

Book launch. Chinese food in white take-out boxes with chopsticks is circulating: good marks for reverse chic, but poor on the green scale. Outside, the art critic in her wide-brimmed hat works furiously on her cell phone; she is in a panic to find her husband.

Inside, and unaware that he is missing, the ever-cheerful husband zips around, his belly nicely balanced by a large, round, bald head. He carries an umbrella although it isn't raining. He emanates man-about-town. But he has a paper napkin stuck to the bottom of his shoe.

“When are you having another novel out?” he says. “Is it about Toronto?”

I tell him it is and he's in it.

But to an old friend, a writer I haven't seen for ages, I admit I have fallen into a research hole.

“How lovely,” he says, “what is it?”

I tell him Edo and the woodcut print artists, and he says he doesn't like that period because it is decadent.

And we're not?

I drop into a conversation where a journalist is trying to pinpoint the age at which a woman can be seen as 'older', and still be hot. He says 40. He's stretching it to make the females in the group feel better. But not far enough.

(In Edo you were old at 27 and no one thought you were attractive after that. You probably weren't, unless you were exceptionally lucky and had your teeth, and were not pock-marked or starving to death or slowly dying of overwork. So we have that to be grateful for.)

The architect du jour strolls by; strangers reach out a hand to him saying congratulations. It's wonderful. It's gorgeous. There goes Man About Town with the napkin still stuck to the sole of his shoe. The talk switches to editors. How they insist you cut one thousand words out of a three thousand-word profile. Then they go on mat leave.

Someone else asks me about the novel. I am short-tempered, so I just say, “R.H.”

Stands for Research Hole.

Also stands for Rabbit Hole. Remember, Alice got to Wonderland by falling head over heels into a long tunnel that went “down, down, down”, passing shelves stocked with marmalade jars and other enticements and only hit bottom at the glass table with the gold key and the little bottle that said “Drink Me”.

I have been in my R.H. for a while. I have searched the pantry shelves. I have covered the territory: I know what is filed away, and where it is. If anything is known that I don't know, I know who knows it. And it has been a lot of fun but I am strangely unsatisfied.

The truth is that my heroine has become lost to history. She made an appearance but now she's gone. I have consulted the Historical Record, and it has thrown up its hands. She has disappeared.

The feminists have an explanation for these lapses. They tell us it isn't women themselves who vanish. It is gender-blinkered historians who “subvert, silence or interpret” women's actions to the point where they disappear from their own narratives. If the Historical Record can't fit a woman into an expectation, it goes dumb on her.

So. She fell off the record; she fell off the radar. My scholar-guide thinks it may even be because she fell off the wagon. “Or did something else self-destructive,” he says, gently.

I don't believe it. She wouldn't. She was in her prime. She had finally come into her own. She was free of family duties.

“I'm afraid that for the end of her life your story will have to be mostly speculation,” my scholar-guide adds.

Hallelujah. Does he realize he has just given me the gold key? Now for the little bottle that says “Drink Me”.

I am set free -- guiltlessly, legitimately, free.

This is called making up for what time lost.