

# Cardinal Divide



Essential Prose Series 172



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada<sup>11</sup>

Guernica Editions Inc. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The Ontario Arts Council is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

# Cardinal Divide



*Nina Newington*



**GUERNICA  
EDITIONS**

TORONTO • CHICAGO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)  
2020

Copyright © 2020, Nina Newington and Guernica Editions Inc.  
All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication,  
reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,  
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise stored  
in a retrieval system, without the prior consent  
of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

Michael Mirolla, general editor  
Lindsay Brown, editor  
David Moratto, cover and interior design  
Guernica Editions Inc.  
287 Templemead Drive, Hamilton, (ON), Canada L8W 2W4  
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.  
[www.guernicaeditions.com](http://www.guernicaeditions.com)

Distributors:  
Independent Publishers Group (IPG)  
600 North Pulaski Road, Chicago IL 60624  
University of Toronto Press Distribution,  
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8  
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills  
High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.  
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2019949202  
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication  
Title: Cardinal divide / Nina Newington.  
Names: Newington, Nina, 1958- author.  
Series: Essential prose series ; 172.  
Description: Series statement: Essential prose series ; 172  
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190173793 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190173963 |  
ISBN 9781771834421 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771834438 (EPUB) |  
ISBN 9781771834445 (Kindle)  
Classification: LCC PS8627.E8655 C37 2020 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

*for Debbie Lafferty*  
*13th April, 1958 – 7th August, 2017*





# WEEK ONE







# Chapter One



INSIDE IT'S HOT, dark. The smell of spruce needles in rain washes through my chest, something browner underneath. Pelts line log walls, in one corner a bed made of stout branches. Something hisses and sputters. The stove squats in the middle of the cabin like a plump cook in a tiny kitchen. The kettle is dented and blackened. Beyond it, an orange glow. Someone drawing on a pipe. Stringy silver hair.

“Moira McFie, meet my daughter, Meg Coopworth.”

“Come here.”

I look at Dad. He nods.

Her nose is long and sharp, her cheeks wrinkled and round. Eyes the grey-green of lichen flit over me. My breasts poke out from my chest like mountains.

“Pleased to meet ye,” she says at last.

I duck my head, mumble, “Pleased to meet you too,” the way Mum taught me.

“Have a seat on the bed, why don't ye?” Her voice is cracked but it swoops and banks like a swallow. I step back from her, from the stove that pulses with heat, sit down on the bed and sink my fingers into fur. The fur is warm as if the animal is still alive.

“Well, Ben.” She was a famous trapper once, Dad said. Went on trapping long after most people gave up. I lie back. My eyes close. I'm slipping down into a nest lined with rabbit fur.

Something nudges my shoulder. Bounding away between dark trees,  
I blink, open my eyes. It's still dark.

"Did ye dream?"

The voice slips in among the deer. I nod.

"And what were ye?"

"A deer, running."

"Ah, that's fine."

I struggle upright. She hands me a mug of tea and an oatcake.  
"To tide ye over for the journey home."

Outside the hides are gone. "While you were sleeping," Dad says.

Rancid sheep fat still smears the air.

A few yards down the trail I look back. The cabin has disappeared.

The phone rings. I jolt upright, snatch the receiver from the cradle.

"Dreamcatcher Lodge, Meg speaking."

"Can I speak to Tanya please?" A woman's voice, urgent.

"She's not on tonight. She'll be here tomorrow. Can I help?"

"I'll call tomorrow." She hangs up.

I reach for the log book.

*19th October*

*16:00–24:00 Jay, Meg*

*16:00 45 clients, 3 probation*

*16:15 Jay starting room check, Meg on desk*

I fill in a few more room checks. End with:

*21:55 Jay in ceremony, Meg on desk*

I swivel the chair to face the dome, eyes climbing courses of rough  
stone. Twelve feet up, the stone ends, just shy of a pyramidal skylight.  
I catch the cadence of the Lord's prayer, close my eyes, breathe in.

*Hai, hai. Amen.* The blanket at the door is pulled aside and the  
scent of sage and sweetgrass grows stronger. Clients file out, blink-  
ing, reclaim shoes, eyeglasses, jewellery.

"Good sleep."

“Good sleep.”

They hug each other. Jay unwinds the purple and yellow sarong from around her black jeans, folds it up and puts it back in the basket before clicking open the gate.

Deborah’s first in line for her meds. She knows the ropes, Deborah not Debbie, old white woman with her PhD and her cirrhosis, back for a fifth try.

There’s a longer line for the phone. I set the egg timer for the first call.

“Smooth,” I say, an hour later, bending over the log.

“Good thing,” Jay says. “Two of us on, forty-five clients. Anything went sideways? Frig.” She shakes her head. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

Before Tanya came back to work here, it seemed like we’d be friends, Jay and I. We’d worked a few slow shifts together, talked about our lives while the clients played softball in the late summer evenings.

She rounds the dome, a thick china mug in each hand. Five foot six with short dark hair, greying at the sides, she always wears black and her hair always looks as if it was cut yesterday.

I follow her back into the office. She sits down by the computer, turning the chair to face me. Her skin is sallow, features rubbery but her eyes are sharp as her hair.

“How’s it going?” she asks.

“Not bad.”

“You look tired. New guy?”

“I wish. Well, no, I don’t.”

Jay waits.

There’s a lump in my throat. My eyes prickle.

“I don’t know what I’ll do when my mother goes, whacked as she is,” Jay says.

Fuck. I swallow. “It’s been nine months. But sometimes, something.” I shrug, take a drink of coffee. Jay’s watching, interested. She knows my story. The outline anyway. And I need to say it to someone. “I’m going to find them.”

“Have you ever tried?”

I shake my head. “Mum would have been so hurt. Besides, what was I going to find out that I wanted to know?”

Jay waits.

“But maybe it’s why I can’t seem to make a relationship that lasts, because I don’t ...” My throat swells again. “Anyway, how’s school?”

She studies me for a moment then says, “Great. I love it.”

“What are you taking this semester?”

“History. More psychology. I’m doing my senior thesis on you-guessed-it ...”

“Jung?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do when I graduate.”

“Get a Master’s?”

She grins. “I promised Annie I’d pay off some of my loans first. Have to get a real job. Maybe I’ll have this place out of my system by then. Shall we start on the overview?” She turns to face the computer.

I was the one who changed the subject. “What we were talking about earlier. My father has to know more.”

“He’s pretty old, right?”

“Really old. So I’d better ...” I shrug.

“You never asked him before?”

“He said he’d told me everything he knew.”

“Why would he tell you more now?”

“With Mum gone. She ... for her there was only one story. I was a gift from God. It was God’s plan I came when I did. End of story. You know.”

Jay nods.

“Mum told all the stories. How Dad came to Canada. How they met. How they bought the ranch. How I showed up. The same stories, over and over. With her gone it’s like a river dried up. You see the shape of the riverbed, the banks.” Jay sips her coffee. “I don’t know where I’m going with that. Anyway, I guess it’s somewhere to start. Asking Dad. Because it doesn’t really add up, that they were allowed to adopt me without a birth certificate. Without anything.”

“Depends. You were what, ten, eleven? Late sixties? They were snatching kids right off the reserves, putting them up for adoption.”

“People I used to work with all assumed I was Ukrainian.”

“Everyone here thinks you’re Cree.”

## Chapter Two



I PUT THE kettle on, scatter flour on the counter, turn out the dough I mixed when I got in from work. My hands push and fold, finding the rhythm, the rhythm of kittens kneading the teat. The dough becomes flesh, elastic and smooth. Cover it with the palm of your hand, you can feel it press against you. I brought a loaf in for Jay, not long after I started baking. Put it on the desk. She didn't pick it up, just said, 'It's a lot of work, eh?' Heather came in, sniffed the air. 'My mother always baked,' she said. 'Far as I'm concerned that's why God created supermarkets.'

First and last loaf I took to work. I bring a couple when I visit Dad but that's not enough to keep up with the supply.

I clean and dry the bowl, oil it, slip the dough back in and cover it. Make coffee, eat my toast and boiled egg then go for my walk. When I get back the dough is nudging up the cloth like the bellies of young girls at work, pregnant bellies rounding skimpy T-shirts. I rest my palm on the dough and it shrinks back into itself, but when I slide it out onto the counter, flatten it, fold in the sides, roll it back and forth, it swells again. *That's who my mother was.* Some girl in too much trouble too soon. I wait for a moment, the way I do when a thought like that surprises me. In case a memory hovers, shy by the half-open door. It never does, or if it does I can't see it. Or won't. I've had more than enough therapy to admit that possibility.

When the loaf has been in for twenty minutes I open the oven door, quickly swivel the pan, shut the door again. The smell escapes anyway and I breathe it in, the smell which is the thing itself, particles floating in the air. Actual physical remains. After Mum died I'd catch the smell of her. Back at the ranch it made sense that fragments of her body had come to rest in drawers, corners. Sixty-three years she lived there so of course she was in the air, stirred by our feet wherever we walked, a sweet sour smell. However tightly permed and scrubbed her outside was, there was a brothy ferment to her body, a gravy richness in the smell of her. It was the part of her that danced, I used to think, a wildness in her feet while her head stayed completely still which was the style and would have won her high marks if she had ever competed which she did not because she was a God-fearing and temperate woman, a God-fearing woman with wild feet who danced in the living room while Dad played the fiddle. Standing in my kitchen in the smell of baking bread I hear the clack of her heels on the hardwood floor. The woman who was my mother and who wasn't had a rigid mind and wild feet. After she died I smelled her here in this house which she never visited because I lived here with one man or another. Out of wedlock.

'Wed-lock. The word says it all,' I said to her once. Dad looked away but I caught a flash of laughter in his eyes. Sunlight glancing off water. Mum could stare you down. Reptile eyes. Brown with a slow blink. So there's no way her smell should have been in the air here but it was. In any corner you might inhale a particle of her until, one night, coming in from work, I knew something was different. In the morning I realized she was gone. Perhaps she hadn't been in this house but in the crannies of my own body and I used her up.

I turn off the engine, slouch low in the seat. October sun slants across fields bleached the colour of oats. The poplars by the slough cast indigo shadows. Ravens call from the alders. The low building doesn't interrupt the sky. Some evenings deer graze, a coyote lopes alone across the field. I reach over, sift through the mail. There's a white envelope, squarer than a bill. Spiky, slanting hand; fountain pen, blue ink. Dad's writing, but he knows I'll be out to visit next week.

*Dear Meg,*

*At the risk of sounding melodramatic there is something we need to talk about before I die. Something that perhaps you should have been told long ago. Having reached this decision I find myself impatient to see you. Would you come as soon as you can?*

*Love,*

*Dad*

*P.S. No health problems. I'm as improbably hale as ever.*

His face wavers in front of me, creased and angular, eyes the chalky turquoise of rock milk. Rock flour. I always think it's rock milk but it's rock flour, the fine particles that turn the mountain streams and lakes turquoise. Tears sting my eyes, seeing his face. His face thirty years ago, hair still blonde and thick. Even now he has a good head of hair. The Hetzl brothers tease him about it. Fifty years his junior and bald as eggs. *He's going to tell me.*

"Hey Meg," James's face appears around the office door.

"Hey to you, James, let me take my coat off, okay?"

"Sure," he says but his head floats in the doorway, a round brown moon, shadow moon to the crescent of his smile.

"Yes?" I step back out to the front desk. He's wearing a necklace of teeth strung so they all point the same way, little ivory tusks against his black T-shirt. "Can I skip the meeting tonight so I can work on my life line?" He smiles his loopyest smile. "I really, really need to get it done."

"Yeah, right, James, you're the hard-working man."

He turns. "Hey, Jay. My favourite staff."

Jay hoists an eyebrow.

He raises both hands. "I know, I know. Manipulation."

"Easy as breathing, eh James? Hey Meg." Jay's leather jacket is slung over one shoulder though it's not exactly warm outside. I've never seen her wear a toque. "Who else is on?"

"Haven't looked yet. Tell you what, James, work on your life line now, before the meeting. See how far you get."

“Aw ...” He catches Jay’s eye and grins. “Okay.” He saunters off.  
“I need that look.”

“This one?” Jay gives it to me: level hazel gaze, tiny quirk of amusement in one eyebrow.

“James would argue with me until I got mad. You just look at him.”

“Me and Tanya, we have the eye. You’re getting it. You’ve only worked here ... how long have you worked here?”

“Since the beginning of July.”

“See, I’m coming up on three years.”

“Excuse me.”

Tanya’s voice startles me. I step sideways, almost bumping into Jay. “Sorry.”

“Like the hair,” Jay says.

It’s blue today.

“Did anyone go to the counsellor’s office yet?”

“Not yet,” Jay says.

“I’ll go then.”

“I’ll count cash,” I say.

“So is anyone else on?” Jay asks.

I squint at the chart. The lay-out’s been changed again. “Heather.”

“It’s not like her to be late.”

“She’s coming in at five.”

In the back corner of the office a low door opens into an oversized closet. Inside are a coat rack, a small table and chair, trays of bulging Ziploc bags, and a safe, door ajar. I shove aside heaps of contraband to pull out the cash box.

“Done?” Jay’s framed in the doorway. “You okay?”

“I got a letter from my father. He wants to see me. He has something to tell me.”

Jay’s eyebrows arc. “About where you came from?”

“What else could it be?”

“A little synchronicity, eh?”

“Dreamcatcher Lodge, Meg speaking. How can I help you?”

“My son, he’s in trouble ...”



My sister, niece, uncle, mother, grandchild. “Let me put you through to Admissions. If you don’t get Janet, leave her a message.”

I hang up and reach for the log book. The phone rings again.

“Is Tanya there?” asks a clear young voice.

“She is but she’s not at the desk. Shall I ask her to call you?”

“Yes, please.”

“Is it urgent?”

“It’s kind of an emergency.”

“Shall I page her?”

“No. Thank you.”

The door alarm beeps. Heather clicks across the floor.

“Hello Meg.” She unwinds a black and silver scarf, shrugs off her mauve down-filled coat. In her late fifties, retired after thirty years in government service, an administrative secretary of no doubt ferocious efficiency, she looks like a tight-arsed white spinster, silver hair, sharp face, trim body, only if you look twice there’s a sexiness to her, the red lipstick on her small mouth, big breasts she doesn’t hide.

Tanya rounds the north side of the dome. Seeing us, she holds up the cap she’s carrying, a bill cap with the familiar jagged leaf on the front. “Warren, Theresa’s brother.”

“Buddy with the tattoo on his face?” Heather asks.

“The one and only. Says he was wearing this when he checked in this afternoon,” Tanya shakes her head. “Hate to think what else they let them bring in.”

“I like the hair,” Heather says.

Cobalt blue looks good with Tanya’s copper skin. Her face is round, cheeks full and long so there’s a groove to either side of her hooked nose. Her mouth is wide and when it turns down it makes a perfect arch. The day she came back to work here she plonked her mug down on top of the office fridge. **THE REAL BOSS**, it said. She scowled for most of the shift. I kept overhearing muttered conversations between her and Jay, how the place had gone to hell, clients never used to ... But she’s smiling now. “The girls like it too.”

“That reminds me. Your daughter wants you to call her. She says ‘It’s kind of an emergency.’”

“They’re arguing over what channel to watch.”

“Somebody else called for you yesterday, a woman. She didn’t leave her name.”

“Probably Viola. Remember her?” She looks at Heather. “Went back out. Finally got her kids back and now she’s high again.”

She goes into the office, picks up the phone.

“Hey Meg, where’s Jay? Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.” James leans over the gate to peer into the office. I can’t see his face, just the back of his head and, beyond, Tanya, eyebrows raised. “Oops.” He pulls his head back smartly.

Alphas, Dad would call them, Jay and Tanya. At best I’m in the middle of the pack, as ready to grovel as growl.

James tugs a stick-thin, blank-faced girl forward. “Hey Meg, hey Heather, meet my cousin Shannon. My *kokum* is sisters with her aunt’s mother.”

“Just like where I come from.” Heather’s accent is flat as a rock skipping over water compared to James’s lilt. “All anyone wants to know: Who’s your father?”

“*Whoo’s yeh faathub?*” James repeats. “Where you from, Heather?”

“Nova Scotia.” Her voice tips up at the end: *Sco-sha?*

“Ah. Well, like I was saying, this is my cousin.”

“You again, James?” Jay lets herself in.

“Meet my cousin Shannon. My *kokum* and her aunt ...”

“James, you’re related to every single person in western Canada.”

“Not to you.”

“How do you know?”

“Look at you.”

“Because I look white? Seeing isn’t believing, James. Seeing isn’t believing.”

“You Native then, Jay?” He’s grinning at her.

“So do your life line, James.” She nods at the alcove off the common area. “Nice to meet you, Shannon.”

Shannon smiles a flat, plastic little smile. Her hair pulled up in a tight pony tail, she looks exactly like three or four of the other girls.

“Tanya back from the counsellors?”

“In the office.”

We shuttle bedding for new clients, talk them through the pattern of the days. Some Wednesdays are a zoo but only six came in this week. Four women, two guys. Warren, short and muscled with a scorpion tattooed up his neck, the tail arching onto his cheek, and a tall, stick thin man in his forties who has yet to say a word.

“Suppertime, it’s suppertime.” Jay’s voice booms from the speakers.

We meet back in the office, clearing space on the desk for our trays. “So,” Tanya says, “they’re not going to replace Georgie.”

“Why not?”

“Budget won’t cover an after-care worker.”

“What are the clients supposed to do? Camp? There’s no frigging housing.”

“They had enough to hire Cathy to supervise us.”

“This place makes me tired,” Heather says.

“Heard it before. Heard it all before but here we still are.” Jay forks up mashed potato shiny with gravy.

I push around the parade of carrots and peas, complaint, mockery, resignation lapping like waves.

“Meg?”

I look up.

“Nice job.” Jay’s grinning at me.

I look down. I’ve piled the peas and carrots on top of the slices of brown beef, buttressed the wall with mashed potatoes. If I’d taken gravy I could have made a moat. “If they’d just give me a sandbox,” I say. My voice is supposed to be light. Now Heather is looking at me too.

“Heather,” I say, “would you be willing to trade shifts with me? Take mine tomorrow?”

“Certainly, if I can.” She gets up to look at the schedule. “How about Friday? No, we’re both on then. Can you take my Monday? That would work out well for me actually.”

“Fine. Thanks.”

“I’ll write it in, shall I?”

“Against the rules these days,” Tanya says.

“That’s right,” Heather says, changing the names anyway.

“Excuse me?” A woman’s head pokes around the door. “Can I make a phone call?”

“Not until six, hon,” Jay says. “But if I were you I’d stick around, make sure you’re first in line.”

“Okay.”

When her head disappears Jay mouths, “Who’s that?”

Heather and I shake our heads.

“Wendy,” Tanya says. “Which reminds me, two of the new girls, Janice and Mona, they had some kind of beef in prison. We’re supposed to watch them.”

Jay puts down her fork. “They let them come at the same time?”

# WEEK TWO



## Chapter Twelve



“WHERE ARE WE going?” the guy sitting across the aisle from me asks. Don. He operates some kind of heavy equipment in the oil-patch. “You’re allowed to tell us now.”

“The AA meeting in Beverly. ”

“Beverly.” Don shakes his head. “You guys pick these neighbourhoods on purpose?” Short back and sides, brown hair, little moustache. Everything annoys Don. Particularly all the no good welfare bum clients. He doesn’t quite say drunken Indians but he’s thinking it. Only he has to put up with it all because he’s going to lose his job if he doesn’t stay the full seven weeks.

*Can’t Get No Satisfaction* blasts out of the speakers. I’m sitting next to Theresa. Head half-turned away from me, she’s gazing out of the window. Dark fields slide past, then squat commercial buildings with big metal doors, then houses, rank on rank, too big for their lots, cars gleaming in the driveways. The bus rocks with laughter and catcalls. The ear-battering beat of the music is the wild throb of survival. I close my eyes, just want to swim in the crazy soup.

The bus swings left. “Ooh, trigger,” someone yells. We’re on 118<sup>th</sup> Avenue already, passing the East Glen Motel.

“Been there,” one of the men shouts.

“Shut up.” A woman’s voice.

At the light by the library a sign reads, *This neighbourhood does not tolerate prostitution.*

Theresa's eyes are closed. She's a beautiful woman. Straight nose, perfect sculpted lips, hair black as a raven's wing. A beautiful Cree woman. No-one would ever take her for Ukrainian. She used to run an escort service. Jay told me. 'Hired a couple of her brothers as muscle. Bunch of girls working for her. Quite a businesswoman, our Theresa. Only then she started using crystal, right? Ended up on her back like the rest of 'em, brothers pimping.'

The bus jolts to a stop. Her head jerks. "Are we there?"

"Not yet."

She turns to look at me. "You've been sober a long time, eh?"

"A day at a time. You're leaving on Wednesday, aren't you?"

She nods.

"How does it feel?"

"Scary."

"Because of last time?"

"I was so sure. Too sure."

We all thought she'd be the one. One and a half out of fifty. Those are the stats. She went tree planting in BC. Good money, no meetings. The day the helicopter brought them out on break, she picked up.

Everyone piles out and lights up. Doug and I stand on the street edge of the cluster. He seems okay with just watching, a little smile on his lips. They're a soft, beige pink, his lips, the edges indistinct.

"I used to come to this meeting," I say at last.

"You live around here?"

"Few blocks away. Nicer neighbourhood."

His lips twitch.

"Not hard, eh?"

"You like living in the city?"

"No."

"Hey Doug. See that?" It's James, pointing his lips at a white SUV parked a few yards up the road.

"Uh huh."

"Know what that is?"

"Mm. No."

"You?" James looks at me.

I shake my head.

“Undercover cop.”

“How do you know?” I ask.

“Antennas.”

I look again. The car’s bristling with them.

“Learn something every day,” Doug says. “Thanks, James.”

He nods, pleased, and saunters off.

“All who care to, join me in the Serenity Prayer.” The guys doff their caps. Shining black hair, shaggy blonde, orange. Mona. The regulars are all seamed faces, grey hair or no hair. Beverly is old guard white working-class even though the main drag has a Caribbean restaurant now. My eyes travel round the circle again.

*Amen. Hai, hai.*

A barrel-chested man, bald pate ringed with sparse silver hairs, stands up. “My name is Vince and I’m an alcoholic. Welcome, everyone from Dreamcatcher Lodge and anyone else who’s new to this meeting.” He leans forward, scans the back rows. “I want to tell you, I envy you. You’ve got a shot at getting sober now. Don’t have to wait to be an old fart like me.”

People always say this at meetings. People said it when I got sober and it annoyed me then. James is leaning back, jiggling his knee. A couple of the girls are whispering.

The old men are old men. Stubbled faces, pot bellies. Dad didn’t have to shave. I never thought about it. Dad squatting on his heels, gold hairs on his arms. Her arms. Something curled in the palm of his hand. ‘A caterpillar. One day it will be a moth or a butterfly.’

“I was fighting four cops at once. When I was drunk I was ten foot tall and tough as a grizzly. Next thing you know, I’m on my face in the dirt and after that I’m in a cell, no belt, no bootlaces, puking in the jake.”

Is it easier for a woman to pass as a man? The only woman here besides the Dreamcatcher crew is Amelia, heavy-breasted, pear-shaped. She does have a moustache.

“You know what I did, the minute I got out of jail? Went and bought me a bottle, get the taste out of my mouth.”

The regulars have heard it a hundred times but they’re laughing too.



I sit down next to Theresa again. She glances at me, half-smiles then goes back to the window. The driver cranks up the radio. We pass the library and the Lucky 97, lights green all the way. My street now. Couple blocks back from the mansions along Ada Boulevard. Four blocks south of crack and cops and tricking. Like layers of clothes sliding over one another, the worlds, all separate, all happening all at once. In my old job I fit right into the Highlands. Slipping off my pumps at the end of the day.

Voices erupt in the back. I half stand, twist around. Doug's got it. Laughter now. Theresa's cheek is pressed against the glass, her eyes closed. Last time she was in, she talked about the day child welfare took them from her grandmother, Theresa and her four brothers. Not before Theresa got a cracked skull and a bunch of broken bones. Foster care was worse. Her foster father raped her. Social worker too.

Theresa stirs then sits up. She rubs her eyes. "I know I have to go to meetings. But those guys ..." She tips her head back. "It's all the same disease but ..."

"Not all the meetings are like that. Are you going to stay in Edmonton?"

She nods.

"You've been to the *Mustard Seed*, right? That's my home group."

She looks away. "That neighbourhood."

Crap.

She looks at me. She knows I know. Her chin comes up. "I have a plan," she says. "I'm going into the concrete business. Couple of my cousins are into that. Driveways, pavements. Start small. Build it up."

*Let her do it, let her succeed. Whatever You are.*

"If you stay sober," I say, "you can do whatever you want."

"I could hire my brothers. We'd work together. A family business, you know?"

'The Pen boys,' Jay calls them. 'They'll always get her, those brothers. Welfare split them up. She's always trying to put them back together.'

"First things first," I say.

Theresa nods, turns to stare out of the window again.

*She was old school, my kokum.* Taken from her family, sent to residential school. *She never cried again.*

A few weeks after I started at Dreamcatcher, Dad asked me how it was, the work.

‘At least I feel like I’m doing something useful. But it’s frightening. Because I can’t.’ I shrugged, the wall of everything I couldn’t make different rising up in front of me. I wanted to cry but I was sick of crying, sick of Mum being dead, sick of everything I couldn’t change.

‘You can’t but you want to. That matters.’

Then I did start crying. It undid me, the gentleness, and I cried until I was dripping and red-eyed and my nose was chafed. He sat there while I cried and made little mm-ing noises, him in his chair, me on the chesterfield, then he made a pot of tea.

I thought we never touched because he was old and English.

## Chapter Thirteen



“IT’S HARD TO describe what it was like, being a girl in those days. I was full of energy and curiosity but all I was supposed to do was wait. Wait for a man to shelter me from the world.”

“So what did you do?”

“I waited. And read. I read Shakespeare, George Eliot, Dickens, Hardy, Mrs. Gaskell. Whatever I could find in the library of the holding tank for young ladies that passed as a school. At least it was better than the governesses we had for a while. I lived inside the worlds those writers made. I don’t know if I can explain this. How little room there was to move or dream. To believe there could be anything different. I was thirteen when the War began. It was supposed to be over by Christmas. At first it was all speeches and cheering. The gardener’s boy went off to fight. But so many died. The nearest gentry. They lost one son, then another, then the last. My mother had dreamed of the youngest son for me or for Lucy.”

He stops, takes a drink of tea. “God help me, I thought it was an adventure. One that I was barred from, as I was barred from anything exciting.” He shakes his head. “The other thing I did was act the leading man in any number of Shakespeare’s plays. I was the tallest girl in the school and besides I had no trouble learning my lines. As long as I read them out loud.”

“That’s how you know such huge chunks of Shakespeare?”

“They didn’t need a prompt, if I was on stage.” The skin crinkles around his eyes, creases upon creases.

# Acknowledgements



Quotations from Georgina Binnie-Clark, *Wheat and Woman*, Toronto 1914

Lyrics from *I Will Survive*, Freddie Perren and Dino Fekaris, 1978  
*Snowbird*, Gene MacLellan, 1969

*Walk on the Wild Side*, Lou Reed, 1972

As a gender queer child, as a lesbian who's been called 'sir' for forty years, as someone who enjoys messing with people's categories, I have been researching this book my whole life. At the same time I want to express my gratitude to particular individuals and institutions.

Thank you, Richard Jenkins, Cree/Métis educator and activist from Moose Mountain, Alberta, for sharing traditional Cree understandings of gender and sexuality with me, and for the work you have done to gather and preserve this precious knowledge.

Thanks to the Alberta Native Friendship Centre who hired me to research and write about the situation of two spirit youth.

Thanks, too, to the Provincial Archives of Alberta, a remarkable resource where I first encountered the Sunday School Bus.

The Clarke Historical Library of Central Michigan University is a digital treasure trove of Aladdin Mills' kit house catalogues from the early twentieth century.

I acknowledge the support of the Province of Alberta through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

I recognize the support of the Province of Nova Scotia through the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage.

Thanks to my editor, Lindsay Brown, who spared me an embarrassment of verbal tics and lazy phrases.

Special thanks to Anne Bishop for our years of winter meetings, for talk and critique, encouragement and companionable complaint.

I live in Mi'kma'ki, the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaw people. I am grateful to this land which sustains me in every way; to our sheep and dogs and chickens who amuse and instruct, and to Alexa Jaffurs, my beloved companion in trouble and fun. A woman of few words, she wields a sharp pencil.

## About the Author



Nina Newington's first novel, *Where Bones Dance*, won the Writers' Guild of Alberta *Georges Bugnet Award for Novel* in 2008. She is currently finishing a memoir about living illegally in the US for twenty years. A former Kennedy scholar with an MA in English Literature from Cambridge, she makes her living designing gardens and building things. English by birth, she and her American wife immigrated to Canada in 2006. They raise sheep on unceded Mi'kmaw territory near the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia.