

Storm Warnings

The personal is political... & historical

Feral Sage

a review of

We are the Birds of the Coming Storm by Lola Lafon. Seagull Books, 2014, translated from the French by David and Nicole Ball

Originally published in 2011 as *Nous sommes les oiseaux de la tempête qui s'annonce*

We are the Birds of the Coming Storm is French author Lola Lafond's third novel, and the first to be translated into English. It is the story of three women whose lives converge and intertwine during a time of personal and political upheaval.

It is set in present-day Paris, during the presidential election period, against the backdrop of a crescendo of radical activism in opposition to the increasingly repressive State.

Having barely survived a cardiac arrest, Émile is on life support. There is only a small chance she will survive. Having exhausted the powers of medical science and technology, doctors and nurses can only monitor her vital signs and keep her comfortable while waiting for death to arrive...or perhaps not.

Her friend, the nameless narrator, stays at her bedside writing what she calls, "A Diary of Her Unlived Life." When she is not keeping vigil, her thoughts are an ongoing conversation with the absent Émile.

Through her musings we learn that Émile is a radical social worker. After being raped by a stranger, Émile has tried to maintain control over the meaning of her experience by turning it into "an ironic, ferocious misadventure," refusing to play the role of victim. She reaches her own limit when, one day, her heart simply stops beating.

The narrator is a dancer, classically trained at the Ballet School of the Bucharest Opera in the former Romanian Socialist Republic, where she developed her art under the ubiquitous eyes and ears of the Securitate, the State secret police. "Our bodies made do with these conditions, moved according to the grotesque, ever-changing rules of the Conducător, the communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, and dodged his relentless efforts to shrink our lives."

As an exile living in a Democracy she once only dreamed of, she has tried to invent a new life as a dancer with France's National Ballet. That dream is crushed when she is raped by her boyfriend, a respected man in the arts community with whom she shares mutual acquaintances; a vengeful man intent on teaching her that she is nothing.

She and Émile are drawn to one another in a support group for women who are living in what the dancer calls a "democracy of rape." They are a diverse group. They could be any woman. Their rapists, a doctor, a family member, a group of co-workers, a stranger, a boyfriend, could be any man.

The dancer learns that being the victim of the crime of rape is not a simple matter in this democracy. Pressing charges involves following procedures that include a psychiatric evaluation designed to detect the truthfulness of the allegation, and a trial in which the determination of guilt or innocence is influenced by the sex and socioeconomic status of the parties.

The acquaintances she shares with the rapist question the reality of her experience, inferring that it might have been a simple misunderstanding. “As people keep politely suggesting silence to me and I obey, Dance leaves my body, declaring it a pariah, contaminated.”

Trying to recover their lives, the two women have agreed not to speak about the details of the event that brought them together, nor about the worsening political situation around them. They meet often to suspend reality watching old films at a local repertory theatre.

While Émile remains in the hospital recovering her memories after her near-death, the dancer meets the enigmatic, waif-like woman they have often seen at the Cinémathèque writing in her notebook during the films. Émile has named her “the Little Girl,” appending “who lives at the end of the lane” because “the kid’s at the end of the end in my opinion.”

The Little Girl has noticed them, too. Watching them share their M&Ms, acutely aware of her own loneliness, she writes in one of her texts, “Someone. Who would protect my absurd manias” and “would not be anxiously watching out for them, brandishing the box of anti-depressants at the slightest suspicion.”

To introduce the dancer to the 19th century American feminist anarchist, Voltairine de Cleyre, the Little Girl gives her a letter she wrote recounting the story of the Haymarket events in Chicago that began on May 1, 1886, when a general strike broke out in several cities in the United States. Workers were demanding an end to the mechanisation of labour and the use of child labour, and calling for an eight-hour workday.

In Chicago, thousands of workers demonstrated. They were attacked by strikebreakers and police in a hail of rocks and bullets that left six strikers dead and hundreds wounded. August Spies, the anarchist editor of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Workers Daily) called for a peaceful demonstration to be held the following day.

Near the end of the demonstration, police declared it illegal and began attacking the demonstrators. Suddenly, a bomb went off and police began shooting into the crowd. The seven policemen and dozens of demonstrators who were killed may all have been shot by police, since they were the only ones known to have been carrying weapons.

Although the bomb-thrower has never been identified, hundreds of people were arrested, and four men including Spies, were hanged. The Little Girl ruefully observes: “Today in Paris, on May First, resigned crowds march along the customary route,” chanting words that “are merely pretences of threats and combats.” She is enraged when she sees “these gatherings circumscribed by policemen and garbage trucks following them slowly, picking up and erasing the traces of a disorder that has not occurred.”

She mentions in a postscript that de Cleyre, wrote a poem (“The Hurricane”) for the Haymarket martyr Spies, beginning with the words spoken by him during the trial: “We are the birds of the coming storm.”

The birds the Little Girl sees everywhere are falling birds, dead and dying birds. She calls the dancer “Voltairine.” Later, in the Little Girl’s room, the dancer notices a postcard picturing a young woman who “looks like she’s asking a question and...won’t give up before she gets an answer.” The Little Girl tells her that this is Voltairine de Cleyre.

In her writing, sometimes stream-of-consciousness, sometimes cogent theorising, and her poetry filled with gruesome imagery, the Little Girl claws away at the wrapping of everyday life to reveal the true horror of existence under the State. The election has brought into focus the machinery of control, invisible to those who improvise their daily lives according to its unwritten script, while the mainstream media normalize the reality of racism and xenophobia and the criminalization of poverty and dissent.

The Little Girl identifies the election as the reason for her state of “generic rage,” as her attention is constantly drawn to what the government is doing, “waiting for things to get worse, with my mouth wide open to them.” Mental health authorities have given her the psychiatric label of “oppositional disorder,” of “being in opposition to one’s surroundings,” and insist that the real reason for her distress is her radical rejection of biological destiny.

A man in her life, variously referred to as her boyfriend, her fiancé, and her husband (suggesting, perhaps, that any difference among these roles is illusory, as their common function—indeed their purpose—is to circumscribe a woman’s being within a man’s manageable space), collaborates with mental health authorities by continually suggesting that she take her psychiatric meds.

While Émile has been a stabilizing influence in Voltairine’s life, the Little Girl is an explosive one. Émile has shown her how to navigate the System; the Little Girl encourages her to break its hold on her mind, beginning with an act of solidarity that defies the power of the man who has commanded Voltairine’s silence. Soon they are participating in a series of increasingly daring acts of civil disobedience.

The relationships that develop among these women are intricately woven into a story of our time, as we find ourselves listening to the maddening hypocrisy of political pronouncements that hide monstrous cruelty behind innocuous-sounding phrases like “collateral damage” and “enhanced interrogation.” Of necessity, we are caught up in seemingly futile efforts to mitigate the destructive effects of increasingly feudalistic social policies designed to ensure that we will not go “to the end of the road.”

We are reminded that Haymarket did not spark a revolution. Rather, it ushered in a period of repression aimed at crushing a revolution, followed by reforms that mollified the revolutionary mood of the workers’ movement.

And yet, the fires that were ignited have remained, burning underground, flaring up now and then, here and there, throughout the world. *We are the Birds of the Coming Storm* is a brilliantly sobering novel that does not suggest that revolution is on the horizon, only that the potential exists.

Our visionary birds will continue to fall and die, but we know that the storm is approaching.

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