

PREFACE

LET'S SAY YOU'RE in Amsterdam. You arrive at the Centraal station, walk across the bridge, and soon find yourself in a neighborhood of familiar shops, eateries, and cafés, all of them endemic from Dublin to Berlin. Off in the distance, you catch sight of a Madame Tussauds and, in an evasive maneuver, turn right, toward the Grachtengordel, where the gray brownstones by the tea-colored canals put you in mind of a watery Brooklyn. A radio in an open window announces the ongoing influx of refugees; the spray paint on the walls debates the value of their lives. After some reflection, you decide you won't wait in line for a look at Anne Frank's annex and instead tramp down to the Rijksmuseum, where once in a while you get a moment alone with Vermeer's Delft, or Rembrandt's Jewish bride, before someone, or several someones, step up with glowing phones to obscure the view. Outside, you try to make light of the sight of your fellow travelers, come from every corner of the globe to take selfies on a stick designed for the purpose, as if there were such a thing as a *purpose*, or for that matter a *self*. . . By now, needless to say, you're having trouble subduing the sub-Bernhardian rant that began unspooling in your head the moment you stepped off the train, the rant about how dire, how moronic, how utterly despair-inducing it is to have to live the way we live today . . .

There really is nothing very special about the moment in which we live, except it's the moment in which we live, and to ignore it would be unwise, if not impossible. Setting too much store by the moment, however, seems equally unwise. The very concept of the present as somehow supremely significant strikes me as symptomatic of the disease of the times. "What's new is not that the world lacks meaning, or has little meaning, or less than it used to have," the anthropologist Marc Augé writes in his book *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*; "it's that we seem to feel an explicit and intense daily need to give it meaning; to give meaning to the world, not just some village or lineage." *Non-Places*, first published

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in 1992, has proved to be prescient. More than ever, we exist in a world of places that are not places—tourist districts, international airports, chain hotels, refugee camps—where meaning is transient, and the only thing to do is pass through. As for the past, in these liminal, dehumanizing locations, it has been demolished, stashed out of sight, refurbished, or reduced to a set of signs. The Anne Frank House. The Jodenbuurt. The Windmill Capital of the World.

And yet the past is what's running the show. The past is the lit fuse leading to what John Saul, in his story "Armadillo" (England), calls today's "exploding Europe," a Europe where everything appears to be happening at once:

Daniel or even Daniela scrabbles for transport, fighting the cold, soldiers with guns and no comprehensible English, one language after another, a struggle to get the necessary papers, hopeful papers, Daniel or Daniela secreting cash, yearning for food, sharing food, not sharing food, checking barbed-wire fencing in the dark, falling in mud, entering rivalries, enemies everywhere, acts of friendship turning up when totally unexpected, the extremely occasional miracle or no miracles at all, flu, no doctor, flesh wound, no doctor, cold, no heat, boats, lifejackets, snatches of television news with politicians in suits with warm houses to return to: The prime minister is to make a statement about the migrant situation later today. The content is already public. His use of terms has once again come under criticism. He will speak in Bradford. In Bratislava, Bucharest, Burghausen. But this is not this story.

This story, like all the others in *Best European Fiction 2018*, is not the anonymous one dictated by the press; it's the story of a Moldovan cleaning woman, a Czech grocery clerk, and a neglected cat which simultaneously manages to be an elegant meditation on storytelling, social station, and the question of the self. Ekaterina, the Moldovan woman, knows that she's only "a cleaner momentarily. She has *become* a cleaner. There will be a time again when she is not a cleaner." The trouble is that almost everyone around her is satisfied to take her, reductively, for what she seems to be.

Best European Fiction is not a themed anthology. Nevertheless, once these thirty stories were gathered together, certain patterns could be traced. Many characters, like Saul's Ekaterina, turned out to be facing down some disparity between their own consciousness and the delimiting world. In Maartje Wortel's "The Camp" (Netherlands), a well-meaning therapist tells the unwell narrator: "You want to be yourself . . . Maybe that's the problem." "The problem?" asks the narrator. "The thing that you want from me," explains the therapist. In György Spiró's "The Problem" (Hungary), two lovers lucky enough to want each other struggle to keep up with an increasingly complicated series of genital entanglements, which soon land them in a realm of the ridiculous reminiscent of Landolfi and Kafka. In Kalina Maleska's "A Different Kind of Weapon" (Macedonia), the protagonist must learn to adjust when not only her own sense of reality but the entire solar system is turned around.

A number of stories narrate more earthbound adjustments. The narrator of Ravshan Saieidin's "The State of Things" (Russia) recounts his efforts to accustom himself to the idea of losing his virginity, while at the same time caring for a ninety-year-old Frenchwoman whom he memorably describes as "the widow of the century I was born in." Nora Wagener's "You'd Have Larvae Too" (Luxembourg) lets us into the thoughts of a young woman coming to terms with the death of her long-estranged father, after years of telling everyone that he was already dead. Lídia Jorge's "The Age of Splendor" (Portugal) encompasses in a few pages an entire life, as an elderly woman thinks back from her hospital bed to an old-fashioned childhood of maids and goldfish ponds. In Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl's *Evil* (Iceland), an unnamed narrator endeavors, over and over again, in a kind of mania, to contextualize, without mythologizing, the Shoah.

All sorts of threads connect these texts. There are several stories about, for example, unhappy children, dying fathers, absent friends, and dystopic amounts of bureaucratic paperwork. There are also two extraordinary stories of outright dystopia: Andrei Dichenko's "The Poet Execution Committee" (Belarus) and Davide Orecchio's "City of Pigs" (Italy). In Hugh Fulham-McQuillan's

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“Winter Guests” (Ireland), the narrator contemplates “the pursuit of ultimate relaxation,” while in Bruce Bégout’s “Watching *My Best Fiend*” (France), the narrator brags of having reached “a certain refinement in the art of wasting time”—of “doing nothing with style.” The choice to do nothing is, in a very different sense, at the heart of Thomas Morris’s heartbreaking “Where We All Belong” (Wales). Yet, whatever these stories may have in common, they are each themselves, reflecting something other than the times and their trends. Taken together, they give a meaning to contemporary Europe quite apart from the noise on the news.

The present is a fiction, sometimes horrific, sometimes banal, but the life around us, as Elizabeth Hardwick wrote half a century ago, “is not a pageant of coldness and folly to which we have paid admission and from which we can withdraw as it becomes boring. You feel a transcendental joke links us all together; some sordid synthesis hangs out there in the heavy air.” The stories in this anthology speak to the strangeness of that sordid synthesis, and assure us that, even as Europe’s body politic convulses, its literary imagination is alive and well.

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