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Haunted Attention: On Marie Chaix's *The Laurels of Lake Constance* and *Silences, or A Woman's Life*

The Laurels at Lake Constance, by Marie Chaix. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

Silences, or A Woman's Life, by Marie Chaix. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

At the very beginning of Marie Chaix's brilliant novel *The Laurels at Lake Constance* a small but telling thing happens. Here it is:

He threw himself into politics heart and soul, at the risk of neglecting everything else in his life.

At the age of thirty a great craving for action suddenly turned him from the easy path unconditionally laid down for him by his father, a successful man who had fulfilled himself through wealth, business, the stock market, and the Legion of Honor.

In 1936, Albert is a high-ranking executive in the Rhone-Poulenc factories at Péage-de-Roussilon. He is a chemical engineer, a brilliant one: his career is already rich in diplomas, distinctions, and the praise of professors and employers. You have every advantage, his father tells him, don't spoil your chances. You'll make your mark in business.

Did you catch it? How the tense shifts from past to present between the second and third paragraph? How the prose suddenly, subtly moves from declaration towards scene and opens up into drama? It's easy to miss. For one, like a lot of Chaix's gestures it's not particularly showy and, for two, the paragraphs mostly seem to be doing the same thing. They all introduce a protagonist: Albert, whose beliefs and political career will drive the action of the novel and occupy its ghostly

narrator, Marie Chaix. And yet if you look closer you can see how this short passage sets up what will follow. The passage, divided by tense, is doing two different things. Past is the tense of record, of fact. Present does something else. It embodies. It is 1936. Here is Albert. Here is Albert's father telling him to stay the course. To do as he is told. To follow in footsteps. What's so important about a slight tense change is that it moves the prose toward embodiment, it makes the past the present, turning declarations into living moments. It is this movement, making the past present, embodying it, that drives this novel. And it is in the space between these two paragraphs, between knowledge and imagination, an empty space, that the heart of this novel lies.

The *he* here is Albert Beugras husband, father, patriot, aspiring politician. In the novel we follow his political awakening and subsequent explosive career. From 1936 to 1940 Albert joins and quickly ascends ranks of the nationalist FPP, the French Popular Party. He is worried about communism and the influence of the Soviet Union. He has experienced its upheaval first-hand during violent strikes at the factory he manages. The striking workers take the factory and he sends family to Paris for safety. It is a stinging defeat and in its wake he becomes mesmerized by FPP founder Jacques Doriot and his rhetoric of nationalist pride. In the FPP Albert feels for the first time bound to a higher purpose, shaken from the course of his life laid down by his hardworking father and thrust into the center of things. The novel follows him from here into army service and then into the higher ranks of the FPP. It chronicles with insight and clarity his fervent belief in the Doriot's vision and the Party's agenda even as Doriot decides that the Party must do what, in retrospect, is pure folly: collaborate with the Nazi regime to avoid communist take-over of France. This in itself is a remarkable story. The story of collaboration told with insight and sympathy from the point of view of the collaborator is a considerable narrative feat.

But this is not just a book about Albert's folly. It's a book about the cost of fervent belief and what it precipitates. So the novel details in addition the effect of all these seismic changes on Albert's family. His solitary, romantic long-suffering wife, Alice. Her patient servant Juliette. His weak, confounded parents. His neglected children. It takes everything into account.

All of this has the burden and merit of being true. *The Laurels of Lake Constance* is based on the discovery of the journals Albert Beugras kept during the war and so that book evokes both the historical novel and memoir comes as no surprise. But its what Chaix does with

these genres, freely combining the searching, meditative qualities of the best memoir with the narrative urgency, eye for detail, and stylistic and tropes of fiction. In doing so she creates something vital. Throughout the book she trains her keen eye, her quicksilver sympathies and intellect on burrowing into these characters and this story. We are able to feel Alice's loneliness. We understand Albert's sense of necessity and love of country. We see the affects of Albert's decisions on his parents and his children. To do this Chaix deploys a wonderful and formidable array of gestures and forms. The point of view shifts constantly, from chapter to chapter and at times within passages themselves, shifting from one character's limited third into another's first person meditation or from description into the narrator's direct address of the characters, as when she describes her mother feeling trapped and abandoned in Paris, after Albert moves them there to keep them safe. She writes:

You're afraid. Sleek and sad, you raise your children and protect them from the nightmare: but can't you see what's happening? And yet you know about the war—out there. Is it possible that a luxurious seventh-floor apartment has replaced the watercolor hues of your garden in Lyons without changing your outlook? After Chemin des Cerisiers comes fashionable Avenue Rodin, and you're still the same anxious, ignorant woman clinging to your unflinching expectation and love, While the world collapses and Allied planes drone overhead, your smooth white fingers still stroke the shiny keys of your dream piano: can't you hear what's happening?

These moves happen again and again and unpredictably. Chaix's sense of form is organic and lovely, an embodiment of her desire to understand the history she was born into. She has a need to narrate, to explore, to come to terms with the messy matter of her familial identity and this underlies her brilliant stylistic brio. What does it mean that a man I never met was part of something terrible? What does it mean that my mother stuck by him? What does that make me? Who am I to survive? About a quarter of the way through the book she writes: "I was born in '42. Others were children of the roundup, the Veld'Hiv, freight cars, Auschwitz. Not me: a pink child, loved suckled, cradled. A child spared." It is this combination: the mix of the authorial voice probing and questioning and reflecting and the power and authenticity of the characters voices and rendered experience that make this work so special. A less innovative book—a lesser book— would do one

or the other, but Chaix's loose, probing novel is something different, something rare.

Chaix puts this same fierce intelligence, sympathy and formal daring to equally effective use what might be called a companion volume, *Silences, or A Woman's Life*. *Silences* picks up the thread of Chaix's life many years later, this time depicting/interrogating her relationship with her mother as she, Alice, deteriorates and dies. Near the beginning of the book Alice has a stroke and is taken to the hospital, unresponsive. This sets off a series of memories, meditations and descriptions, as Chaix tries to come to terms with her mother's condition.

A work of memory rather than reconstructed story, *Silences* eschews the narrative momentum of her first book in favor of fragments that intertwine, entangle or emerge from white space, from gaps and ellipses. Here we delve deeper into Alice's life and read stories that reveal new aspects of her character than those we encountered in *The Laurels of Lake Constance*. We learn of Alice's childhood, her whirlwind courtship and early death of her mother before her marriage that left her "an orphan, but married" whose "heart is divided between love and mourning" in such a way that binds her resolutely to this new life with the man she loves. This information comes both in the form of stories about Alice narrated by Chaix, but also first-person accounts in which Chaix channels her mother. In one section, Marie narrates Alice's memory of her father's death, telling us:

I lost my father when I was six—A vast sorrow whose reverberation I still feel. Winter nights when anguish would start with the candle lighted at the bottom of the creaking stairs, continuing to the cold bedroom with its shadowy walls and an over-starched cotton nightgown that was too big for me, brought to its peak between the sheets where I lay with my feet cold and my eyelids shut tight: waiting for his good night kiss weeping because I would never again sniff the spicy fragrance of skin or the smell of Virginia tobacco on his moustache.

How intimate and precise these details are. How lovely. At first these passages begin with "she used to say" or "you used to say" but as the book progresses these signifiers drop out and often it is hard to distinguish at first who is speaking. Marie too, we know has lost her father, but was it six? Or was it later? When the narrator of these passages speaks "the war" we can conjure the First World War or the Second.

Whose memories are we enmeshed in? Chaix creates a deliberate confusion, a doubling. Near the beginning of the book she writes, "They won't realize it, but I'll be leading parallel lives: a visible life, in which I'll follow your body wherever they decide to take it; and a second, nocturnal life, the legacy of shimmers and shadow, of fugitive moments, of scenes half-lived half-dreamed: the life of a woman who is now taking her leave."

Once again, as in her first novel, Chaix is conjuring in order to understand. She inhabits with sensitivity and clarity the voice and point-of-view of her mother as she dreams, hopes, reels from the shocks of life, despairs at aging. But this book, unlike its predecessor, gives equal weight to the "visible life," Chaix's own lived experience. Here she does not hover as much in the white space of the prose, but speaks with clarity, with doubt, with longing, with anger about her own experience of her mother. For example, when she gets the call from Juliette that something is wrong with her mother, Marie bluntly states: "I'll take my time. Since she didn't wait for me before taking flight or warn me that the time for her departure had come, she can wait now." Or later, after the doctors open her mother's trachea in hopes of helping her breath, Marie tells us: "I'd like to sleep but I can't. I keep seeing you under the white light, with your throat slit." Here Marie acts, reacts, rather than simply questions and probes, as she chronicles—in arguments with doctors, quiet moments with nurses, and reflections on her mother's still body—the absurdity, tedium, and anguish of end of life care.

Floating next to each other Alice and Marie's experiences intertwine, collapse into and pull away from each other. It is this shifting relationship between Chaix and Alice and between the visible life of the body, the aging body, the body under medical surveillance and invisible life, the presence past, fantasy life, emotional life that constellate around the a simple question: what does it mean to be a woman? Chaix probes the question of identity with subtle stories and direct address that accumulate into a monument of shards. This book, like *The Laurels of Lake Constance*, asks the simple, penetrating question: in a world of disappointments and compromises, can we find a place to really live? One answer is there in her work, powerful and delicate assemblages that hum with the electricity and rasping breath of human life.