

Life went on

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Mohsin Hamid

EXIT WEST

240pp. Hamish Hamilton. £14.99.
978 0 241 29008 8

Jason Donald

DALILA

368pp. Cape. £16.99.
978 1 910 70248 2

Viet Thanh Nguyen

THE REFUGEES

224pp. Corsair. £12.99.
978 1 4721 5255 8

US: Grove. \$26. 978 0 8021 2639 9

There are more refugees in the world today than at any time since the Second World War, and depending on where you get your news and opinion, this is either a humanitarian call to arms or a free-floating threat to political order. In the latter camp fall a growing number of European politicians and a certain American president who is either unwilling or unable to consider why a person might leave their country for reasons unrelated to criminality. “This could be one of the great Trojan horses”, Donald Trump said of the Syrian crisis months before assuming office and implementing a travel ban on seven predominantly Muslim countries. Such is the tenor of our moment, which Pankaj Mishra has characterized in his recent book of that title as an “age of anger”. Refugees are being cast as both victims and villains, liable to steal jobs and live off welfare, if not worse. Having given up their former lives, it is argued, they have nothing left to lose.

In an essay written in the late 1950s, the philosopher Michael Oakeshott described conservatism as preferring “the familiar to the unknown . . . the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant”, a disposition that, while in keeping with the global mood, is at odds with that of contemporary fiction. Just as American filmmakers have of late focused on the country’s black population as a way of engaging with questions of not just racial but of social injustice (see: *Moonlight*, *Hidden Figures*, *Fruitvale Station*), several recent works of fiction examine the inequities of globalization from the perspective of refugees, those most directly subject to its calamitous mood swings.

The arbitrary opening and closing of worlds is the organizing reality of life as a refugee, and it is the central concern of Mohsin Hamid’s extraordinary novella *Exit West*, which tells the story of two young people falling in love against the backdrop of an unnamed Middle Eastern city under siege. In his brilliant second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Hamid sketched with claustrophobic intimacy an encounter between a nameless American (a hired assassin?) and a Pakistani man (an

anti-American activist) at a café in Lahore as the latter explained how, despite having a degree from Princeton and a prestigious job, he had become disillusioned with the US. In *Exit West* Hamid continues his exploration of cultural conflict, but trades *Fundamentalist*’s extended monologue for a more panoramic approach, which comes sharply into focus when the couple’s life is altered by global events.

Nadia and Saeed meet at an evening class. She rides a motorcycle, lives alone and, although not religious, wears a shapeless black robe to divert male attention. He lives with his parents (teachers), prays in the evenings and refuses sex before marriage. Both have corporate jobs. Their relationship unfolds as rebels descend on the city, imposing a curfew, setting up checkpoints, and attacking the architecture of daily life. The couple’s world shrinks to the size of Saeed’s apartment, and then bursts apart – not because of war, but with the appearance of mysterious portals all over the city:

Rumours had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country. Some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors. A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all. Most people thought these rumours to be nonsense, the superstitions of the feeble-minded. But most people began to gaze at their own doors a little differently nonetheless.

With this turn, a love story whose intimate, self-possessed tone recalls Alejandro Zambra’s *Bonsai* (2000) – a similarly self-reflexive novella about a pair of doomed lovers – takes on an aspect of science fiction, projecting us into a near future of unencumbered migration. Through these doors refugees are transported to Mykonos, to London, creating enclaves that test the limits of surrounding communities. At

the same time, through short vignettes set in Sydney or Shinjuku, Hamid flips the frame, dropping us into the lives of locals as they become aware of these strangers. The scope suddenly expands: two old men become lovers, despite not having a shared language; the hills of California’s Marin County transform as new arrivals set up homes. Via these encounters *Exit West* speculates about what might become of a world without walls, and how we might react if more than a select few were given greater say in their own geographic destinies.

Walls, however, remain political fetish objects, and so, increasingly, are those trapped behind them. And just as history is written by the victors, the foreign is typically viewed from the perspective of the powerful, an imbalance to which Jason Donald’s earnest, accomplished new novel *Dalila* is a corrective. *Dalila* follows the trajectory of its twenty-three-year-old titular protagonist after she lands in London, having escaped an abusive relative who was holding her hostage in her native Kenya. She has settled with another African migrant in a run-down housing complex in Glasgow, and is being held in bureaucratic purgatory while the government decides on her case. Overcast days are spent at the local immigration office or meeting neighbours, several of whom are also awaiting notice. *Dalila*’s interiority is at times simplistic, but Donald captures the nuance of her situation, particularly the additional difficulty of being a refugee from a country that’s rarely in the news. As the novel illustrates, the stasis of waiting for what will likely be a negative response – in the year ending in June 2016, 62 per cent of more than 36,000 applicants were refused asylum in the UK – is not only demoralizing but socially counterproductive. The total reliance on strangers, the obligation not to pursue work or study, and the mandate to adapt without being allowed to assimilate are conditions generally ignored by the public unless

they curdle into radicalization, or riots. Here there is no such threat: *Dalila* is a model refugee. But the novel is an unforgiving parable about the immigration system, which comes off as compromised by politics, likely at the expense of the UK’s best interests.

The characters in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s powerful collection of stories, *The Refugees*, find themselves in a different kind of limbo, not dependent on bureaucracy but tormented by history. Nguyen, the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015), migrated with his family to the US from Vietnam when he was four, and his protagonists maintain ties to both countries, whether as immigrants, the children of immigrants, or, in one case, an American Vietnam War veteran. How the pull of the past clashes with the American drive for self-reinvention is at the heart of these stories. In “The Other Man” a wealthy gay couple in San Francisco takes in an eighteen-year-old Vietnamese refugee who comes to see the bright lines of class difference after beginning an affair with one of his hosts. In “I’d Love You To Want Me”, an ageing husband rewrites his life when, after decades of marriage, he begins to call his wife by the wrong name. Perhaps most impressively, the collection is also bracketed by two different kinds of ghost story, a nod to Nguyen’s observation that “while some people are haunted by the dead, others are haunted by the living”. In the opening tale, “Black-Eyed Woman”, the narrator, a ghostwriter, leads a quiet life with her mother in California until the day her brother, who died at sea escaping Vietnam decades earlier, appears at her door. In the closing story, “Fatherland”, a Vietnamese-American woman takes a trip to Saigon to meet her father’s second family – his first wife and children escaped to America – and the half-sister who shares her exact name. As an American reading these stories in our current political climate, I find their sense of lucid dislocation especially poignant. Ours is a country of refugees, a campfire around which ghost stories are meant to be told.

Opting for the familiar over the unknown is not a luxury granted to everyone, and as the world continues to change, it may be extended to fewer and fewer people. Fiction, of course, carries within it the capacity to help people see the unknown, and project themselves into it, whether backwards through ghost stories, or forwards through science fiction. This is worth bearing in mind as the migration crisis unfolds, and the rhetoric surrounding it is subsumed by fear. Still, even if appeals to the better angels of our nature fall on deaf ears, as Hamid writes in *Exit West*, history will progress. His novella closes on a note that, if not exactly hopeful, brings some degree of comfort. In “places both far and near”, he writes,

the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge . . . and the result was something not unlike relief.