

A Brief History of Yes

Marcom describes *A Brief History of Yes* as a "literary fado," referring to a style of Portuguese music that, akin to the American blues, is often melancholic and soulful, and encapsulates the feeling of *saudade*--meaning, loosely, yearning and nostalgia for something or someone irreparably lost. *A Brief History of Yes* tells the story of the break-up between a Portuguese woman named Maria and an unnamed American man: it is a collage-like, fragmentary novel whose form perfectly captures the workings of attraction and grief, proving once again that American literature has no better poet of love and loss than Micheline Aharonian Marcom.

Reviews

"A beautiful elegy for lovers lost within bittersweet recollections."--***San Francisco Chronicle***

"Marcom allows wildness to arise with in language. Her writing is also attuned to the subtler risks of style—or rather, it radically recasts style as risk. To read Marcom, then, is to read writing that risks being the sole instance of its species—words that could only have been written the way they are written."--***David Winters, Quarterly Conversation***

"*A Brief History of Yes* is a weeping novel. Its cohesion is mourning. Ineluctable sorrow manifests in its structure and grammar, in its sounds and imagery...Micheline Aharonian Marcom's abiding interpretation of language is reaching and relentless and unrestrained."--***Numero Cinq***

"The book is slender, yet dense with language of a high register. In Marcom's novel, reality appears more blurred, mysteries more veiled, and the land of grief more convincingly enveloping because her characters are unabashedly archetypal in their presence—not individuals but types playing out timeless human dramas."--***Kenyon Review***

Excerpt

1.

So that, yes, here are the two lovers again, and their love affair spans a calendar year—August to August, dry season to dry season—and like the songbird who remains a short while in the hillside grove before he departs for the south—the lovers arrive and pass their season together and then pass on to other lovers and another season in the following summer, or autumn for the hermit thrush who returned to the girl's hillside grove in October from the north two months after the end of the love affair, made his yearly urgent unstoppable migration, stays his three weeks, and the earth revolving around the sun, and the songbird singing his ingrained blood song and moving toward his final winter destination as the weather permits and decrees.

2.

He is tall, blond-haired blue-eyed. She is tall for a Portuguese, and dark-eyed haired. She is called Maria like so many of the women of her generation for the mother of God, and he bears a deformity across his chest where the bones and cartilage did not form properly across his heart when he was a child—"There was the possibility of a surgery when I was a boy," he tells Maria after they have removed their clothes for one another for the first time, the naked body, and made love in August and she sees his concave chest area, the hollow, in the summer eve in the window light of his bedroom, "a surgeon offered to break each rib bone in my chest and to place a steel rod through the cartilage below the sternum." He is a man with a concave chest, he is someone who needs love she thinks when she sees him naked on this first occasion; or: he is someone who has not had it, his heart tight and duly too hemmed in by the chest cartilage which holds closely to the muscle. "My parents did not force me to have the surgery," and he says that he is grateful to them now, "for there could have been complications," he tells her while they lie on the wide bed in his city apartment, "the procedure has since been improved upon, and now to correct the deformity the surgeon will place an enormous magnet below the skin and one on the top of it also, here, and thereby make a force to pull the chest bones outward," he smiles, and Maria smiles also: her brown eyes his blue the colors magnetic the invisible chords which draw this particular woman, a Portuguese, across the ocean from her city on the Tagus to this man in his city by a large saltwater bay in America. I made a journey to your country to find you, she doesn't tell him. It is also true that she has lived in his country for twenty-five years and there have been many lovers before him and a husband also, and an eight year old son from her marriage and I'll fix your heart, she thinks, a little arrogant in the way that she thinks it, as women sometimes are in their desire to fix and alter and abrogate the male (I'll wash your feet for you); my own muscle to pull yours hidden outward.

Twelve months later in August, the blue-eyed lover will tell the Portuguese girl that he would like to end their affair, "I love you, Maria, but I am not in-love with you," he will say to her on the

telephone. She cries into the black machine after he says the black not in love with you words. "But last week," she tells him, "when you said" and. And she will think at that moment on the telephone and their bodies separated by miles by the bay waters by the ineffable, not of him but of his ill-formed and moderately collapsed chest bones, the concavity of his body which unprotrudes below the satellites of his sternum, of love and property—and of his conventional and moderate ideas (and hers always immoderate) of love and property, for it is a small fact like a small nuisance (a small corrosive fact) that her blue-eyed lover is a rich man and his monies sit in accounts where the numbers only move skyward like black birds on the heat of the rising thermals, and many things rise up for her lover except for his breastbone and cartilage contused and dimly knitted and hunkered down over the muscle, except for love. And like a boy alone on his child's bed, the boy who hit his head against a wooden headboard in his inability to sleep and find ease each night at bedtime, and so rocked and hit the body against wood for the rhythm it made the sleep it then brought, her lover notthinks but learnt that succor is found in these lonely collisions. His mother told Maria of it once, "I could hear him alone in his room when he was a boy. He'd hit his head against the black board of his bed and rocked himself thereby to sleep each night." I couldn't stop it I could not help him, his mother did not say to Maria, but the quiet blue-eyed anxious failed look of the mother said it to the Portuguese girl: the too tightly knit mother for whom all things must needed to be proper and in their place and observant of all of the codes of the moral Protestant upper classes and the codes placed thereby above the son (which needs which desires, his terrors) when he was a boy and the mother was filled with all of her strict and proper (not love) ideas of love.