

Inflorescence

Raluca Antonescu

Novel

French



In biology, inflorescence refers to the arrangement of flowers on a stem, a quality often specific to a family of plants. In her latest novel, Raluca Antonescu turns inflorescence into a human characteristic; that single small element indissociable from a whole, as are the intertwined destinies of the four women whose stories she tells. Using the metaphor of the garden, Inflorescence breathes vital originality into the genre of the family saga. Antonescu leaves aside the traditional family tree to explore in greater detail the thousands of interactions, similarities, and miniscule contrasts that bind the members of a single family. Through the generations, this family evolves like a garden—never wholly the same, and never wholly different. It is a representation of kinship that offers a perspective as new as it is pertinent to what resists the passage of time.

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Photo: @Atelier Mood Eyes

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Excerpt translated by Romy Fursland

THE PIT

Jura, 1911

She cut through the woods and quickened her pace. Suddenly the plateau opened up ahead of her and the harsh light made her squint. Head lowered, she crossed a field dotted with yellowish tufts of grass which stirred in the wind, reminding her of lion's manes. She slowed down, out of breath. It wasn't far now.

Even from a distance, she thought she could smell the putrid stench rising from the pit. This was an insalubrious place. The Devil's Pit, people called it, and with good reason.

She put her basket down and went on gingerly, feeling with her feet for any pitfalls around the edge. A band of thick grass grew all the way around the pit, a luminous green, dazzling in comparison to the rest of the meadow. A mirage of life, she thought to herself. An illusion, designed to mask the true nature of this place. She'd heard so many stories about this deep tunnel which led to an elusive world, surely a monstrous and abominable one. She imagined the bottom of the pit swarming with blind snakes and huge, fat worms. A wave of nausea swept over her. She remembered the day her father had brought the three cows here. The horses had balked in fright, neighing and refusing to move despite her father's blows. She'd been mesmerised by the cows' lolling heads, their protruding tongues, their eyes rolled back in their heads. Thick, yellowish foam was still oozing from their mouths. More than half the herd had perished with frightening speed, and the three animals lying in the cart had died during the night. They'd had to quarantine their bodies as quickly as possible and bring them to the pit to stop them infecting the others. After throwing the animals in, her father had started howling into the pit. His eyes were red, exhausted, mad. She'd been afraid he was infected too.

When she reached the edge of the precipice, she released her rounded belly. The moment she'd felt the first symptoms, she'd shuddered with dread. There could be no doubt about it. She'd been here so many times before. But she couldn't resign herself to this new pregnancy. Another mouth to feed – it was unthinkable. She didn't know how it had managed to survive, given the huge quantities of sage she'd been drinking ever since. Not even the foul mixture of dark, bitter plants she'd got from Mariette had been enough to drive it out.

Leaning as far as possible over the pit, she stared down into the darkness that engulfed the mossy walls – a dark, voracious throat that devoured undesirables.

"Why is it still growing?" she asked, in a fearful voice. One thing was for certain. This place had the power to swallow up anything which you wanted to disappear. "Devil, take this thing inside me, take this life!" she said, more loudly this time. A gust of wind brushed past her face, ruffling the locks of hair that had escaped from her headscarf. The smell was not unpleasant this time. Was it possible that she had felt a warm breath? She moved a little further forward, craning her neck as far as it would go. Her foot dislodged a stone and, in a flash, she saw herself tumbling after it to the bottom of the pit. She thought she heard the sound of water swallowing up an object. Horrified, she flung herself backwards and landed heavily on her back.

Her whole body trembled as she lay there on the wet grass. She would be punished for having dared to ask a favour of the pit. The thought of this punishment was like a fist closing around her heart, and she knew she would not survive it. She scrambled to her knees and crossed herself again and again. Pressing her face to the ground, she felt the cold clay against her lips. "I beg you, Lord, I beg you..." Pierrette's prayer was filled with all the fervour she was capable of. Her plea was bitter, heavy with guilt and devotion, and it had the blackish hue of the plants she'd hoped would bring back her periods. But an intuition is quickly dismissed, forgotten like the memory of a breath of foul air. At that moment the life inside her stirred, the blood rushed into her face, and she felt a sense

of relief which relaxed her limbs and made her feel slightly drunk. The Lord had heard her, He was on her side. She felt the divine caress of the almond-green blades of grass against her cheek. She picked a handful of them and stuffed them into her mouth, barely chewing them, swallowing them whole.

She got to her feet again, her nose and forehead streaked with mud. Filled with desperate conviction, she leant forward and spat a large gobbet of green saliva into the Devil's mouth.

VIVIAN

Geneva, 2007

That day, I cling to a habit. Before making my last visit to my mother, I stop at the newsagent's and head straight for the motorbike section.

He's not on any of the covers. I take down a magazine and quickly flick through it. I look out for his curls, his smile, the ring in his ear. Nothing. I check a second magazine, then a third. Where's he hiding? My fingers grow taut, and I turn the pages more and more savagely.

"Can I help you?" asks a young shop assistant in a strident voice.

He must not like the way I treat the merchandise. He stares at me, and his eyes soon fall on my tight-fitting black dress, my matching high heels. His gaze sweeps shamelessly over my body, and the hint of a smile appears at the corner of his mouth, like a trail of saliva. I hold my hand up in front of his face as if to protect myself from his gaze. But the black glove blends in with the rest; it's no more than a matching accessory. From the man's slightly surprised expression, I realise that the glove lacks its usual repellent effect.

"I'm looking for Valentino Rossi," I say, my voice a little tight.

"Sorry?"

I repeat that I'm looking for photos of the racer. Somehow I feel obliged to justify myself. "It's for my mother," I say. And then, in an offhand way, like a ball that's slipped out of my hands and is rolling away

from me, I add: "She's dead. But even dead, I know she'd like it."

The shop assistant's eyes widen and he blushes like a teenager. A customer is approaching the till and he turns away from me so abruptly that he staggers and almost loses his balance.

I flick through one last magazine. I can't find him anywhere. Vale has gone into hiding in protest – he's in mourning too. This naïve thought makes me smile. I look at my watch, knowing it's time. And if there's one appointment I can't allow myself to be late for, it's this one.

There's nothing special about the day. It's not properly cold: the sun, slightly milky and clouded, casts thin rays that are not strong enough to chase away the damp. There's no rain forecast, but even if it did rain it would only be a few drops, nothing to cause any major inconvenience. It's definitely not going to be too windy, and there's absolutely no chance of snow. No – no exaggerated romanticism from the elements the day of my mother's funeral. This is just how I thought it would be: obliging, convenient, no trouble, just like her. It's not insipid, but rather a kind of gentleness, discreet and pleasant. A gentleness that keeps drama at arm's length.

In a moment they're going to close the coffin. It's hard to look at her white face, impassive, the cheeks too pink. No longer wearing that apologetic expression, pitying me. I imagine myself walking the four paces that separate me from her. I'd take one of the white lilies from the bouquet on top of the coffin and tuck it behind her ear. I'd decorate her hair with countless white flowers and then I'd take a rose – also white – and slip it into the corner of her mouth, between her teeth.

I don't step forward, don't make any sort of gesture. I'm the one who ordered this entirely white bouquet, choosing the various flowers solely for their uniformity of colour. They blur together into an indistinct smudge. A mound of snow, beautiful and cold.

I look down, and the heels of my shoes sink into the earth. There are little brown specks all over my tights, all the way up to the hem of my dress. After more than

ten days of rain, the ground is drenched. The mud nibbles shamelessly at suede shoes and the bottoms of carefully ironed trousers. When people lift their feet, there's a slightly embarrassing little sucking sound.

My stepfather is beside me, the sleeves of our coats touching. Neither of us has shed a single tear. Our cheeks are dry, our backs are straight. The self-restraint in my facial expression and my posture shows how well brought up I am, how disciplined. I'm doing what she would have expected of me. Remaining impassive, resisting the violence of the emotions that might lead you to eat a flower or throw yourself into the mud. Because isn't that what you're supposed to do on the day of your mother's funeral? Throw yourself head first into the mud and roll around in it, howling with despair?

I still don't move. I won't do anything unseemly. I can't even bring myself to cry. In this family we don't indulge in demonstrative suffering. They're closing the coffin at last. Ada is here, standing slightly apart from everyone else. She's found a patch of grass a little less wet than the rest. Everyone's wearing smart shoes which have been ruined by the mud, except Ada, whose trainers are astonishingly clean. She's wearing a man's suit that's slightly too big for her, and she's got a tie wrapped around her neck as if it were a scarf. Even kitted out like this she's got style, incredible class.

Each of her four dogs has a black silk ribbon around its neck, with a rose tucked into it. Lying at their mistress's feet the dogs are strangely calm, solemn. Except for Coly, who's wagging his tail and pulling on the lead.

I signal to Ada that she can let go of him. He comes bounding towards me and I bend down to stroke his head. He's sporting new colours, turquoise for his paws and dark orange for his body. The colour of his head is less easily identifiable, a fantastic greenish pink. I catch people's horrified glances at the dog, at his lurid dyed fur, so inappropriate for the occasion. And then I spot the inscription in black on his back: R. I. P.

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