THE SHADOW OF DESIRE

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Rebecca Stowe

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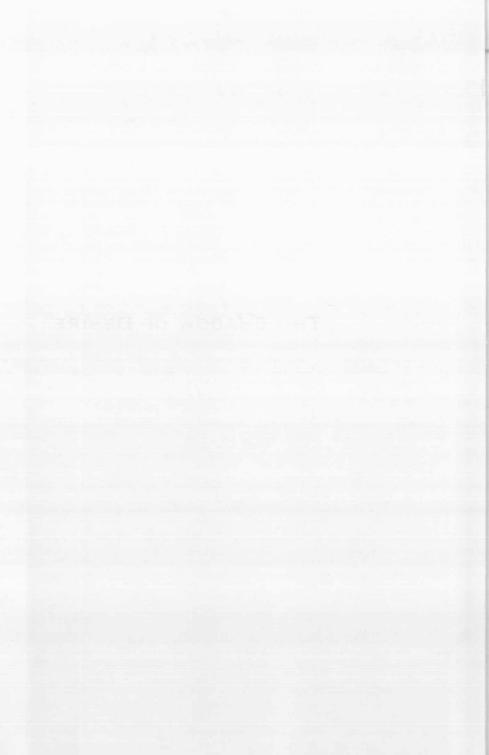
Printed in the United States of America First Edition 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 This book is dedicated to my father, Joseph G. Stowe, and to the memory of my mother, Elizabeth Robertson Stowe. Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or Reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.

And being restrain'd, it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of desire.

—William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

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1952. IKE IS ELECTED; ROCKY MARCIANO BECOMES THE champ; polio invades; Lillian Hellman cannot cut her conscience to fit the year's fashions and Richard Nixon's dog is the most popular creature in the country. The H-bomb is exploded and I am born, the very next day, a mutant of sorts. I have all my fingers and toes, all the necessary parts in all the right places, all except one. I am born without a heart.

Or so Virginia says. Virginia is my mother; I am her namesake, Virginia Junior, Ginger for short. I call her Virginia rather than Mother because in 1960, when I was eight, she decided to liberate herself from the yoke of motherhood and become a Person. This was a great catastrophe for me, not because I resented her being a person—the truth being she would never be a "person" to me, she would always be a force, and that force was Mother—but because she insisted

we all call her by her name. Not Mom, not dear, not honey, not Muu-ther, but Virginia. If we fell and came running into the house with a bloody skinned knee, crying for Mom, she'd turn her back and refuse to hand over the iodine and Band-Aids until we called her "Virginia." If Poppy came home and called, "Honey, what's for dinner?" he didn't get any.

It was humiliating. "You call your mother by her name?" my little friends would ask, in amazement and fear, as if calling my mother "Virginia" would explode the very structure of all our lives, for what was more safe and secure than "Mom"? What if this becoming-a-person thing was catching and they'd lose their own mothers, whose names most of them didn't even know? Everyone felt sorry for me and avoided my house when Virginia was there. They couldn't stand the embarrassment of having to call her "Virginia" rather than Mrs. Moore, which was who she was and always would be to them, it was like asking them to turn their backs on all their training, all the rules, and that was asking too much.

The person my mother became was not the one she wanted to be, although I don't think she had anything specific in mind. She just wanted to be "her own woman," and if she wasn't quite sure who that was, it didn't matter, she knew who she wasn't: Mom-Mother-honey-dear. She was not a stupid woman, far from it. She was smart, perhaps even brilliant. She had graduated with highest honors from the University of Georgia, one of the few women in her class. She was one of the few local mothers with a college degree, and looking back on it, I wonder how she could have been so simpleminded, how she could have thought that forcing a bunch of terrified children to call her by her first name would somehow result in her attaining a sense of self. All it

did was turn her into an eccentric heretic in the eyes of others, and eventually she found that unbearable. She had neither the strength nor the fury to defy the consensus, and unfortunately for us all, but especially for her, her experiment in Personhood was a disaster.

FOR MOST OF MY LIFE I HAVE BEEN FLEEING. THE DIRECTION always seems to be away from Virginia, that is always my intention, but no matter which way I run she is always there, standing in front of me, real or imagined, like some kind of spectre of doom.

"Why do you go?" Cassie always asks, and I never know what to tell her. I don't know why I make this annual Christmas pilgrimage to Michigan with a trunkful of dirty laundry. There's something almost shameful about the laundry, something so teenagerish about driving all the way through New York State and across a strip of Ontario, 650 miles one way, with no clean clothes. So undignified. So unlike the way I think I should be, at my age, at this stage in my life.

And what is it I think I should be? I don't know; I'm not any more clear on that than Virginia was, but instead of

thinking I should be More, I think I should be Farther. Farther along with my career, farther away from North Bay, farther from my past, farther along in my own quest for Personhood.

If it weren't for the snow I would love this drive. I love being alone in the car, I feel self-contained and in control, if only for twelve hours. I love the idea of being unreachable no phones, no newspapers, no television, free to inhabit any world I choose, free to let my mind wander uninhibited by the chaos of the real world, which terrifies me. Not in any physical sense; I'm not afraid of muggers lurking in dark doorways or murderers rustling about in the bushes in Central Park or angry gangs of girls running up and down the sidewalks with hat pins to jab into unsuspecting shoppers, even though these threats are real enough. It is, ironically, their very realness that makes me not fear them: because they are real, one can take precautions, one avoids dark doorways and stays out of Central Park after the sun sets and crosses to the other side of the street when fifty kids start running toward you. In fact, I'm rather fearless, physically. It's the one bit of my youthfulness I retain, that sense of immortality, that thoughtless, baseless sense that nothing could ever happen to me.

No, what I am afraid of is more amorphous, less substantial. I don't know how to describe it without sounding like a crank, someone who should be wandering around Times Square in a sandwich board reading BEWARE THE INVADERS! or some such nonsense. What I fear is the way I feel every time I venture out of my apartment. I feel bombarded by the world, attacked by all the information, all the messages, all the subtle and blatant injunctions to do this, be that, wear this, buy that, all of which are designed to make one feel inadequate. And which succeed, in my case. I simply can't block them out, as everyone else seems to be able to do. I

sometimes think that I missed the evolutionary boat, that somewhere along the line our species developed a gene for blocking out the unnecessary, for creating a little sievelike device in our brains to strain out the superfluous, and I didn't get it.

"Maybe that's why I never had children," I told Cassie. "I instinctively knew it was my duty to the species to remove myself from the gene pool," but she thinks that's unlikely. "I think it has more to do with your fear of the living than your concern for the unborn," she always says and she's probably right.

I check the odometer. Four hundred miles to go. I always promise myself to stop along the way, to see Niagara Falls again or go to the Women's Rights National Park. "What is that?" I always ask myself as I pass the sign, what kind of feminist am I, passing it by twice a year, on my way to and from North Bay, why don't I stop? But I am always in a hurry. A hurry to get it over with when I am on my way there, a hurry to get home when I'm on my way back to New York.

"What are you in such a hurry about?" Virginia always asks, and I'm not quite sure. Nothing in my life is particularly urgent. With the exception of my classes, I have no solid commitments. All my obligations are rather vague, openended, but, for the most part, that's how I like it. I love doing what I do, but it's time-consuming, all-encompassing, it takes years to discover enough about a life to write it.

That's why I prefer the dead to the living. As subjects, that is. The dead aren't going anywhere. There is nothing to keep up with, no fear that the knowledge you obtain will be obsolete by the time you understand what it *means*.

The dead are at one and the same time both more mysterious and more accessible than the living, for no matter how complex they were—no matter how complicated their lives or how ambivalent their feelings, their thoughts, their

deeds—they remain the same. The dead can be puzzling, but one can always find the pieces and put them together, whereas the living are not complete. There are always missing pieces, and generally the missing pieces are the most important ones, the key images without which the portrait is indecipherable.

The truth is, one is never complete until one is dead. And one is never understandable, to others, until one is six feet under, the longer the better, at least in terms of accumulating information. Although not *too* long, of course; too long dead can pose as many problems as not dead, as any biographer of Shakespeare can attest. With the too long dead one must make a lot from a little; with the not dead, one must make a little from a lot.

I prefer the obscure dead. "That's for sure," Virginia often says. "Where do you come up with these women?" She thinks I should write about someone more contemporary. Herself, for instance. "It would make a wonderful book," she says, "everything's there. The southern gothic childhood. The crazy aunts and the Confederate ghosts, my famous mother, my beaux . . ." She trails off, wandering back to Georgia, back to a childhood half remembered and half fantasy, drifting back into her drawl as she conjures up images of leading cotillions and sipping mint juleps under two-hundred-year-old oak trees dripping with Spanish moss, images familiar to me from *Gone with the Wind*, which is where she no doubt got them.

I love my work. Being a biographer is like being a detective, a psychiatrist, an anthropologist, and a social historian all in one. One has a tremendous amount of power, it is truly like bringing the dead back to life, like being Frankenstein without the moral dilemma: if one's subject turns out to be a monster (as a number of mine have), one at least has the consolation of knowing it's not a monster of one's own creation.

Every discovery is a treasure, even the ones that blow your theories to smithereens. A theory is, after all, just a theory, up for grabs, something to be proved or disproved, whereas what has already been lived cannot be changed.

I had to come to terms with that when I was working on my first book, The Obscure Muse, a biography of Angeline Wilton. Angeline's father and brother, Sir Henry and Frederick, were both hugely successful eighteenth-century novelists, although they, too, are forgotten now except by a few academicians. They churned out immensively popular romances, the most famous of which are The Fountain of Landymere and The Misfortunes of Master Manfred. They kept Angeline a virtual prisoner at the family estate in Essex, where in addition to doing all their secretarial work and acting as hostess, she wrote several volumes of poetry, one of which survives to this day. "So fair, so far, so true . . . ," that's Angeline. In any case, my theory was that Angeline was the far superior writer of the three and that if she hadn't been forced into slavery in the service of their careers, she could have made a lasting contribution to literature.

I was young; it was the 1970s, I was hot on the trail of all of "Shakespeare's sisters," as Virginia Woolf called them, all the women of talent and imagination who had been lost to posterity because of their sex. I had come across numerous references to a novel Angeline had written—published anonymously—and I was determined to find it and resurrect both Angeline and her work, to carry her out of the grave and put her back in the world where she belonged.

It was a rather monumental task: I had neither title nor author, just a vague plot outline I had culled from her journals. I was living in London at the time, in a brutally cold bed-sit in Maida Vale, surviving on Digestives and Silk Cuts and dreams, bathing as infrequently as hygiene would allow, stalk-

ing my quarry on foot to save my 10p coins for the ravenous gas fire. I kept myself going on fantasies, imagining myself at the MLA convention, telling a lecture hall full of admiring colleagues about my fortuitous discovery, being approached by Lionel Trilling about an opening at Columbia, moving to New York, living in a huge apartment overlooking the Hudson, a huge subsidized apartment with central heat and a bathroom where I could take long, hot baths without feeding coins into the hot-water meter. I might even find a lover. It had been a long time since I'd touched anything living, besides my sickly geranium. A lover would be nice, someone brilliant, a medievalist, perhaps, medievalists were incredibly sexy and passionate. I had no idea why this was so, but it had been my experience that all medievalists were remarkably attractive, not necessarily physically, but they all had an aliveness, a kind of charged, urgent enthusiasm I found irresistible. It made no sense to me-personally, I couldn't imagine getting worked up about Beowulf, but then again, I'm sure there are tens of millions of people who can't imagine why I get so worked up about my dead women.

I finally tracked down an ancient woman named Amelia Fortunata, who had an attic filled with boxes and boxes of old books, manuscripts, newspapers, magazines. She collected absolutely everything she came across that had anything to do with London literary life in the eighteenth century, "Just in case someone needs it." She was a delightful old kook, gray-haired, chirpy, and absentminded, dressed in nubby old tweeds and looking like she just stepped out of the 1950s. She'd bring up a pot of tea and sit on an old trunk and jabber away about Kitty Clive and Dr. Johnson, as if they were old pals. Amelia Fortunata was not a librarian: nothing was organized, it was all just there, the worthless jumbled in with the priceless, a dusty mess, and I would make the long

trek from Maida Vale to Shepherd's Bush, filled with hope on the way there and discouragement on the way back.

To make a long story boring, as my father always says, I finally found it, in manuscript. I recognized Angeline's tiny, obsessive, chicken-scratch penmanship immediately. *The Abduction of Abigail*. I was overjoyed: I grabbed Mrs. Fortunata and danced around the attic with her, for she, too, was ecstatic—this was why she collected all this, "Just in case." She wrapped it up for me in newspaper, like a fish-and-chips dinner, and I ran back to my bed-sit with my treasure tucked under my arm, thinking that my fortune was made.

It wasn't. The novel wasn't terrible, but it wasn't very good, either. Needless to say, I was rather depressed. Too depressed to see what I really had in my hands. Too depressed by all the flashing eyes and saintly dead mothers and bloated blue bodies floating in murky Scottish lochs to see that what I had was not just another overwrought romance but evidence—no, proof!—that Angeline had not been her father's and brother's amanuensis but rather had been the real author of their books.

The Obscure Muse set me on my way. I was beginning with Angeline but I had plans, dreams, I would rescue from obscurity hundreds of brilliant women, thousands of them.

I was obsessed with a very specific type of woman, one who seemed to suffer from a certain type of paralysis. Women who had all the equipment—the brains, the skill, the talent, the desire, the ambition, the leisure, and the money—to accomplish as much if not more than the men in their lives but who could not, for some reason, do. Why were there so many of them? Feminism has, of course, given us many answers, but I was searching for something very specific: I was interested in women who not only couldn't do, but who were tormented by it. Women who would reach a certain