of being able to pee lying down. I won't deny that it would have been nice to shop around for some German boy toy and have him stand here, half-naked in the candlelight, declaiming Schiller to his old pillow hag, but apparently they've banned the flesh trade in our country now, so there's no point in bemoaning that. I've nothing left except a few weeks of life, two cartons of Pall Malls, a laptop, and a hand grenade, and I've never felt better.

THE HAND GRENADE is an old Hitler's egg that I acquired in the last war. It's accompanied me over the rivers and fjords of my life, through all my marriages, thick and thin. And now, at last, would be the time to use it, had not the seal broken off many years ago, on a bad day in my life. But it's an uncomfortable way to die, of course, to embrace a firestorm like that and allow it to blow your head off. And to tell the truth, I've grown quite fond of my blessed little bomb after all these years. It would be sad if my grandchildren weren't able to enjoy it, in a silver bowl inside an heirloom cabinet.

Meine geliebte Handgranate is beautiful in its deceit, fits nicely in one's hand, and cools a sweaty palm with its cold iron shell crammed with peace. That's the really remarkable thing about weapons: although they can be unpleasant for those who get in their way, they provide their holders with a great deal of comfort. Once, many cities ago, I left my golden egg in a cab and couldn't put my mind to rest until I'd recovered it again, after countless frantic calls to the cab station. The cabby hovered awkwardly on the stairs, trying to figure it out.

"That's an old hand grenade, isn't it?"

"No, it's a piece of jewelry. Have you never heard of the Imperial Fabergé eggs?"

At any rate, for a long time I kept it in my jewelry box.

"What's that?" my charming sea bear Bæring once asked me, as we were about to set off for a ball.

"It's a perfume, Feu de Cologne."

"Really?" the old sailor gasped in astonishment.

Men have their uses, but quick witted they sure ain't.

And it never hurt to know that the hand grenade was there in my handbag when the night was over and some jerk wanted to take me home.

Now I keep it either in my bedside table or between my rotting legs, lying on the German steel egg like some postwar hen, in the hope of hatching some fire — something that is so sorely missed in this dreary thing that society has become, totally devoid of violence. It can do people only good to lose the roof over their head or see their loved ones shot in the back. I've always had problems with people who've never had to clamber over dead bodies.

But maybe if I throw it on the floor it'll go off? Hand grenades love stone floors, I once heard. Yes, of course, it would be wonderful to exit with a bang and leave them to pick through the dust and debris in the hope of finding some morsels of my flesh. But before I explode, permit me to review my life.

WOMAN AT 1,000 DEGREES

by Hallgrímur Helgason

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This Is a Love Story

— AN ESSAY BY —

TAYARI JONES

All my life I have lived in a world where the men are under siege. When I was a little girl, there was a serial killer in Atlanta who killed thirty black children, most of them boys, two from my school. I was so shaken by this experience that it became the subject of my first novel. When I was in high school, it was fashionable for adults to refer to the boys of my generation as an “endangered species.” There are lulls in this fear. But then, as regular as a solar eclipse, there will be a reminder. Maybe it will be personal, like riding in a car with a boyfriend and suddenly blue lights strobe from the car behind us. Sometimes it will be more symbolic than deadly, like the arrest of decorated Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates because he was thought to be burglarizing his own home. Other times, there is a shooting at the hands of police, a neighbor, or a total stranger. No matter where I am, the threat looms — either right in front of me or hiding in my peripheral vision.

In 2011 I was awarded a research fellowship at Harvard. I was a woman on a mission to make a difference. I wanted to write a novel about the tribulations of the innocent men who languish in America’s prisons. I watched documentaries, read oral histories, and studied up on the law. I was horrified and angered by a justice system that criminalizes black men and destroys families. Outrageous statistics troubled my sleep. But when I sat down to write, my old-fashioned Smith Corona was silent. I had the facts, but not the story. When I was a very young writer, my mentor cautioned me that I should always write about “people and their problems, not problems and their people.” After a year of research, I felt that I understood the problem, but what about the people?

I wasn’t sure how to go forward. Novels, like love, can’t be forced. But also like love, novels can enter your life in an instant.

One year when I went home to visit my parents in Atlanta, I overheard a

couple arguing in the food court of Lenox Square mall. The young woman was wearing a cashmere knit dress, cinched at the waist with a beautiful leather belt. Her beau wore a pair of inexpensive khakis and a polo shirt that was a little too tight for him. He wore a wedding ring, but she didn't. "Roy," she said with a sigh, seeming more exhausted than angry. "You know you wouldn't have waited on me for seven years." The man was obviously aggravated, but also (or it seemed to me) hurt. "This wouldn't have happened to you in the first place," he shot back. His voice was loud, and people turned and gawked. "Answer me," she said. "Tell the truth. Would you have waited for *me*?" The man was too frustrated to respond.

At the time, my sympathies were squarely with him. It was clear that he had suffered—I could see it from the strain on his face to the scuffs on his shoes. She, on the other hand, was pretty, poised, and prosperous. Her face and body language transmitted complicated emotions. She was sad, but not crying. She was annoyed, but not shouting. She stroked his arm. At some point, they caught me looking and I turned away, embarrassed to have glimpsed something so painful and intimate.

When I returned home, I wrote down everything I could remember about that encounter. I was intrigued mostly by her, as she reminded me of the women I went to college with—independent yet vulnerable, reserved and passionate all at once. I knew this woman. In many ways, she was a younger version of myself. I named her Celestial. I remembered she called him Roy. My imagination filled in the gaps. I decided that my characters were married and that Roy had been in prison those seven years—for a crime he did not commit.

When I write a novel, I like to think of a conflict in which both parties have a legitimate point. The couple in the mall would probably agree that he likely would not have waited patiently and chastely for seven years, and they might also agree that she would not likely be the one incarcerated in the first place. But I imagine that they would disagree about the implications of these agreed-upon truths. He felt that his suffering entitled him to fealty, if love alone was not enough. She seemed tired, like she had discussed this with him more than just once. He would probably say that she didn't love him, and she would likely counter that this is not a grade-school love letter where you check YES or NO. Or at least this is what I imagined.

I wrote this novel three times. The first time, I wrote it all from the point of view of Celestial—the wrongful incarceration of her husband is the creeping fear made real. She struggles under the pressure to stand by her man, which is exacerbated by the fact that he is innocent. She’s talented and independent, and not cut out to be dutiful. These are the attributes that intrigue Roy, and me. For some reason, this approach just didn’t work. After a frustrating year, I rewrote it from the point of view of Roy, the ambitious young man robbed of his liberty. This approach worked a little better—after all, a man’s heroic journey is the bedrock of Western literature. Roy was like Odysseus, coming home from battle hoping to find a faithful wife and a gracious house. But this story seemed a bit too easy, familiar in a way that didn’t address the questions in my mind.

Finally, I realized that this story is neither his nor hers. It is theirs. Roy says to Celestial, “This wouldn’t have happened to you in the first place.” But it did happen to her, in that it changed her life. He loves her because she is headstrong and resourceful, but can he ever forgive her for surviving? Can she be excused for finding happiness despite this tragedy? In his letters, Roy says, “I’m innocent.” Celestial replies, “I’m innocent, too.”

Who is to blame, then, when everyone is innocent? And what is the value of blame at all?

The epigraph of the novel is taken from Claudia Rankine’s book *Citizen*: “What happens to you doesn’t belong to you, only half concerns you. It’s not yours. Not yours only.” Does this novel have a “main” character? Is Roy more important because of how he struggles? Is Celestial’s happiness with her new life illegitimate because of the shadow of Roy’s distress? And then there is Andre, who has loved Celestial since they were babies bathing together in the kitchen sink. If she is his true love, should he give up fighting for her out of respect for Roy’s predicament?

After six years of wrestling with the characters’ points of view and sympathies, I don’t presume to know the answers to these questions. I can only say that survival is a human instinct. To survive, Roy had to hold on to his memories of his marriage, fanning the embers to keep himself warm. In order for Celestial to survive, she tries to extinguish these same flames. Once Roy is freed, I can’t say what they “should” do, nor will I spoil the ending for you. But, as Celestial says, “You can never un-love someone.”

As I survey the final draft of this novel, my mind reels with the paradoxes in these pages. How did I do so much research for so little of it to make it into the book itself? This is not to say that the real-life statistics and policies I studied didn't affect the trajectories of my fictional characters. Never during the composition of this work did I forget the dead boys of my youth, the humiliated professor on campus, or the men killed in the streets. But when writing about Celestial and Roy and Andre, I had to look past their plight to understand their plight.

My characters are three people in love — with home, family, freedom, and each other. They are also three people in pain. Some of their problems they brought upon themselves, and others were dropped upon them. Some of their worries are recent and others are brittle as history. But today, they find themselves at a crossroads, and like every human being on earth, they walk their paths, heart-first.

FROM
An American Marriage

BY TAYARI JONES



Dear Roy,

I'm writing this letter sitting at the kitchen table. I'm alone in a way that's more than the fact that I am the only living person within these walls. Up until now, I thought I knew what was and wasn't possible. Maybe that's what innocence is, having no way to predict the pain of the future. When something happens that eclipses the imaginable, it changes a person. It's like the difference between a raw egg and a scrambled egg. It's the same thing, but it's not the same at all. That's the best way that I can put it. I look in the mirror and I know it's me, but I can't quite recognize myself.

Sometimes it's exhausting for me to simply walk into the house. I try and calm myself, remember that I've lived alone before. Sleeping by myself didn't kill me then and will not kill me now. But this is what loss has taught me of love. Our house isn't simply *empty*, our home *has been emptied*. Love makes a place in your life, it makes a place for itself in your bed. Invisibly, it makes a place in your body, rerouting all your blood vessels, throbbing right alongside your heart. When it's gone, nothing is whole again.

Before I met you, I was not lonely, but now I'm so lonely I talk to the walls and sing to the ceiling.

They said that you can't receive mail for at least a month. Still, I'll write to you every night.

Yours,
Celestial

Dear Celestial, aka Georgia,

I don't think I have written a letter to anyone since I was in high school and assigned a French pen pal. (That whole thing lasted about ten minutes.) I know for sure that this is the first time I ever wrote a love letter, and that's what this is going to be, a love letter.

Celestial, I love you. I miss you. I want to come home to you. Look at me, telling you the things you already know. I'm trying to write something on this paper that will make you remember me — the real me, not the man you saw standing in a broke-down country courtroom, broke down myself like a sand castle on a rainy afternoon. I was too ashamed to turn toward you, but now I wish I had, because right now I would do anything for one more look at you.

This love letter thing is uphill for me. I have never even seen one unless you count the third grade: Do you like me ____ yes ____ no. (Don't answer that, ha!) A love letter is supposed to be like music or like Shakespeare, but I don't know anything about Shakespeare. But for real, I want to tell you what you mean to me, but it's like trying to count the seconds of a day on your fingers and toes.

Why didn't I write you love letters all the while, so I could be in practice? Then I would know what to do. That's how I feel every day here, like I don't know what to do or how to do it.

I have always let you know how much I care, right? You never had to wonder. I've never been a man for words. My daddy showed me that you *do* for a woman. Remember that time when you damn near had a nervous breakdown because it looked like the hickory-nut tree in the front yard was thinking about dying? Where I'm from, we don't believe in spending money on pets, let alone trees. But I couldn't bear to see you crying, so I hired a tree doctor. See, in my mind, that was a love letter.

The first thing I did as your husband was to "sit you down," like the old folks say. You were wasting your time and your talents doing temp work. You wanted to sew, so I made it happen. No strings. That was my love letter, to say, "I got this. Make your art. Rest yourself. Whatever you need to do."

But now all I have is this paper and this raggedy ink pen. It's a ballpoint, but they take away the casing so you just have the nib and this plastic tube of ink. I'm looking at it, thinking, *This* is all I have to be a husband with?

But here I am trying.

Love,
Roy

Dear Georgia,

Hello from Mars! That's not really a joke. The dorms here are all named for planets. (This is the truth. I couldn't make this up.) Your letters were delivered to me yesterday. All of them. I was very happy to receive them. Overjoyed. I am not sure even where to start.

I haven't even been here three months, and already I have had three cell partners. The one I have now says he's here for good, and he says it like has some type of inside track. His name is Walter. He's been incarcerated for most of his adult life, so he knows what's what around here. I write letters for him but not for free. It's not that I'm not compassionate, but you get no respect when you do things for free. (This I learned in real life, and it's ten times as true in here.) Walter doesn't have money, so I let him give me cigarettes. (Don't make that face. I know you, girl. I don't smoke them. I trade them for other things — like ramen noodles. I kid you not.) The letters I write for Walter are to women he meets through personal ads. You would be surprised how many ladies want to pen-pal with convicts. (Don't get jealous, ha ha.) Sometimes I get irritated, staying up so late answering all his questions. He says he used to live in Elie, so he wants me to bring him up to date. When I said that I haven't lived in Elie since before I went to college, he says he has never set foot on a college campus and he wants me to tell him all about that, too. He was even curious about how I got the name Roy. It's not like my name is Patrice Lumumba, something that needs explaining, but Walter is what Olive would call "a character." We call him the "Ghetto Yoda" because he's always getting philosophical. I accidentally

said “Country Yoda” and he got mad. I swear it was an honest mistake, and it’s one I won’t make again. But it’s all good. He looks out for me, saying that “us bowlegged brothers got to stick together.” (You should see his legs. Worse than mine.)

So that’s all I got in terms of atmosphere. Or all that I want you to know about. Don’t ask me questions about the details. Just suffice it to say that it’s bad in here. Even if you killed somebody, you don’t deserve to spend more than a couple of years in this place. *Please tell your uncle to get on it.*

There is so much here that makes you stop and say, “Hmm . . .” Like there are about fifteen hundred men in this facility (mostly brothers), and that’s the same number of students at “Dear Morehouse.” I don’t want to be some kind of crazy conspiracy nut, but it’s hard not to think about things in that way. For one, prison is full of people who call themselves “dropping science,” and second, things here are so bent that you think somebody must be bending it on purpose. My mother wrote to me, too, and you know her theory — it’s Satan! My dad thinks it’s the Klan. Well, not the Klan specifically with hoods and crosses but more like AmeriKKKa. I don’t know what I think. Besides thinking that I miss you.

I finally got to make my visitors’ list and right at the top is you, Celestial GLORIANA Davenport. (They want your full government name.) I’ll put Dre on, too — does he have a middle name? It’s probably something religious like Elijah. You know he’s my boy, but when you come the first time, come by yourself. Meanwhile, keep the letters coming, baby. How did I forget that you have such a pretty handwriting? If you decide not to be a famous artist, you could go be a schoolteacher with that penmanship. You must bear down on the pen because the paper buckles. At night, when the lights are out — not that they are ever really out, because they make it dark enough that you can’t read but too light to really sleep — but when they cut the lights off, I run my fingers over your letters and try to read them like Braille. (Romantic, right? Ha ha.)

And thank you for putting money on my books. You have to buy anything you think you might want in here. Underwear, socks. Anything you need to try and make your life a little better. This isn’t a hint, but it would

be nice to have a clock radio, and of course the main thing that would make my life a little better would be seeing you.

Love,
Roy

PS: When I first started calling you Georgia, it was because I could tell you were homesick. Now I call you that because I'm the one missing home and home is you.

AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE

by Tayari Jones

978-1-61620-134-0

On Sale February 2018

A House Split in Half

— AN ESSAY BY —

CHRISTOPHER SWANN

The book is heavy, bound in dusty black buckram that is now faded to the gray of cigarette ash. The dust jacket was discarded years ago. The pages are chamois-soft and the color of weak tea, the ends ridged like an irregular fingerprint. *Tome* is the word that comes to mind, something archaic and mysterious and rewarding. On the spine, the title, originally in gilt letters, has been all but rubbed away. But if the light catches the book just right, you can read the two most important words of the title, in ghostly black like a photo negative: *Sherlock Holmes*.

My grandfather gave me this book when I was eleven or twelve. It is the complete stories of Sherlock Holmes: all four novels and fifty-six short stories. As a child I had loved the Encyclopedia Brown mysteries, and I had graduated to the Hardy Boys, but this was the real deal, the fountainhead of modern detective fiction. I inhaled the book, pored over every detail of Dr. Watson's narration, struggled with some of the Victorian-era vocabulary (what, exactly, is a *brougham*?), and came to hero-worship Holmes and Watson and their extraordinary friendship.

That was my first clue that I wasn't just a mystery junkie. I enjoyed the twisty and tension-filled plots, but the actual mysteries were not why I kept returning to these stories. Aside from a few spine-tingling passages in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the writing was merely serviceable, although occasionally surprising—you read “My dear Holmes!” I ejaculated” and see if you aren't thrown off momentarily. No, I was fascinated by the characters and their relationships with each other.

A few years later, I came across a copy of *Gorky Park*, the first novel in Martin Cruz Smith's illimitable Arkady Renko series, and I was hooked. However, it's in his third Renko novel, *Red Square*, that Smith offers his most succinct description of the kind of stories he writes. A character asks

Arkady why on earth he would choose to be an investigator in the Soviet Union. Arkady says such a job gives him permission: “When someone is killed, for a short time people have to answer questions. An investigator has permission to go to different levels and see how the world is built. A murder is a little like a house splitting in half; you see what floor is above what floor and what door leads to another door.”

All stories have at their heart a mystery, a question to be answered. Will Prince Hamlet avenge his murdered father? Will Sherlock Holmes solve the riddle of the speckled band? Will Jane Eyre find true love? In asking questions, a protagonist discovers or creates doorways. We follow the protagonist through those doorways only if we are drawn to him or her. I worried as a young writer about how to build a good mystery, how to follow the rules of the genre without writing something that was stale or boring. What I eventually learned is that I need to create a compelling character, and then imagine that character in a situation that demands answers.

Some people can walk right into another person’s life and open their closets, look under their rugs, peer into their refrigerators. In the real world, I hesitate to ask people about their personal lives, because I don’t want to pry. When writing fiction, however, nothing else is more rewarding than this search for answers. Asking certain questions can split a house in half, reveal hidden attics and basements, lead to places the questioner may not have intended to go but that prove to be surprisingly fruitful.

BOARDING SCHOOLS conjure up thoughts of exclusive all-male enclaves, of privilege and hard work, of privation and ritual and *The Catcher in the Rye*. While nothing guarantees acceptance at the college of your choice, attendance at a good boarding school used to be and often still is thought of as a considerable advantage in the admissions game. I was certainly well prepared for college and adult life by my own boarding school experience. But in the changing world of the twenty-first century, what if the promise didn’t always hold? And what if someone came to question everything he had been taught, everything he knew about his own alma mater? That’s the situation Matthias Glass faces in *Shadow of the Lions*.

But it’s more than that. Rather than have my protagonist slowly come to realize that the gilded promises made by his boarding school might not

always be kept, I wanted him to experience a shock in the opening pages, a shock that will reverberate through his life. The question at the heart of this book — *what would happen if your best friend disappeared?* — is one that haunts Matthias. The mystery of that scenario, of Fritz vanishing into thin air, might be compelling enough. But just as fascinating to me is what happens to the people left behind in the aftermath. What kind of shadow would such an event cast over your life? And what if you suddenly learned something about this long-ago event, something that shined a light on it, that made you wonder if maybe you could actually do something to find out what happened to your friend? What kinds of questions might you ask? What house would split in half for you, and what secrets would be revealed?

And what would you do in the face of such uncertainty?

Would you hesitate, reconsider, and leave the mystery for others to answer?

Or would you take a breath, steel yourself, and step through that doorway?

FROM

Shadow of the Lions

BY CHRISTOPHER SWANN



Standing by the stone lions at the gates of Blackburne, Fritz looked out forlornly over the empty fields. He fingered the Saint Christopher medal he wore around his neck, a gift from his grandfather who'd fought in World War II. Watching him fiddle with that medal, I was annoyed. It was something of a shock to realize that. It felt like a betrayal, but it was also liberating. Fritz was being neurotic and self-indulgent and attention-seeking. I knew any minute he would sigh and talk in a defeated tone about college. And I couldn't take it. Not then, not while I was consumed by my own guilt, wrapped up in my own garbage.

Oblivious to all of this, Fritz shook his head. "It's stupid, but it's just—there are all these *expectations*," he said. "I mean, I go to Blackburne, so I'm supposed to be set, right? But what if I'm not? When I was a kid, I told my father I wanted to be a cowboy. He handed me a copy of *Lonesome Dove* and said that was as close as I'd get, that I was *meant* for things. But what? Granddad got a medal at Okinawa. Grandpa Joe built a shipping company out of nothing. My father built his own company from the ground up, and he can quote Shakespeare and Tennyson at the drop of a hat." He stopped, grimaced, and then shook his head again. "Jesus, listen to me," he said. "I'm sorry. After all you had to go through today with the J-Board and everything, here I am bitching about college and all the crap in my life."

The J-Board, or Judicial Board, was the school's organization of student-elected prefects, the students who embodied the honor code. When a student was accused of violating the honor code, the J-Board determined whether or not that student was guilty. Fritz was a prefect, and I had appeared before the J-Board that morning.

"It's okay," Fritz said, mistaking my silence for feeling awkward about the hearing, having had to sit across from a group of my peers, including my roommate, and be judged. Fritz shrugged with that half smile of his. "I knew you couldn't have done it."

The moment stretched and took on weight like a branch bowing under a load of snow. Long past the point when I should have affirmed my innocence, I said nothing. Fritz stared at me, his eyes widening. It must have been all over my face.

"Fritz," I said, and then stopped. What could I possibly say?

"Jesus Christ," Fritz said. His face was pale. "You fucking did it, didn't you?"

"Fritz, I —"

"I stood up for you. I said there was *no way* you would've —"

"I know," I said, rushing through my confession. "I know, I'm sorry —"

"Do you get what you've done? What kind of position you just put me in?" His voice rose, tightening like a screw biting into wood. "I have to turn you in, Matthias!"

"You can't do that!" I said. "Please, Fritz. It was an accident, I swear."

"You cheated by *accident*?" Fritz looked at me as if I were a stranger, someone contemptible. The pain I felt from his look was so bright and immediate that I was unable then to consider whether or not he was right to judge me that way. He was right, of course. But at the time, all I could see was a rejection of nearly four years of friendship. "Was it an accident when you lied to the Judicial Board?" he said. "When you lied to *me*?" He raised his hands to his head as if he would pull out his hair. "Jesus," he said. "It's too much. It's too goddamn much. I can't trust anyone."

Something in me gave way, a floodgate opening to vent my fear and self-loathing. "Don't give me that holier-than-thou crap," I said. "You're telling me you haven't ever made a mistake?"

He stared at me. "I've never cheated," he said. "Not once."

"Because you haven't had to," I said, warming to my ugliness as if I were holding my frozen hands over a fire, gathering comfort from its heat. "You're a fucking genius who's going to get into college. Yes, you are," I said as he opened his mouth. "You are. And so am I. But the difference is that you don't

have to worry about paying for it, or even getting in. You've got the grades and the extracurriculars and all that shit. I mean, Jesus, look at your *family*. You think your father and your uncle won't pull strings for you if they have to? Stop being such a fucking drama queen about it. *God.*"

For a few frozen seconds, we stared at each other, stunned and hurt, but only one of us in the wrong. A jay cried in its harsh voice from the darkening wood. Aside from that, we were alone, locked into a terrible moment at the edge of our friendship.

Fritz made the first move. He let the Saint Christopher medal drop from his fingers to dangle on the chain around his neck; then, without a word, he turned and began running up the drive, back to school. Within ten seconds, he was among the trees, and then the drive curved and Fritz curved with it, vanishing from my sight.

After a few more precious seconds passed, I, too, began running, trailing my roommate. My breathing was harsh in my ears as I ran down the drive, leaving the stone lions behind. I entered the trees, the air beneath the boughs dank and dim and slightly chill. There was a damp, organic smell to the oaks, an earthy scent like ground coffee. I glimpsed Fritz ahead, his T-shirt a white blur, and then he was gone again. I ran after him, my feet and legs registering each impact with the pavement. I felt uneasy, as if I were missing something, or about to. I couldn't see Fritz. Ahead of me, the drive straightened into a short stretch before the final curve, and after that curve, the trees would fall away before the playing fields. The road was empty — no Fritz, no anybody. An invisible hand threatened to squeeze my heart, my stomach. My lungs began to burn as I started sprinting. It wasn't just that I wanted to catch Fritz. I had the distinct feeling that I was chasing him, that I had to catch up with him, before something caught up with me. The trees loomed around me; the road seemed to buckle at my feet. I would have sworn something was behind me, but terror seized me at the thought of turning around to look. To say that I thought the lions had finally leapt off their perches and come bounding after me would sound insane. But I ran up the last hundred yards of that driveway as if I had to outrun whatever imagined thing was pursuing me, or be caught and suffer some horrific fate.

I burst out of the trees and into the wide, sheltered bowl of the playing

fields, gasping like a man emerging from a forest fire. I stopped and bent over, trying to catch my breath, hands on my knees. My pulse sledgehammered in my temples. I looked up to see the drive stretch before me and up the Hill, a good quarter mile of asphalt bordered by the track, the golf course, and various dotted stands of trees. Fritz was nowhere to be seen.

SHADOW OF THE LIONS

by Christopher Swann

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Hidden Among Us

— AN ESSAY BY —

JESSICA KEENER

In the winter of 1993, I moved to Budapest with my husband, our six-month-old son, our dog, and seventeen overstuffed suitcases. We had been living in Atlanta for several years. I don't know if there is a best time for making a change in one's life, but I was in my late thirties and felt an urgency about time passing. I was especially fearful of having regrets at the end of my life. The arrival of our son, whom we adopted at four days old, intensified these feelings.

One of my dreams after graduate school was to live overseas, someplace in Europe — maybe Italy or France. Budapest never crossed my mind back then. But Eastern Europe was in the news a lot in the nineties. Budapest and Prague were “it” cities, and Americans were streaming over to have a look at countries long hidden behind Russia's Iron Curtain. A few years prior, a Hungarian American friend of ours urged us to meet him in Budapest so he could show us around. We visited his cousins in the countryside, ate homemade goulash, drank Hungarian beer in tiny dark bars downtown, and ordered room service at our hotel because it was ridiculously cheap.

I loved traveling to landmark cities in Europe (Paris, Rome, Vienna, Madrid), but Budapest got under my skin in a different way. I was unnerved and haunted by its convoluted history. And my response felt more personal because of my own family history. I was Jewish. My grandparents came from neighboring Ukraine and Poland. My father had fought in World War II as part of the army's 42nd Rainbow Division and had, along with the U.S. Seventh Army, liberated Dachau concentration camp in Munich on April 29, 1945. He witnessed thousands of corpses lying stacked in open train cars. As a child I had carried my father's war story inside me.

I wondered if the ghosts of my Jewish ancestors were nudging me toward Budapest in some way.

The city also reminded me of Boston, where I grew up. Budapest had the Danube running through it, while Boston had the Charles. Budapest was gorgeous and gritty, the poor cousin of grand, polished Vienna. Boston was charming and smart, but quaint compared to its behemoth neighbor: New York. And Budapest was rife with narrow back streets and stairways that cut through the city's hills like the neighborhoods I'd walked in Boston. I was intensely, almost compulsively, drawn to this familiar yet strange city. My husband and I visited Budapest a second time the following year, and that was when we made the decision to relocate.

When I boarded the plane with our babe in my arms to meet my husband, who had gone ahead to secure an apartment, I had no clear plans. No job. My husband had a few business ideas. I knew I could write anywhere. We had some savings and our American optimism. Whatever unfolded would surely be okay.

Our year in Budapest was much more difficult than I expected it to be. From the first month of our arrival, I experienced a deep loneliness I was never able to shake. Calling it homesickness was an understatement. I wanted our son to know his grandparents. I craved having conversations in my own language. The things that had seemed intriguing as a visitor — the dirty streets, the lack of retail options and services, the vacant synagogues, the bullet holes defacing old buildings — were constant reminders of the country's long economic hardship, its isolation from the world, its history of violence.

Increasingly, I felt as if I were trapped inside Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Once-stunning mansions sagged behind overgrown bushes and vines. I could see outlines of Budapest's former grandeur, but so much had been worn away by wars and government takeovers.

At the same time, Budapest ignited a seed that had lain dormant inside me — about who I was as an American and as a Jew and what it meant to feel safe.

My response to Budapest also struck me as shamefully egocentric and naïve. As tattered as the city appeared on the outside, something else was waking up and demanding attention from its deeper inner core. I was stunned by how vibrant the city was despite its soiled appearance. The place was teeming with millions — the sidewalks overflowed with young and old,

couples and families. Yet, until my first visit, I'd never given this elegant but frayed city a thought. This was a country that gave the world Liszt, produced chess and math wizards, designed distinctive porcelain and lace, and was saturated in Gypsy lore. But something had gone wrong, terribly wrong. I wanted to understand what and, most of all, why.

After a year, we returned to the States and resettled in Boston. For a long time, I didn't know how to make sense of my Budapest experience. Hungarians were both friendly and reserved, the culture complex and layered, full of contradictions. What had I learned that I could pass on to others? What greater meaning did it hold?

Over the next decade, two disturbing encounters led me to synthesize my overseas experience and write *Strangers in Budapest*. The first was in 2002, when I wrote a magazine article about the tragic death of a teenage boy who was innocently caught in a street gang's crossfire. Ironically, this young man from Boston was on his way to a "teens against gun violence" meeting the afternoon the bullet struck him in the head. In writing this story, I interviewed his mother, a remarkable woman who started a foundation in her son's name, the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, to help families deal with the rage and depression that come with the loss of a loved one from a violent death. I wondered how Louis's mother could absorb something so horrific and channel her grief into something so affirming and healing for others.

In the second encounter, I learned that my neighbor's daughter had died an unexpected, untimely death. The mother suspected foul play by the daughter's boyfriend. Though the police looked into the matter, nothing came of it, and the case was closed. The mother considered delving further, but she didn't have the heart for it, ultimately knowing it couldn't bring her daughter back to life.

During both encounters, I remember asking myself: What would I do? As a mother, the question was almost too painful to imagine, but it served up the final piece of a larger puzzle my subconscious had been trying to fit together concerning so many things: my time in Budapest, violence and wrongful deaths, my father's experience at Dachau, and how far I would go to protect my child or rectify a crime.

I began to see how we are all survivors of violence in some way or another — either personally or historically — though I had never thought

about myself from that perspective. I began to see that we can choose how we respond to violence's devastating impact. Will we hate or forgive? Rage or love? That was when I knew Budapest in the mid-1990s offered an ideal time and setting for my American characters, who are wrestling with grief and its lethal consequences.

When she arrives in Budapest, my protagonist, Annie Gordon, is initially seduced by a city trying to free itself from decades of secrecy and repression. She has come with her husband and their newly adopted baby to support her husband's business ventures. But she soon grows restless. The city's dark side unhinges her own repressed memory of an accident she witnessed as a child and couldn't stop.

Annie is also someone who needs to help others, especially people broken by life. So when she meets Edward Weiss, an ailing expat and World War II veteran, she quickly entangles herself in his desperate search for a man he says murdered his daughter. What she doesn't realize is how far Edward is willing to go to uncover the truth about his daughter's death. In accepting Annie's help, Edward prods her to take responsibility for her own choices, as they hurtle toward the story's final, defiant act.

FROM

Strangers in Budapest

BY JESSICA KEENER



She'd grown used to calling the Danube by its Hungarian name — Duna. In fact, she preferred it over the American version. The whimsical sound — Duna — felt light on her tongue, fanciful and upbeat, a spirit rising. But, like all things in this city, the river that glittered at night concealed a darker surface under the day's harsh sun. The water looked sluggish and dull from this high point on the bridge.

"How much farther?" Annie asked. They had walked a mile, but it felt longer to her.

"Almost there," Will said, waving his well-worn map. "A few more blocks."

"Good, because this whole thing feels crazy."

She pushed their son, Leo, in the baby jogger across a crowded Árpád Bridge — one of eight bridges spanning the river that divided the city into two distinct parts, Buda and Pest. In her running shoes, T-shirt, and shorts, Annie nudged the jogger between couples and families seeking relief from the excessive heat, many of them heading to Margaret Island and the kiddie sprinklers, woods, and shade the park offered. Today they would bypass the park and its entrance from the bridge. She tried to hurry on, but throngs of people strolling in front of her forced her to slow down.

"Think of it this way," Will said. "We finally get to see their apartment."

She laughed. "I know. I'm glad about that. That's good, I guess."

She did not feel good about it, though. The day had begun with an unsettling fax, an urgent request from their neighbors back home in the States. The strident beeping from the machine in the living room woke her early, before dawn, while Will lay immobile beside her in bed, undisturbed. She sat up, trying to locate the unpleasant sound.

On the bridge, she turned her attention back to the riverbank below and the ferry boats boarding day-trippers for a journey to Vienna four hours away.

"We should take that ferry to Vienna sometime," she said.

"I agree. We'll do it," Will said.

She pushed harder, the humid air dragging on her T-shirt like a heavy coat.

"Up and over," she said to little Leo, tilting the baby jogger back and hiking it over a curb. Leo loved the sudden movement and let out a joyful screech.

She and Will both laughed at the happy sound. How little their son required — sleep, food, a ride in a stroller — to make him feel loved. She wished she could say the same for herself. After eight months of living here, things were not turning out as they expected.

At last, they reached the opposite end of the bridge and stepped onto the Pest side of town — pronounced *Pesht* — otherwise known as the flat industrial section of Budapest, where streets, arranged in gridlike patterns, fanned out for hundreds of blocks. Buda was the hilly side.

"Look both ways," she said as they crossed a wide avenue ringed with trolley tracks.

"There's the street," Will said. "Károly utca. Number 647 should be on the left." He closed his map.

They entered a serene residential street, empty except for parked cars and deeply shaded by maples and oaks, grand as any she'd seen back home in Massachusetts, limbs reaching high into the moist atmosphere. The trees offered a soft feeling of relief from the sharp-edged, intractable sun reflecting off the main boulevards. Leo bent his head back to take in the quilt of greenery overhead. His auburn curls matched Will's exactly, a coincidence that seemed more miracle than a stroke of fate. How else could she explain it, given that their son had come to them via an adoption agency in North Carolina?

"Ap, Dada." Leo pointed to Will's map.

"Map, that's right," Annie said. "Daddy needs to hold on to it."

THE THREE-STORY brick building lacked classical architectural adornments. She guessed it to be late 1930s modernism. Old newspapers littered the entranceway, where a panel of buzzers listed residents' names. Annie stepped closer to the panel, scuffing a roll of newspapers out of the way, and rubbed her finger across the handwritten letters.

"Just as Rose said. Here it is, number 2F. Rose and Josef Szabo." From her hip pocket, she unfolded the piece of thin fax paper.

Dear Annie and Will,

We are concerned about the heat you are having. Please go to our flat, no. 2F at 647 Károly utca. A man named Edward Weiss is living there. Edward is in his seventies and not in good health. He has diabetes and a heart condition. We are worried about him.

It was true. Temperatures had turned lethal these past weeks. The summer of 1995 was breaking records for the longest stretch of days over ninety degrees, according to Radio Free Europe, the station she listened to every morning since coming here eight months ago. Already a dozen elderly had died. *More deaths expected, no end in sight*, the announcer had warned in that Euro-British broadcaster's accent she'd grown accustomed to.

"Ready?" Will said. He stood next to her, a good half foot taller than she, blocking a ray of sun poking through the trees. He wore his usual summer attire: madras shorts, collared shirt, tennis sneakers.

"Wait. Her instructions are very specific," Annie said. She reread them aloud: "'This is important. You must not tell anyone that he is living there. We are trusting you. The buzzer to the apartment is broken, but the front door to the building will be open. It is never locked. Go to the second floor. Knock loudly. Tell him we sent you. He will not like this. Call right away if you find a problem. Hugs and kisses to Leo.'"

Rose's handwritten consonants curled in the same Hungarian style of script Annie had seen on store receipts here.

"It's odd Rose never mentioned this Edward Weiss," she said. She hoisted Leo from the jogger to her hip.

"I know. Let's go." Will easily lifted the aluminum baby jogger and carried it through the doorway.

She loved entering buildings for the first time. She attributed this pleasure in part to her father, who owned a real-estate company in Portland, Maine, where she grew up. He taught her that buildings were meant to be inspected, surveyed, and assessed. But for Annie, it was more than that. Unknown buildings held secrets, possibilities, surprises — a peek into other people's hidden lives.

A center staircase greeted them.

"There's an elevator." Will pointed to a dark corner behind the stairs.

"Let's walk up."

The open stairway turned three times around a shaft shimmering with dust and sun from a skylight above. Leo grasped strands of her short hair. He tightened his plump legs around her waist, the sweat on his soft skin indistinguishable from hers. On the second-floor landing, they found the apartment midway down a dark hall, the last name, SZABO, on a tag beneath a peephole.

She knocked, then looked into the peephole, but it was covered up and she could only see black. Leo reached out to touch it.

They waited.

She knocked again. Louder.

"Mr. Weiss?"

She pressed her ear against the door. "I hear something."

The peephole lightened and after some jostling the door was unlocked. An elderly man with a large forehead stood in the doorway. He eyed the jogger without the usual surprise that Hungarians exhibited.

"Yes? What is it?"

He spoke perfect American English and wore a pajama set: thin navy-colored pants and matching short-sleeve shirt hanging loosely, as if he'd lost a lot of weight. The dark material accentuated his pale liver-spotted skin. Annie took a step back, struck by his bedraggled appearance. The old man's eyes followed her, two dark lights quivering with nervous energy. She wondered if he was feverish.

Will said, "I'm Will Gordon. Our old neighbors in the U. S., Rose and Josef Szabo, asked us to come by. This is my wife, Annie. We used to live across the street from Rose and Josef."

"In Massachusetts," Annie said.

“Yes. Yes. I know about you. What are you doing here?”

Annie looked at Will, then said, “Rose was concerned about the heat. She asked us to stop by.”

“Why didn’t you ring the buzzer? What were you planning, a break-in?” He looked behind her, his dark, burning eyes scurrying up and down the length of the hall.

“She told us not to use the buzzer,” Annie said. “She told us to knock.” She shifted Leo on her hip. The baby was focused on the old man, taking in his appearance and behavior.

“Thank you. I’m fine. Is that it?”

“Rose was concerned about the heat,” Will said.

“What about it? It’s hotter than hell.”

The old man’s gray hair, matted from sweat and grease, gave off an odor like burned toast.

“That’s all,” Annie said. “We didn’t mean to disturb you. Rose was concerned. We can come back another time.” She turned toward the stairs. He reminded her of men she’d served at the homeless shelter in Boston. Sometimes it was better to feign disinterest.

“Door,” Leo said, pointing at Mr. Weiss. The baby squirmed in her arms, wanting to get down and walk.

Mr. Weiss swatted the air. “Hold on. Don’t get dramatic on me. I’ve had enough of that in my life. Never mind. Come on. Bring your child in.” He patted Leo’s arm, and in that moment of contact, she saw something soften inside him.

“What’s your child’s name?”

“This is Leo.”

“He’s the one who matters. Come on. Bring in that stroller or whatever you call that thing.” He waved them inside.

Sensing they had passed some kind of test, Annie looked at Will, then stepped across the threshold into the apartment and put Leo down. Edward shut the door behind them and locked it. A standing fan rattled the air in the living room, making unflattering noises.

“You’ve been here since January, have you not?” Edward said.

“That’s right.” She was stunned to learn that he knew this. Did this mean he had been here all this time? The apartment didn’t look lived in. It lacked

furniture except for an orange couch parked in the middle of a large living area, another standing fan next to an easel, and a small television propped on a suitcase.

“When did you arrive?” Will asked.

“Not important. Listen closely, please,” Edward said, raising his voice and facing them. “If you care about an old man, and I believe that you will, based on what Josef and Rose told me about you, you’ll honor the understanding I have with them. I don’t want anyone to know I’m here. If you violate this confidence, we’re done. Understand?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Annie nodded but didn’t understand at all.

STRANGERS IN BUDAPEST

by Jessica Keener

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On Sale November 2017

What Left the Earth

— AN ESSAY BY —

ROBERT OLMSTEAD

The year is 1873. Elizabeth Coughlin, a woman of energy, grace, and self-possession, has been undone by the death of her husband. She lost him in a violent accident and learned the secret that's been haunting him for months. The comforts of their prosperity have been a lie. Insolvent, they've been living on the verge of bankruptcy. As a woman of the long nineteenth century she could not hope for a life beyond home and husband, and now she has neither.

Elizabeth, the heroine of *Savage Country*, is sourced from the three generations of women who raised me. They were businesswomen and farmers, nurses (so many nurses) and teachers, social workers, restaurateurs, and railroad agents. They were artists, immigrants, and bohemians. They belonged to civic, religious, and sororal organizations. They smoked and played cards and occasionally they took a drink. They owned land, houses and barns, horses and cattle, stocks and bonds. They had their own bank accounts. Many had wealth. Self-denying and self-disciplined, they felt the responsibility that wealth should increase. They were Daughters of the Revolution. They buried a lot of husbands.

My great-aunt Adeline (1897–1976) was completing her first year at Simmons College when she decided to abandon book learning and become a railroad telegraph operator on the Boston and Main. This was in 1917, and she was the only woman employed in the Connecticut River division at the time. She worked the lonely nights of the graveyard shift, with no human habitation in sight and no sound except the call of some wild animal. Tramps were aplenty, and her supervisor advised that she carry a gun and learn how to use it, but she never did. When I was a boy, I used to take care of her yard. She told me, “If I were broke and footsore and hungry, I wouldn’t want to have the muzzle of a revolver poked between my ribs just because I

asked for something to eat.” On the whole she found the tramps to be polite and invariably grateful for little kindnesses. She had a poem that one wrote for her and she carried it into old age:

*If all the girls were like this girl that passes by this shack,
You'd have to go out every moment, longing for her to come back,
It's a girl like her that makes life worth living for a poor, old, lonely tramp.
I'd guide her footsteps on her way, but I do not have a lamp,
I'd like to climb this cliff and write her name in letters bold,
For it's seldom that you find a girl with a heart of gold.*

Following the path of these great women, I was able to get back to Elizabeth Coughlin, a strong, talented, and resourceful woman, though life was not so filled with opportunity for her. In the eyes of the law she had no identity beyond that of her husband. In the words of the Declaration of Sentiments drafted at the 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, she was “civilly dead.” She had no property rights, even to the wages she might earn. She was compelled to obedience. Theology, law, medicine, education, politics, these were closed to her. Think about this: because women owned nothing their clothes had no need for pockets. And after you have thought about it, think about it some more.

We were driven then as now by economic imperative, and then as now no one felt this more acutely than women. So, in September of 1873, after her husband's death, Elizabeth embarks on a buffalo hunt with her estranged and mysterious brother-in-law, Michael, to salvage something of her former life and the lives of the hired men and women who depend upon her. They plunge south across the aptly named Deadline demarcating Indian Territory from their home state of Kansas. Nothing could prepare them for the dangers that lie ahead.

THE WOMEN WHO raised me, theirs was a neat trick of parenting. They reprimanded simultaneously for not obeying and for not having a mind of one's own. When the time came they turned the boys over to the men and work. The girls worked too, though at the time it did not seem they worked as much as the boys. Little did I know.

The natural world was where we worked. While the women taught me

one kind of strength, the men taught me another. We cut wood, built fences, planted seeds, baled hay, chopped corn, chased cows. The outdoors was where we swam, played baseball, slept, fished, traipsed, roved, and imagined. It was my grandfather who taught me the husbanding of farm animals and my father who taught me of the disappearance of wild animals: bears, deer, buffalo, wolves, passenger pigeons. The diminishing numbers were staggering. The amount of life expired, like a deep sigh, the suspiration of the earth as it gave up so many animal souls.

In *Savage Country*, I intimate how the greatest mass destruction of warm-blooded creatures in human history took place during the second half of the nineteenth century. Buffalo, bear, wolf, elephant, hippopotamus, lion, giraffe, the large vertebrates of the earth, all succumbing to the bullet. It was more than killing and dying and death. Something left the earth, something that has never returned.

In the United States, the buffalo were especially decimated. By the time we were done, the once-vast herd of fifty million buffalo was reduced to no more than five hundred animals, constituting a complete transformation of life into a means of production. Contrary to popular belief, the termination of so much life was not wanton, was not a campaign against Native Americans. It was for industrial belting. Looms, lathes, drop forges, saws, all machines received their motion and energy from a series of endless belting and pulleys connecting them to a water turbine or steam engine. In 1871 came a new method for tanning the buffalo's tough hide to make these belts, and along with the invention of the Sharps rifle, the massacre commenced. Between 1872 and 1874 the Union Pacific Railroad alone shipped 1.3 million hides.

Being the supposedly superior animal that we are, we humans have not done a very good job with the world we have been given. We have yet to stop taking, rendering, killing, commodifying, abusing, using, using up. When thinking about the animals that were massacred in the 1800s, one might say, "That was then." But the current global wildlife trade is estimated to generate billions of dollars annually — from whale products to rhino horns, mounted, confiscated animals and animal parts, every species imaginable. The large, charismatic megafauna still trafficked for their ivory, horn, bone, and skin are especially at risk.

Having conquered all that walks upon the earth and grows in its soil and swims in its water, we turned our sights upon that which resides within the earth: oil, gas, and coal. Will we take them until they are gone? And what of our children's children and their children and their children? How will they answer when asked if the choices we made, as a civilization, were humanizing or harrowing?

But before there was history, before there was economics and science and philosophy, there were human beings, and I was trying to tell the story of one — a woman named Elizabeth Coughlin. Like all human beings, she wants autonomy, independence, self-determination, and freedom, but as a woman of the nineteenth century these are not rights afforded to her. So when tragedy strikes, she realizes she must act. She must journey beyond the strict boundaries of her upbringing. She must leave the world she knows and enter the unknown, and it is her story that sparked my imagination: her crisis, her struggle, her trials and tribulations, the arc of her inner being. It is her story that sent me to the writing desk, because I needed to know what would happen, to her and to Michael, a young man who'd already seen too much of the world. I had to write their story because despite how harrowing their circumstances, their lives, and the lives of other good people like them, gave me strength and hope that somehow our many wrongs can be made right.

FROM
Savage Country
BY ROBERT OLMSTEAD



Some distance from town he was met with the smell of raw sewage and creosote, the stink of lye and kerosene oil, the carrion of dead and slaughtered animals unfit for human consumption. He struck the mapped, vacant streets where there was a world of abandoned construction, plank shacks with dirt floors and flat-pitched roofs hedged with brambles and waste. Two cur dogs snarled at each other over a bone. Dead locusts strewed the ground three inches deep.

The year was 1873 and all about was the evidence of boom and bust, shattered dreams, foolish ambition, depredation, shame, greed, and cruelty. Notes were being called in for pennies on the dollar. Money was scarce and whole families were pauperized.

For weeks countless swarms of locusts, brown-black and brick-yellow, darkened the air like ash from a great conflagration, their jaws biting all things for what could be eaten. They fed on the wheat and corn, the lint of seasoned fence planks, dry leaves, paper, cotton, the wool on the backs of sheep. Their crushed bodies slicked the rails and stopped the trains.

Michael rode light in the saddle, his left hand steady on the reins. His trousers were tucked inside the shafts of his stovepipe boots, and the buck-horn haft of a long knife protruding above the top was decorated with plates of silver. His black hair was long and plaited into a queue, which hung down his back. A shotgun was cradled in his free arm and on the saddle before him sat a setter dog and behind his right leg hung a string of game birds. The red dog had fallen out a mile ago and he thought that was perhaps for the best.

Farther on was a ravine of tents and dugouts where gambling, drinking, dog fights, and cockfights were taking place. Dingy flaps of canvas were flung back and barefoot women swept their dirt floors into the road. From a tent

advertising Turkish baths came the bleating sound of a hurdy-gurdy. Men lay sleeping on the ground undisturbed, a paste of dirt and saliva on their bruised faces.

Ahead was the darker line marking the railroad grade and the looming warehouses lining the tracks, the bone pickers and hair scavengers converging and departing from across the open land. Along the right-of-way was a rick of bones twelve feet high, segmented in the shape of boxcars, and a half mile long. This was the last of the Kansas buffalo.

Soon he could hear the hammering and banging of the blacksmith. There was a fine dust in the air that remained suspended. An eastbound train chuffed to a stop to take on bones, water, and the broke families bankrupted by the plague of locusts.

A portly man in fawn-colored trousers and a black overcoat came off the platform in a hurry. He stepped into a two-horse fringed-top surrey parked at one end. The man reached for the whip and gave the team a smart cut across the flanks. The drays stepped out and in tandem, their broken tails lifting in cadence.

At the post office Michael asked after mail for himself or anyone at Meadowlark. There was a letter for him from Mr. Salt.

"Michael Coughlin," the postmaster read, handing him the envelope.

"This letter has been opened," he said.

"It must not have been adequately sealed," the postmaster said.

He handed the postmaster the sealed envelope he carried. He paid the postage to London and inquired when the mail would be sent. The stamp affixed, he took back the envelope.

"I will be happy to take care of that for you," the postmaster said, his hand out.

"You can take care of this one," he said, handing him another. "You can do that?"

"Yessir," the postmaster said.

There was a plaza in town and a collection of shops on the four sides of it: saddler, watchmaker, gunsmith, mercantile, hotel, barroom, two druggists. Michael stopped at each one, explaining that his brother, David Coughlin, had passed and Michael would settle outstanding balances. From the druggists he purchased their supply of quinine and asked that they order more

and make delivery to Meadowlark. The first had nothing to say, but the second one did.

"Malaria?" the druggist said.

"I was very ill for several weeks," Michael said, switching his shotgun from the cradle of one elbow to the other.

"It will be here tomorrow. Your brother, he was a never-give-up man. He will be missed."

Stalls were erected in the plaza and men and women were raising money to leave by selling what little they owned to immigrants newly arrived. From one, a tatterdemalion boy was selling honey and beeswax candles. Michael paid for a mixture of nuts, candies, figs, and four oranges. He stood about, drinking gently a cored orange.

The postmaster stepped out and went down the street, where he entered another building that represented itself as the Kansas Land Office. Young boys of a hard nature loitered in front, posing and strutting. They wore shiny revolvers and knives. Their neckerchiefs were as if brilliant plumage. The black runner and a big raw-boned sorrel were hitched at the rail.

"Mister," the tatterdemalion boy said, offering him an envelope of gold stars to put in the night sky. He'd cut them with scissors out of tissue paper. Michael paid for the stars as the postmaster was setting off again in the direction of the church steeple, carrying Elizabeth's letter in his hand.

Beneath a tarpaulin roof an old man with a brick-red face and deep-set eyes was selling bread drenched in sweet molasses, wolf pelts, and broken pinchbeck timepieces he displayed on a three-legged stool. The old man had a walleye and his cheeks were deeply pitted by smallpox. He carried the heavy scar of an edged weapon. The stroke was vertical and cut through his forehead, his nose, lips, and chin. The halves of his face were sewn together in a ridged seam, stitch holes scarring both sides. He wore a fur hat decorated with two stuffed blue jays. He smoked a pipe with a red clay-stone bowl and a cane-joint shank and labored with each weary breath.

From somewhere off came the slurred harmonizing of men singing. A strange languor settled in the space between Michael and the old man as they watched two little girls play marbles in the dust.

"What happened to yo'r pony?" the old man said, asking after the scars on Khyber's flanks.

"A lion," Michael said.

"A big big lion," the old man said, inclining his head as if to hear better.

"Big enough," Michael said. "Nine feet seven inches from tooth to tail and near four hundred pounds."

"Where are you from," the old man said, "they have such lions?"

"I am from away," Michael said.

The old man told him his name was Bonaire and he was a wolfer and he was also from away. His mother was Lakota and his father French. He fished inside his shirt for the medallion he wore around his neck, Agnus Dei, the lamb of God.

"What is it you are wanting?" the old man said, letting the medallion drop. "A woman or a drink?"

"I do not want neither nor."

"What man from away does not want neither nor?"

The old man dragged off his fur hat and rubbed at his forehead. He had no ears. The auricles had been cut away, and left were the receptacles of his ear holes. He then slyly lifted a cloth and invited Michael to look. Beneath was a collection of six skulls he said were Kiowa.

"Make me an offer," he said, but Michael declined.

At a street corner a man in a derby hat let down the leg in his barrel organ. His companion, a capuchin monkey with cup in hand, bounced from his shoulder to the organ to the street. The man had fixed mechanized birds to the top, and when he played, the birds bobbed their heads and flared their tail feathers. The little girls gathered their marbles and ran in his direction.

Michael asked after Whitechurch, the man he was looking for.

"He would be one of the evil kings of the earth," the old man said.

"Be that as it may, I have business with him."

"He'd eat his own gut for money," the old man said.

"It takes all sorts to make a world," Michael said.

The old man took the bowl of his pipe in his right hand and pointed with the stem at the Kansas Land Office.

SAVAGE COUNTRY

by Robert Olmstead

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