

Introduction

THESE DAYS the streets of Rome fill with rubbish, more or less daily. At times its present makes one wonder whether the Eternal City even has a future. A few years ago an Italian archaeologist and art historian published a study provocatively titled *If Venice Dies*, and just the other day one of our favorite Roman authors, Igiaba Scego, commented that she's been thinking of writing a companion volume to that work, about her hometown. As for me, having had the good fortune to hang out in this storied city for the past month, my thoughts are increasingly focused on the relation between, on the one hand, our harried, hurried present—where crisis is no temporary state and stress has become routine—and, on the other, those layers and layers of sites and situations underfoot, history sliding wordlessly down into prehistory, stones and bones, under the soil or under ashes. Ancient footprints are everywhere.

In this year's back-to-school issue, we've got more lessons than you can imagine, histories you've always sensed but never had a chance to hear. Not surprisingly, poets have the clearest sense—and often offer a synchronic slice—of such matters. Carl Phillips, for example, reminds us that light can't logically be cast by shipwrecks, all the while inviting his readers to imagine it otherwise. So do spend your share of hours inside the Colosseum. Elsewhere Leila Chatti gives us something of a crime scene as painted by Caravaggio, whereas Filippo Naitana, in Ann Lauinger's translation, envisions Adam himself, apple in hand, caught between two cities, one in rubble, the other an eternal remove. Joan Houlihan, in her meditation on final things, gives us a title that might also have been coined in reference to the photographic meditations of Ayana V Jackson, also featured in this issue. Hands trace air, indeed.

Archaeology, I've come to find, is no longer confined to the distant past. Yasmin Yildiz has brought us a stunner of a story by Menekşe Toprak, a tale that blends Turkish immigrant and Holocaust experience within a single, multidirectional history. We have Krzysztof Rowiński to thank for an equally impactful excavation: two interviews from the seventies by the Polish journalist Krzysztof Kałkowski, never before published in English. Kałkowski, in a collection given the disarmingly appropriate

title *How Have You Been, Sir?*, confronted Nazis who were then living peacefully in Germany, having been acquitted by the German courts. In our pages, you'll find his conversations with Hans Fleischhacker, a professor of anthropology still conducting genetic research at Frankfurt's Goethe University as well as Kąkolewski's interrogation of Heinz Reinefarth, the German SS commander during the Warsaw uprising. The crimes of state that sent Václav Havel to prison are more recent; in this issue, his brother Ivan remembers those years, as well as the resistance of intellectuals that continued nonetheless. As for the dark times we face today, Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton bring us a story by Hwang Chǒng-ŭn about a gay man's isolation in contemporary Korea, and J. Malcolm Garcia tells the tale of Rosa Robles Loreto, a woman forced to live in sanctuary in Tucson, because the country she calls home threatens to expel her. To tell the tale of our time, however, sometimes you need to go way back. Jim Walke, as one illustration of the horror this country calls health care, offers an avatar of Simeon Stylites, the Syrian ascetic who spent much of his life living atop a pillar.

Strangeness of this sort, and much that is stranger still, is the subject of Catherine Chin's marvelous essay on the marvels of history. Even if we, like Chin, don't necessarily believe that "the now-extinct European aurochs [. . .] defended itself by squirting burning shit at hunting dogs twenty-four feet away," that doesn't mean such accounts have nothing to tell us—or that they're not just plain fun. Dark as these times may be, we do still manage to find wonder, comfort, and humor in our world and in these pages. Don't, for example, pass up your chance to spend some time with "The Rabbi's Cat" by Miljenko Jergović (translated by Aleksandar Brezar). And definitely don't miss Teresa Solana's "Premiere Nights" (translated by Peter Bush). Though certainly buffo, this is clearly no tale for opera buffs; instead, as some of us like to say out here in the Bay State, it's anti-Fascist, and wicked fun. Who knows, maybe someday everything is going to be smooth, like a rhapsody.

In the meantime, we'll just keep painting.

Jim Hicks
for the editors