



My Heart Hemmed In

Marie NDiaye

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Ndiaye's novel is haunting in its strangeness and is pointed in its warnings—that happiness cannot come at the expense of one's core.

Eerie, involving, and surreal, Marie Ndiaye's *My Heart Hemmed In* follows a once-respected couple as they grapple with the sudden hostility of everyone around them.

Nadia cherished her life in Bordeaux with her society husband, Ange. They earned respect as schoolteachers devoted to their work, and took pride in being the envy of those who gave life any less vigor than they chose. But that was before. Suddenly, it's not respect that colors people's gazes—it's hatred.

When Ange comes home with a vicious gash in his side, refusing care on maybe-paranoid, maybe-knowing grounds, all transforms. Noget—the retired author next door whom they hate, but whom everyone else seems to be in awe of—steps in to care for the couple, fattening Nadia up with rich French fare, but doing nothing to ease her fear and suspicions.

No one will tell her what they know. Streets, even, change direction when they see her. Something dark seems to be coming to a head. “The city's had enough of us,” Nadia warns Ange. “Either it contracts like it's trying to expel us or it dilates monstrously to make us lose our way.”

Suggestions of allegory abound, particularly once Nadia begins to reveal what she left behind when she married Ange: a poverty-stricken childhood that she reveals to none; family abandoned in shame; a husband whose lack of aspirations she could not bear. Things reshape themselves until they are beyond recognition. Black, slithering abominations slide out of rooms like bad dreams; paths of bone shards give her little hope of escape. Pity plagues her from those she would never acknowledge. The past beckons.

Ndiaye's novel is haunting in its strangeness and is pointed in its warnings—that happiness cannot come at the expense of one's core. That loves that shut all else out fester more so than they grow. Whether the demons that chase Nadia and Ange are real, or an expression of guilt, they conjure a sympathetic horror.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July/August 2017)

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