

Les Invisibles at the Dinner Table

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by Annie Dawid

Around the dinner table, friends recount their travels to family manses in the Old Country. Anita describes the house in Spain that's been home to generations of her mother's family, brimming with relatives eating three-hour meals under the arbor. Her grandmother emigrated to the New World of the Caribbean, and her parents to the United States when she was a child. We thrill to her descriptions of the centuries-old dwelling of stone, its architecture in harmony with its desert-like surroundings, not unlike the house in which we enjoy spicy Cuban beans, with its wide archways and unfettered Sierra views.

Gretchen tells of her grandmother's home in Austria, where at 99 she still presides over multiple generations who have made that valley home for centuries. Her own mother left for Canada, then the United States, needing independence from all those relatives, but Gretchen is wistful as she speaks of extended family all in one place, where their dead have always been buried.

As others talk, I ponder my familial history in Europe: my Jewish forebears did not retain their ancestral homes. Russian ancestors huddled inside darkened rooms while Cossacks rode on "Good Friday" rampages, breaking windows in Jewish homes and worse.

On his father's side, my son descends from Congolese brutalized by French slavers on their enforced journey to the island of Saint Domingue, which became Haiti in the first successful slave revolt of the New World. Likewise, his father's people have no home in the "Old Country," no dwelling to mark their earliest existence because those in control of their destinies deemed them less than human.



When Anita recalls the beauty of Spain, I remember my own trip to Toledo, where I got spooked visiting a 13th century synagogue, empty of Jews since the Inquisition, despite the sign: “Toledo was home to a lively Jewish population of ten thousand.” Five centuries before the Holocaust, this corner of the Old World emptied itself of Jews; those on the Iberian Peninsula might convert to Catholicism instead of die.

At the home of El Greco, a guard singled me out. “*Judia?*” he asked. Why did he want to know? Would I be penalized — perhaps run out of town — if I answered in the affirmative? I nod. My Jewishness is written on my face. He points to his nose. “I thought so,” he tells me in Spanish. “*La nariz.*” The nose.

To that Spaniard, my identity was marked upon my person, as my son is marked by the color of his skin, making us unlike the others at this party, where, in 2007 we eat and drink, laughing and talking politics while I wonder about the people who no longer reside here: descendants of indigenous people who first populated this valley, the offspring of black cowboys who drove cattle through these mountain passes — their invisible presences. In Haiti, they are called *les invisibles*, the spirits of the dead who are with us, always, whether we see them or not.