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## Book Review

**Stephen Collishaw, *The Last Girl*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003. 310 pages.**

*"The earth, I felt, was beginning to shift, and the long dead were stirring." (7)*

With *The Last Girl*, Stephen Collishaw has succeeded in bringing the small region of Vilnius alive. A place that often is dismissed as backward or treated as overly exotic, this novel portrays it with a great deal of affection and a healthy critical eye. Skillfully weaving together the multiple identities of the city—Vilna, Vilne and Wilno—Collishaw rightly leaves the story of this city open-ended and unresolved, and its narrator and protagonist unredeemed. In doing so, and by offering a very frank and tender image of a place and its people, Collishaw has opened a much-needed space for inter-cultural conversations about the war, the Shoah, and Lithuania's Soviet legacy.

*The Last Girl* is written in a pared-down prose and clipped dialogue. It is told in three parts, each of which is structured around one of the women who have shaped the protagonist's life. Part I, "Jolanta" (a woman representing hope for the future) is narrated in the first-person. It opens in the narrative present: independent Lithuania of the 1990s, with the aging Steponas Daumantas wandering through Vilnius, reading in its cafes, drinking to excess, and obsessively photographing its young mothers with their children. In a former life Daumantas was a writer, a poet, and eventually a professor. He witnessed the city's transformation from the Polish-Jewish *Wilno/Wilne* to the Lithuanian *Vilnius*, and his obsessive picture-taking is a symptom of the trauma of lost love. Present-day Daumantas lives in an apartment overlooking a park on *Vokiečių* (German) Street, in the heart of what was once Jewish *Vilne*. During the Nazi occupation, this street was the dividing line between the city's two ghettos in which approximately 100,000 people were imprisoned, over ninety per cent of whom perished at Ponar (*Paneriai*) or in concentration camps in Estonia. From his vantage point overlooking the spot where the Great Synagogue and famous Strashun Library once stood, the past bleeds into the present for Daumantas, and the ghetto comes alive. Even in the 1990s, he walks and frequents cafes *in the ghetto*:

The ghetto is flourishing. For years these streets bore little sign of what they had been. They fell silently into decay. Windows gaped, empty sockets, great weeping holes. Buildings bereft of their owners, of their past. Now the plaster is renewed, the floors are retimbered. The roofs are retiled and the cobbles are relaid. The facades are repainted and walls wear signs recounting the history of the ghetto. But for years those decaying broken-backed buildings were signs. Now they are gone and we have smart boutiques, restaurants and Western cafes. (9)

For Daumantas, all roads, past and present, converge in the ghetto and lead back to his moment of ultimate failure. When the Nazis arrived in Vilnius, a Jewish woman, Rachael, whom he had loved since his boyhood, was imprisoned in the ghetto together with her baby. When Rachael pleaded with Daumantas to save her, to take her out of the ghetto, he panicked. When she tried to thrust her baby into his arms, Daumantas turned and ran, abandoning the opportunity to save two lives, and committing a sin for which he would never forgive himself. And so, as he approaches the end of his life, Daumantas lives life as a prayer. Although he has long since lost the ability to pray in the many churches of Vilnius, he compiles his collection of photographs of mothers instead: a monument for the woman he loved and for her baby. And for their community, annihilated and forgotten.

The theme of Vilnius's continual reinvention runs steadily through the book, introduced early in the narrative by means of a familiar vocabulary of ruins and ghosts—remnants of identities past—and a writing style that is itself crumbling, its fragmented sentences echoing the decaying architecture of the place they describe:

[T]his was once a Jewish town. It is hard to imagine that now. Before the war nearly a third of the population was Jewish. Synagogues huddled in with the churches. The rustling of the pages of the Talmud vied with the clicking of the rosary. [ . . . ]

It's still possible, though, to see the remnants of that old city. [. . .]

The ghost city. The city of spirits. The darkened shells, the neglected parts of town, the spaces that stand strangely vacant. (21)

Although Part I risks repeating the oft-told story of today's Vilnius, ignorant of its Jewish past and populated by amnesiac Catholics, happily, *The Last Girl* distinguishes itself from other accounts of a return to Jewish Vilne via Lithuanian Vilnius (like Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom*) or Jewish Lita via Lithuanian *Lietuva* (like Rose Zwi's *Last Walk in Naryshkin Park*) through its nuanced portrayal of the present-day place, creating a narrative that is layered and believable. Collishaw creates a Vilnius with all its warts (like the under-aged prostitutes pimped by a character named Mindaugas), particularities (like the real-life kitschy medieval-themed restaurant *Lokys*), and colorful inhabitants (like Svetlana, the Russian washing woman, who lives in a cramped apartment with broken windows, her teenaged son and blackmailing husband).

Part II, "Svetlana," sets the narrative in motion. We leave behind the meditation on ghosts and ruins to enter the story of a manuscript lost in a bar by Daumantas after a night of heavy drinking. This manuscript—the only copy of a literary masterpiece written by an unstable, depressive, now-hospitalized Lithuanian veteran of the Soviet-Afghan War—is rescued by Svetlana and held ransom by her surly husband and even surlier 'business associate.' It is the story of the manuscript and of Svetlana's unrequited love for Daumantas (if Jolanta is hope, Svetlana represents the self-sacrifice of which the protagonist was incapable) that keeps the reader turning pages until Part III. In this section entitled "Rachael" we meet Daumantas's lost love, and resume the first-person voice.

Part III comprises both Daumantas's confession and the return to his craft. It is a long glance backward that lays out his life-story, from his village boyhood, to his student years and experience of the war, and then through the gray Soviet era. Only upon meeting Jolanta in the opening scenes of the novel does Daumantas begin to see a way out of his sorrowful existence: "It was in the silence of a church, on a day when the sun cut particularly cleanly across the nave, illuminating as it did the head of Mary, the Mother of God, that I saw my last girl" (17). The country is changing and so can he. Jolanta's will be the final image in this collection, and with her face the monument to Rachael will be complete: "Our eyes met and her step faltered for the smallest part of a moment. That look was fifty years old. It cut me to the quick. In that moment the madness of my photographic craze became clear" (17). Unfortunately, it is the least convincing part of the narrative. Jolanta is half-Jewish (we learn this later), and in her face Daumantas sees a shadow of Rachael, who could be Jolanta's mother, the resemblance is so striking. But the transcendental experience in the church seems out of keeping with Daumantas's character, who appears to possess little imagination or spirituality beyond a traumatic compulsion to repeat; and the mere resemblance between two women doesn't accomplish the work the author would have it do: Daumantas is blown away by Jolanta, but the reader is left wondering why.

Minor inconsistencies aside, Collishaw's book is successful. The image of the photographic collection is mercifully almost completely abandoned after Part I, and most readers will be willing to suspend disbelief and accept Daumantas's moment of understanding upon seeing Jolanta in light of the novel's redeeming qualities. *The Last Girl* would certainly be valuable to anyone interested in the Holocaust, the post-Soviet era, and the Baltics in general. Perhaps the biggest contribution that Stephen Collishaw's book makes is with the character of Daumantas. Through him this author has given a face and a name to the Lithuanian bystander. In accounts told by ghetto prisoners (here I am thinking not only of fiction, but of diary accounts like that of Yitzhak Rudashevski), those outside the ghetto are portrayed as shadowy, vague, bloodthirsty, and contemptible for their real and perceived collaboration in the crimes of the Nazis. (This is understandable— how can one write in a nuanced manner of people one never sees?) But through Daumantas, we have what is probably a more nuanced, if not necessarily redeeming, portrait of the bystander: he is a cowardly man who keeps his head down and waits for the storm to pass.

Unlike Daumantas, who is haunted by his memories and accompanied by ghosts on his walks through the city, Vilnius itself becomes amnesiac after the war:

The Soviets had no desire to investigate the massacre of the Jews; we were all victims of the fascist oppressor. And so the rubble of the devastated synagogues was slowly cleared. The vacant Jewish homes were reallocated to the needy. Thugs who had gone Jew-hunting for kopecks during the war years wandered the old alleys free and unmolested. We all forgot. We all buried the rubble of war. Hid the sores. Turned our attentions to new enemies, new struggles. (293)

Only in the 1990s do maps of the ghetto begin to go up on the walls of buildings once enclosed within it, plaques recount how the Jews were marched to the killing fields. A statue of the Gaon of Vilnius is erected, and slowly the city begins to remember. This is the point of Collishaw's novel: memories resurface, even long-buried ones. But he does not offer a pat solution to the rifts of the past and which continue to resonate (during a recent four-month long research trip in Israel, this became abundantly clear to me): "memory doesn't bring forgiveness" (296). After many years Daumantas has brought himself to write down the story of his love and his failure to act for her, but writing has not brought the hoped-for solace, and the book ends with an unresolved melancholy: "I love you with darkness and death," he writes. "Forgetfulness and light. Yes, with pain. With guilt. Grass on a sunken grave." Jolanta may look as though she could have been Rachael's daughter, but she isn't. Rachael's daughter died along with her mother. Daumantas could have saved their lives, but he didn't. These are things that cannot be changed or perhaps even forgiven. The book ends, but the past remains unredeemed.

