

Story for performance #999
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You know who I am.

Feeding the myth of Scheherazade determined to keep her date with dawn. As evening draws in, she would be disciplined to make the regular payment: full of backbone, wild emotions in check, super-professional. She used every wily wit laced with thick Turkish coffee, clever verbal gymnastics and a charm offensive all her own—very, very nice words, to speak face to face to face with her intimate enemy, fiction her new best friend.

As for me, well, I'm serving my apprenticeship in loss. Terrible words killed the future. Then the sound was cut. Darkness and silence. The bruising world, the unforeseen event leaving zero, zilch. Death's necessities refused to budge. I could have closed the door, just fed my stay-at-home proclivities. But here I am. It's a date—well, an agenda, a matter of belief, to live by the day.

I want to sleep, but I wake up and speak public poetry—using the passive voice, hesitant but fluent, the tonal shifts forming their own fractured grammar. Crafting words with precision, I sit in the centre of the village and keep talking into a cold night sky. Deadline after deadline produces this prescribed rhythm—it's a process to steel the will in the absence of language. I work with some one, get somebody to write. That's the plan, anyway. It's the riskiest move: scripted events from a fuzzy photocopy forming a theatre of the day, broadcast live. I'm an echo: it's speech via another route. It can be a little spooky—it's murky and opaque. Like the movement of ghosts, it makes you shudder. I throw control of the narrative into the hands of fate, delivering a soliloquy of disturbing echoes without a style guide. It's oddly Beckettian and fraught with ambiguity.

Oh I'm always enigmatic, speaking my piece of history for listening ears. But I will not burnish the image. Being the messenger is a cursed blessing. Who wants to take the word of a fabulist, a skilful embellisher operating from behind screens, heard but not seen? Who wants to hear such a sharp message? Who wants to acknowledge the basic facts? Let's see a show of hands. You sit in frosty silence. Oh joyful crowd! Close your ears then! Sweep my words away with a frozen smile and behave with culpable blindness in front of your guilt mirrors—as if that will ease things! Can't you see what's going on? You've failed to keep in touch. Did you hear that? You can no longer imagine how things might be different.

Meanwhile, I've taken soundings to predict the future. I've been thirsty to see the real thing. I've been pouring over the marginalia of a cookbook as full of bizarre twists as a paperback thriller. I've been imagining the circulation of a text beyond the small book-lined rooms in which experts have always examined them. But what we need now is a knowledge not written down. Because in the outside world something new and strange is happening to end your romance with the land. It's a boomerang

effect: the gradual warming and the immediate heat will make for a different landscape. Expect a blizzard of sand. No more ancestral trees, no more flowers and strawberries. All that will have vanished decades ago. The gates of hell will open in the coming hours. It's a very ugly picture. And now such blaming, so many jabbing fingers! The language of threats is just another provocation when bad blood runs deep. Look at history.

How many people have travelled from the other side of the earth across the barren deserts and over the fetid hills with high confidence and a visa valid for one year? No chance of going back, they are too poor, too rough, unable to speak fluently to us affable anglophiles. And after all we have rules. For their own good. So, left waiting at the gates or searching for holes in the fence, they live hiding in caves or sheltering under scraps of plastic tarp hidden in the scrub just over the horizon. This is the refuge of last resort for the family, for the clan, for the whole godforsaken village...Others roam the streets without even a change of clothes. "Lice" and "cancer", the locals call them. You recognize the pattern, the lurch to the right across cultural fault-lines in the damaged fabric.

Yet six nights at the Sheraton at \$2900-a-night is a modest sum for the financial man flush with cash. He and his entourage—the guys with degrees in tailored black suits—are extremely comfortable. He's running the show. He clicks his fingers. He's a practical man who made his fortune out of a carefully crafted image and a pool of oil on the auction block. Now it's gold coins locked in a bank vault and a seaside fortress against the wind. Something for every one, they say—they'd sell you dust.

Old promises add to the aura of farce as the man who sports a walrus moustache comes up with stunts in his annual rant. Talk is swirling among street-corner society: three women among the most wanted, seeking anonymity in male clothing, are working under fake names and false beards but with seriousness of purpose against all the massed obstacles. It's a kind of answer, a smidgen of truth offering an imperfect calm, a breathing space for this growing desire now emerged from the dust.

The thaw comes. It's been so long in coming. No more delays. A date is set now and the account is settled. I'm seeking a forgiving breeze under far happier stars. This oracular ventriloquy must come to an end, but how to end it? A question mark over which way to turn—I'm not completely certain what you do the next day, the day after analysis ends, but between now and then there will be a last minute plan.

Survival is victory.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story constructed by Anna Gibbs from the daily writing prompts.