PRAISE FOR
THE EXHIBITION OF PERSEPHONE Q

A *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW* EDITORS' CHOICE
AND *WALL STREET JOURNAL* AND *VOGUE* MOST
ANTICIPATED BOOK OF 2020

"Stevens's dreamlike first novel is a delicate and drifting exploration of Percy's relationships with friends, lovers, neighbors, and the many not-quite strangers who form the fabric of city life. As Percy wanders, New York itself is reflected through the prism of her many identities . . . in luminous prose that captures the essence of a place in the middle of its most defining transformation. A stellar debut."

Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

"Stevens's writing proves that both time and technology are best understood in retrospect, sequences made logical long after each moment has passed. The novel has a romantic slowness, unfurling gracefully, little by little, to show how quickly the present gives way to the future, or concedes to the past."

Haley Mlotek, *New York Times*

"I was magnetized not just by a great story, but one that felt uncannily timely . . . Percy is forced to confront questions of identity and selfhood that feel both poignant and meta during a time of crisis."

Michael Baron, *Literary Hub*

"Jessi Stevens is the Muriel Spark of 21st century New York."

Joshua Cohen

"Stevens has combined the surreal with the actual to create a book painfully relevant to this new age of female testimony . . . A fantastic debut."

Noelle McManus, *Women's Review of Books*

PRAISE FOR *THE VISITORS*

"A mordantly funny requiem for the early 21st century."

Publishers Weekly

"It's as if *The Big Short* were set in the dreamworld of Rachel Ingalls's *Mrs. Caliban*."

Audrey Wollen, *New York Times*

"You might not think Occupy Wall Street and prophetic garden gnomes would fit together within the confines of the same narrative. Now, here's Jessi Jezewska Stevens's new novel *The Visitors* to make the case that, yes, the two can mesh together seamlessly. It's the kind of ambitious, madcap narrative combination that's all too rare nowadays."

Tobias Carroll, *Tor.com*

"The book accepts, and even delights in, the strenuous absurdity of its characters' efforts to index the relationship between the virtual and the material, or to locate the source of reality in imagination."

Daisy Hildyard, *The Guardian*

"Here is a refreshing novel by an author willing to take chances . . . *The Visitors* stands as a pensive and important work . . . rare and exciting company."

Necessary Fiction

"It's both a bold, imaginative play on very recent history and a trenchant prophecy of the terrifying times we're collectively staring down the barrel of."

Anna Cafolla, *The Face* Summer Reads 2022

"Jessi Jezewska Stevens's frighteningly brilliant new novel *The Visitors* is both a bold reimagining of the recent past and an all-too-likely prophecy of what's to come. Caustic, intimate, and consistently surprising, this novel cements Stevens's place as one of the great chroniclers of our cruel and terrifying times."

Andrew Martin

Ghost Pains

Jessi Jezewska Stevens

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THE PARTY

The party was a failure. I can't even tell you what a failure it was. There are no words. Only a great pain in my chest when I wake up. On the veranda. It's better when I sit in the chair. Oh, but then I can see around. The gauzy curtains, pushed by the breeze! The glasses on the floor. Little ghosts! Last night the American walked around sniffing at them like a dog. He said, Who would leave all these dead soldiers behind? I couldn't say. I am American as well, but lately I haven't been feeling quite myself.

It's not the sort of thing I do, hosting parties. The last time I hosted anyone but Ann? It must have been months and months ago. It would have been Ann and her sister and her sister's friend. We ate schnitzel with *Kartoffelsalat* and plenty of pilsner, of course. The sister's friend was confused over the nature of his relationship to Ann. There was an ambiguity there. It ended in disaster. There's always an ambiguity with Ann—he should have known. I lost a perfectly nice vase that night and afterward I said to myself, Never again will I host even the smallest of parties. So who knows where it came from. The sudden urge. To invite everyone I know for drinks.

What a mistake! I was out here on the veranda, by the basil plant, as I often am when visited by caprice. I was by the basil plant having a smoke and thinking of the people in my life, specifically of Sylvia and the way she lights up a room in her light-blue dress. The bluebell sleeves that drape petal-thin over the styles of her

arms. The way she holds a glass. With Sylvia it's always elegance. When she stands in a Berlin apartment, by a window, it is as if the world has traveled back in time. The haute bourgeoisie—they would feel right at home at her wonderful soirees, where the light is always kind of blue and the rooms reverberate with rumors. The low murmurs of a great many people drift fashionably through the floor. They are predicting the future, maybe. The future is happening now. The future is happening and here you are, right in the middle of it: a bit of ash falls to the carpet and then a great work of art has been achieved. Or will soon be achieved. No matter that tomorrow, on the street, we are hardly artists at all. In T-shirts and jeans. Not up to much good. Freelancers. We work at flat-screen monitors, designing advertisements at hotel desks, because it doesn't belong to you, does it, the desk isn't yours. The following week it could belong to someone else. "Dead soldiers." "Hotel desks." As phrases they conjure a kind of elegance, though not as well as Sylvia can whenever she hosts one of her parties. And it's quite possible it was Sylvia I was channeling out there by the basil plant last Friday when I resolved to throw a party myself. To feel, for a moment, as if my name were Sylvia. Or maybe Carlotta would suit. I tapped ash into the basil plant. If my name were Carlotta, I wouldn't have done that, you see. I would have had a proper ashtray I picked up at some street market in southern Turkey, through whose haphazard aisles I had ventured on my own (so I'd tell my friends over cocktails) without even a scarf on my head. Because if my name were Carlotta, I wouldn't have to follow other people's rules. And my ashtray would be most divine. The basil plant was wilting. I caressed its leaves. I stamped my black ash into its soil. Then I set to work on my party, and I blame Carlotta for that. She lies. She ought to have dissuaded me. Sweetheart, she should have said, we're not the same.

Email! The way all modern tragedies begin. I copied the list of recipients Sylvia had used for her last party. Then I made a butter sandwich. *Liebe Freunde*, I wrote, You are invited to the following celebration tomorrow at 8 p.m. I reviewed the list of invitees. I made a second sandwich. "Siri," I said. "What's the email for the *Staatsbibliothek* man?" She didn't know. What's the email for the American? For the Swede? I was really quite swept up in the Swede, though he broke my heart whenever we met by speaking of Sylvia the whole time. And of course I added Ann. She was first on the list. Oh, Ann. Even Sylvia dims a little by comparison. That's Ann's special talent—she dulls all the luster and leaves you groping about in the dark. We can sit for hours on the veranda, not talking, Ann and I. Chewing basil leaves. She says to me, You know Yugoslavia isn't a country anymore? Quite right. She keeps it folded up inside her like a flag.

I went to make myself a third butter sandwich, but halfway through I lost my appetite. And then I was out of bread.

Really there's no need for parties anymore. There never was. I can go for weeks without speaking to anyone but Ann and the cashiers at the BioMarkt. And occasionally my phone. What a stupid woman, Siri must think, who has to ask for directions all the time. I followed her across Maybachufer Straße to buy a bag of almonds. One can always trust an almond, especially the Jordan type. The BioMarkt is another story altogether—I never know what to buy. I stood in the aisles and stared at the labels for *Maultaschen*. And *Apfelsaft*. For egg noodles. What does a party need? But you can only be so ridiculous in public, asking your phone for answers all the time. I bought bread and chocolate. I bought a large bag of grapes. Twelve apples. And popcorn. I hadn't seen it in a while. The kind you make in a pot. Not long ago I'd attended a Futurist dinner party some other girls threw featuring deconstructed spaghetti that

spilled over tables and onto brown paper on the floor: here a pile of languid noodles; here a red lake of sauce. Well-dressed people crouched for fistfuls, hand to mouth. People have only just stopped talking about that party. It's still on everyone's mind. I imagined my bedroom filling with bowls and bowls of popcorn. Like snow. Like scatter art. I bought vodka and gin and plenty of apple juice, plus a liter of Club-Mate. Then it was back to my apartment, where I lit a cigarette and opened my email. No one had responded to my invitation but Ann.

Berlin has a habit of taking your life and smashing it back in your face. The Swede says that's how it is in New York, but I completely disagree. The way I remember it, New York does its face-rubbing out in the open, by the light of day, while Berlin strikes at the loneliest hour, in the dead of night, when the emotion is most dense, when the dogs come out to fight their arbitrary fights. The evening fell like a sigh. I watched it from my veranda. The light fading, the voices echoing the way they do when people start disappearing into bars. I turned around. I looked into my rooms. The green chair. The chandelier left over from some other life. The French doors, open, framed the groceries on the table. The popcorn. The grapes. The apples waiting to be sliced. The melancholy of a lemon—! I have always harbored an envy for Dutch still life. The apples went into a bowl. The grapes. The bottle of Club-Mate shone like a polluted moon. I laid out forks and plates and knives and there it was, a whole banquet set for one. Or many—for all my ghosts and me. I popped a whole pot of popcorn and ate it all. I could hear the people stumbling through the courtyard out the window. The scavengers are out there, every night. On the ground floor is a halfway house and people wander in and out. *Ich wohne hier!* they say, insistent yet uncertain. I could hardly blame them—I felt very half-hearted myself. I didn't feel like a Carlotta

at all. To put it another way, I was reverting to myself. A woman alone with too much fruit. I'd have to invite Ann to help finish it all. Maybe tomorrow. We'd sit here eating grapes until all the grapes were gone. I opened the invitation I had sent. A change of plans. Due to an unforeseen scheduling conflict . . . *Send.* Then I lit a cigarette to burn away the shame. Every email makes me ashamed, it is inherent to the process. Send an email. Feel shame. Light a cigarette, like striking a match after taking a shit. "Dear Siri," I said. "Where's Ann?" "I'm sorry, I can't help with that right now." I heaved my heaviest sigh. My impossible life is always more impossible when Siri will not help.

By the way, I should explain about the dog. The day I decided to host the party I hadn't heard from it in weeks. Of course at first I didn't know it was a dog. My very first night in Berlin, I lay in my bed listening to the dubstep, the garage rock, the sound of people shuffling around the courtyard in the dark. The windows were open and the breeze was cool and fresh. I closed my eyes. I was very tired. I might have even slept. Then the night was torn by the most terrible scream. I sat up. The scream belonged to a very throaty woman or else a very young man. It rang and rang and then abruptly silenced. I waited. I expected a crash, the commotion of other people coming to the rescue. But there was no sound, everything was still. No one was helping at all. I stepped onto the veranda and looked up and down the boulevards, where the sidewalks were very empty. I went back to bed. Then the scream tore loose again.

Months like this! Imagine. I consulted Ann. What should I do? She suggested calling social services, but where would I tell them to go? I had no idea where the scream was coming from. It occurred to me it might even be of pleasure, not of pain. It was possible.