

# the new quarterly

CANADIAN WRITERS & WRITING



**BAD BEHAVIOR:** in which we go too far with storytelling, help our brother through his pregnancy, confront ethics at a boat party, and finally learn about pain porn.

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- + winners of the poetry, personal essay, and fiction contests
- + essays from Jim Johnstone and Kelly S. Thomson

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# The Stories that Linger

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**LARA EL MEKAUI**

**W**HAT MAKES A STRONG PERSONAL ESSAY? WHAT EXPERIENCES DO WE PUT TO pen and reconstruct creatively in essay form? These two questions guided my own reading and evaluation for the 2024 Edna Staebler Personal Essay. The first, a critical question, and the other, one that arose out of fascination with the variety of personal stories shared, expanding the confines of the essay genre.

These two questions also guided the adjudication meeting. I've been lucky enough to engage more with non-fiction in the last couple of years professionally as an editor and critical reader, and I was joined with established and esteemed authors and readers Pamela Mulloy, Alister Thomas, and Tasneem Jamal. The four of us engaged in a dynamic conversation about personal essays guided by the longlist we had accumulated.

In this year's submissions, a diverse array of essays, letters, and retellings were sent in. It is always intriguing to see what accounts are recalled, events rendered meaningful, what lingers and stays with us. The adjudication committee had a lively debate about the pieces that spoke to us. We found ourselves connecting to different pieces, the decision often coming down to what successfully pulls us in through style and narrative.

This year's winning essay captivated us with its honest and heartfelt interplay. Geoff Martin's "The Isabel Letters," portrays a layered and nuanced exchange of letters that reveal an homage to a hometown author, a pressing need to show gratitude in a time of uncertainty, and a desire for connection and community in isolation: "We are indelibly shaped by the places and people we emerged from—our individuality is staked in the collective," writes Martin. Through Martin's engagement with Isabel Huggan's repertoire, the reader is privy to a thoughtful critical and personal reflection of Huggan's work in relation to Martin's own journey.

The runner up this round also sparked discussion. “Relax, You’re on Brain Vacation” by Martha Stiegman is a very powerful essay on disability and dealing with brain injury over the years; the piece chronicles life as it dramatically changes yet keeps moving forward in a referential, surprisingly funny at times, and well-written way.

Our honourable mention for the contest is Dora Dueck’s “Because of the Postcards” an elegant journey in visiting her grandfather’s past.

# The Isabel Letters

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**GEOFF MARTIN**

“**D**EAR ISABEL HUGGAN,” I FINALLY WROTE IN AN EMAIL IN MARCH 2020, back when we feared we might lose all our elders in one fell swoop of the virus. I’d wanted to write for a while.

I explained that we’d grown up in the same small town, exactly forty years apart, which was where I first encountered *The Elizabeth Stories*, her award-winning 1984 book of short fiction. My English teacher had sent us home with the book and instructions to read only the first story. Even in the late 1990s, a faint whiff of scandal still surrounded the book, which followed the coming-of-age of Elizabeth Kessler in the fictive town of Garten, a place akin to Elmira, Ontario, our hometown. That suggestion of controversy—which could only mean sex—had perked my ears.

“I read them all, of course,” I wrote, explaining how I knew no one then who was a writer and hadn’t yet imagined that there were words to be written about life in town. That reading experience was a profound one. I returned to school on Monday a bit more wide-eyed than before, moved by a realist fiction that captured something of my own life.

I’d read that Isabel’s longtime husband Bob had passed away, so I told her I was sorry for her loss. I knew of him from her third book, a 2003 collection of essays called *Belonging: Home Away from Home*, which won The Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction. Bob’s career had taken Isabel and their daughter from Belleville and Ottawa to Kenya first and then France and the Philippines and back, in his semi-retirement, to an old stone house they renovated together in the Cévennes. Which was what *Belonging* was all about: that effort at making home in France while also missing other homes.

“Do you still live at Mas Blanc?” I asked.

I described how I, too, have been moving around a lot and was feeling a little unmoored. I’d been re-reading *Belonging* recently, I told her, because the book is replete

with a quiet wisdom about how to turn a house into a home and how to write your way into some new semblance of belonging. I'd also been returning to it as a guide for its craft lessons, especially that balancing act of tracing out the geographies of one's childhood from an adult vantage.

With gratitude for her influence, I wished her good health and then pressed send from my San Francisco apartment. I swiveled the chair and went to rouse my son from his morning nap. Time now to circle out through the courtyard on our daily, pandemic-induced constitutional, meandering our way through the emptied university campus next door. The only sounds now the hard-wheeled rumbles of the toddler's tri-cycle, chucking across the sidewalk cracks.



"Dear Geoff," Isabel wrote back the next evening. "Longer letter coming tomorrow, tonight's reply through a light blur of tears. This is briefish, just to say I am so deeply pleased that you wrote, honoured that you find my writing in any way useful to your sense of 'what matters' and hoping that life affords us the chance to meet someday..."

She described the small bungalow she grew up in, one I could immediately picture across from the high school though it's now been entirely remodeled. And she played "the Mennonite game" of relations, wondering "if your Wallenstein Martin connection includes Ralph Martin?" (It does).

Then her brief reply turns long: "my 'self-editing' mechanism is asleep at the wheel this Sunday evening," she claims. Except that her words need no editing. The email is a free flow of linguistic *energeia*, a masterclass from an author who's spent a lifetime exchanging letters with far-flung friends and family. Her email was replete with an elastic syntax—sentences that ellipsis

their way into the next thought, em dashes that conjure real emotion. CAPS LOCK for emphasis on the tablet she's tapping at.

"For now," she writes, "you find me in Toronto until the Plague is sufficiently over for me to return to France—I came this side end of February for a month to see friends and family there...what with one thing and another, my new partner and I are back in Ontario, living in the house of a dear friend who died a few months ago. Orillia is where I may end up eventually, but for now, must return to my beloved Mas Blanc, which of course will be impossible to sell under current circumstances, and try to figure out what life is offering."

I had dared to send out that first missive into the pandemic ether. What flew back by passenger pigeon was a rolled note of instantaneous shared connection.



"Dear Isabel," I replied midweek, "It's such a pleasure to learn of many more connections than I previously knew."

I do this thing with writers I admire where I count out our degrees of separation. I'm eager for a feeling of proximity. This is not some star-struckness. It's more about the felt sense of possibility that can come by a relational tie. That audacious question, *could I do something like this too?*

And then the fearsome question: *but how?*

I've long been asking exactly that with Huggan's published work and now with our emails, such that we find ourselves sharing some big life moments in that first year of correspondence. She made it back to France and managed to sell Mas Blanc. She writes that she's moving "home" to Ontario, to Orillia, after thirty-five years abroad.

And over in San Francisco, I've got Henri Nouwen on audiobook. I'm listening to the Dutch priest's

book, *Discernment*, about reading the signs of daily life for guidance while I try to make sense of the sudden call—because what else was this but a call—that we’re also moving home to Ontario.

Four long weeks post-interview, during which we’d nearly lost hope, my wife suddenly had a job offer from a university in Waterloo, near Elmira. Our long-hoped-for Plan A was now coming impossibly to fruition. We’d dared to whisper aloud our plans. And then we got scooped up.

So Nouwen’s words are being soft-spoken in my ear while I peel out packing tape. He writes about reading as a spiritual practice. The reading Nouwen counsels is different than reading for entertainment or knowledge. “Spiritual reading means not simply reading about spiritual things,” he writes, “but also reading about spiritual things, *in a spiritual way*.” Doing so requires, he says, “a willingness not just to read but to be read.”

Through the rest of the chapter, Nouwen shares what he learned from Thomas Merton’s own reading practice. By considering Merton’s reflections on his own literary and spiritual influences, Nouwen hopes to show us how “reading from the wise ones who lived before, or who live alongside you can help you find your way home.”

Which is precisely what I needed. I was packing for home but also worried about its implications: the permanence headed our way. I’d been writing about my homeground from afar. Now, I would need to learn how to write about home from home.

And sure enough, for the next year—through the transcontinental move and the fourteen-day quarantine and the eight-week container-wait and then the long unpacking and the start of jobs and the launch to preschool—I tell the friends who ask that I’m actually feeling out of sorts, destabilized. The to-do list is preposterously long, and just growing longer.

Yes, yes, very glad to be back, I insist. But it’s like

I’m waiting for my mind to catch up with my body.

So while I waited, I read Huggan’s books again, *not just to read but to be read*.



“Golly it has taken me a week to reply,” Isabel wrote a few weeks later. “You’d think that I led a busy working life preventing me from email whereas in fact, like everyone else now in ‘lockdown’ I have hours to spend—and yet I find myself a spendthrift, idly using up the time I have, taking everything more slowly... in some ways it is meditative—as Thich Nhat Hanh became famous for saying, ‘When you do the dishes, do the dishes’... This new life imposed upon us [...] allows for much more of this slow and thoughtful behaviour, [...] I can allow myself all sorts of pleasures, such as not getting up until late morning. (‘When you lie in bed, lie in bed’).”

About that whiff of scandal surrounding *The Elizabeth Stories*, she wrote back confident that her old friend Bill Exley, head of the English department, must have assigned the book. Fondly remembered as Malcolm Gladwell’s favourite teacher, Exley had secretly moonlighted as the lead singer (though he prefers the word orator) of the 50-year-running Nihilist Spasm Band, an improvisatory, Dada-esque noise band that experienced a degree of fame in Japan and played several world tours. But no, Exley had retired the year before I started high school.

“It’s a pity you didn’t ever ‘have’ Bill Exley,” she emailed later. “He was eccentric but he also transformed English teaching in that school...and it was he who DARED to put THE ELIZABETH STORIES on the curriculum as there were a number of people/parents who found my exploration of childhood sexuality terribly shocking and it was made more so by their attempts to identify all parties concerned...”

I have LOTS of funny/sad stories to tell about what happens when you write fiction but use scraps of this and that for colour, locale, filling out a character, enriching a scene.... Too long for a letter but if we ever meet I'll bend your ear."



"Dear Geoff," she writes to me a year or so after I had returned to Ontario. Someone she'd gone to school with in Elmira had recently died, and she was coming to the region from Orillia for a few days. "So how does your day look that Wednesday?" she asks.

And suddenly, two weeks later, Isabel Huggan arrives at my door clad in black: black boots, black slacks, black blazer. A thin gold chain hanging between her lapels. Wire frame glasses and light curls of brown and greying hair. Bright smile and warm eyes, she's asking our rain-booted Robin about his day at kindergarten.

Over tea, I bend my ear and ask about the tempest her book had tossed about in town. I expected the story to ring with humour nearly forty years later. At least, her email had suggested as much. But instead, she tells me a story of great pain and familial loss.

*The Elizabeth Stories* was published to acclaim, first in Canada and then in the U.S. I looked up the reviews: they're glowing. *The Globe and Mail*, *Saturday, Time Magazine*. Comparisons to Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence and suggestions that Elizabeth Kessler be read like Holden Caulfield. The New York Times claimed that Huggan had "succeeded in...mapping out the terra incognita of youth." Short mentions followed in *Ms.* and *People* and *Elle*. A roundtrip flight to New York from Kenya where she was then living, to collect the New Voices in Fiction Award.

As the book's positive reception grew, her father became increasingly uneasy. Believing that the stories

showed only the negative aspects of growing up in a small town, he accused her of misremembering her own happy childhood and, worse, exhibiting a mean-spirited lack of gratitude. This reaction was encouraged by his second wife, a former Catholic nun who found the book shocking and who drove the wedge between them. Eventually, Huggan was not allowed to enter the family home.

It's been her great burden, she explained to me by email later, "to think about how he was personally affected, to think of his being ashamed of me, and shamed BY me."

To little avail, she insisted—to him and to anyone else who objected—that Elizabeth was indeed fictional, the events and characters in *Garten* made up of imagination and composite details. But an unforced error, she admits was in calling her character Elizabeth—too close to Isabel.

I sat there surprised to learn the depth of pain the book had caused. Had any of that scandal made it into the papers, I wondered aloud, letters to the editor lambasting the stories, book ban campaigns even? But no, she suspects it was all just whisperings. She didn't think any of the local papers even carried a review, but "whatever there was is in my archive papers at Western University."

"The fact of the matter is," Huggan says with resignation in an early 1990s interview I'll stumble across later, "everything has its price, and people who are setting out to write should know that. If I had known the cost, would I still have written the stories? I don't know. Probably, but I can't say for certain."



"Dear Archives and Research Collections," I write to the archivists at D.B. Weldon Library, a brutalist building on the campus in London, Ontario. "I am

working on an essay about the writer Isabel Huggan, and I'm most interested in looking through the following series and folders from AFC 453...."

And she's right, no review clipped from *The Kitchener-Waterloo Record*. But among the thick folder titled "Responses to *The Elizabeth Stories*," a pile of stacked letters and responses that I'm made to turn carefully per Reading Room rules. Congratulatory notes from old friends and former teachers alongside heartfelt letters from readers who deeply identified with Elizabeth Kessler and therefore understood their own younger selves a little more.

Such is the gift of story that other people's lives, no matter how different from our own in place and time, can help us re-integrate our past and present selves and bring about new self-understandings.



"Dear Isabel Huggan," one of the letters begins in perfect, cursive penmanship, an exactness of shape that makes of each letter a tiny wave tethered to the next small undulation. It takes a while to tease out each word. As I catch on, a remarkable letter from 1988 takes shape:

Congratulations on winning the "New Voices Award" recently for *The Elizabeth Stories*. My name is Mary Anne Kirkness; I supervise the Woolwich Township Libraries and spend most of my working hours at the Elmira Library.

We have a well-worn, much-read copy of the 1984 edition of your book in our library. When I first read it several years ago, I thought about writing to you to tell you how much I had enjoyed it. It was one of the things I put off until tomorrow. Tomorrow arrived today.

...I didn't read the stories looking for characters, places or events that were recognizable. It amuses me to hear the comments of borrowers, as they return *The Elizabeth Stories* to the library. I've had a few heated discussions with long-time residents of the town. They cannot see the universality of the stories.

I was fascinated and somewhat awed by Elizabeth who was a lot of the things I was—and was not—as I was growing up. I felt the same deep sense of isolation—both emotional and actual (I grew up on a farm with my closest friend over a mile away)—as Elizabeth, but I retreated to the orchard with my books. I wasn't as curious or as outraged as Elizabeth. I patiently waited to grow up to escape.

I hope that, when you return to Canada, if you are in Elmira, you will drop in and say hello.

Yours truly,  
Mary Anne Kirkness



Among the heartfelt letters in that archival folder are also a few book evaluations for schools. The one from The Southwestern Ohio Young Adult Materials Review Group stands out, a rare indication of the book's controversies:

*Fiction Evaluation*  
Author: Isabel Huggan  
Title: *The Elizabeth Stories*

Underline the appropriate items:  
Type(s): adventure, animal, family, fantasy,

folklore, historical, horror, humor, mystery, realistic, romance, science fiction, short stories, sports, suspense, western

Literary merit: excellent, very good, good, mediocre, poor

Characterization: excellent, very good, good, mediocre, poor

Evaluation: recommended, recommended with reservations, not recommended

Summary: Elizabeth tells the story of her growing up—not necessarily the beautiful incidents, starting with the first memories of pre-kindergarten years. She has experiences with family especially her mother, neighbors, schoolmates and a Mennonite lady and her family.

Evaluations: The book was published in Canada in 1984, so the book jacket has reviews. These reviewers, with no literary connections [to Ohio], state *The Elizabeth Stories* are honest, struggling, way of maturing. But they do not mention...the masturbation [sic] at age 5-10; the oral sex at about age 10 in graphic detail and the general discovery of human sexuality found in all humans. *Where in our literature is the material to be placed?*

To which Isabel's U.S. editor, Mindy Werner, has appended a handwritten comment for Isabel's amusement when she opens her mail in Nairobi: Where in our literature is the material to be placed? "(Next to all the other classics! – MW)"

And to which I would add the important caveat that the oral sex is—in point of fact—coercive childhood sexual assault between siblings. The moment is neither witnessed nor described "in graphic detail" but overheard by Elizabeth who is hiding out in the

basement of her cousins' house. Horrified, she vomits, giving herself away.

No lascivious sex scene this. "Into the Green Stillness" is an unnerving story that is also a quiet wailing, a fiction that may shock precisely because it is perennially true.



"Hi Marilyn," I say into my phone when she answers with a soft "hello?" She's currently the longest serving librarian in Elmira, so I was calling to inquire about those "heated discussions" at the lending desk regarding *The Elizabeth Stories*.

Though she loved the book, she started at the library after much of the fuss had died down. "And, unfortunately," she informs me, "Mary Anne passed away some ten years ago."

The whole whisper of controversy, in other words, has dissipated. It all seems of another era, this prurient fear of stories that tap into the emotional truths about the pains and yearnings of growing up weird and lonely.

But, of course, those fears aren't gone. They've simply found other titles to bleed out in this new era of book bans and blowback against stories that throw spiritual lifelines to readers who are drowning out in deeper waters, beyond the buoy lines of respectability.



"Dear Isabel," writes Daniel Menaker, fiction editor at *The New Yorker*. "I've just returned your collection to Penguin. They sent me all the stories not knowing that we'd seen all but "SITSY." "SITSY" didn't work either, I'm afraid—it's subtle and deeply felt, the ending is excellent, but we found the piece a bit too analytical and slow-paced."

He's writing about the draft manuscript to what would become her 1992 collection, *You Never Know*—a book some faulted for not being as “edgy” as her first book but which Huggan thinks is in fact edgier. Menaker's rejection letter here is short though their correspondence is extensive, the exchanges warm as they relay family news. But always that added explanation: “I'm sorry but we just couldn't accept your recent submission.”

They sent letters back and forth during Isabel's years in Nairobi and Montpellier and the Philippines. She's writing all the while, but trying to get her work published from afar is proving difficult. Though her personal letters are sealed in the archives for another twenty years, there's an evident sense of frustration in her professional letters from this era.

But then I pull out a folder marked “Preliminary Notes for *Belonging*” from the early 2000s. The notes are handwritten from a “Lunch with Louise”—Louise Dennys, her Canadian publisher—with whom Huggan imagines a new book into being.

She and Bob had just moved back to France, and they're in the process of renovating an old stone house. Over lunch with Louise, she explains the theme for a possible book of essays on home that is grounded in wonder—“the blé of wonder,” she calls it. She's after the grain of it.

“Who am I, where am I?” her pen asks herself. “Where do we belong? What draws us and why?”

She's finding the book's form too. “A wheel with many spokes, me at the center here/now (France), but the spokes don't need to be the same size—fragments. No need for chronology, more for connections.”

She already knows this truth from poetry and from her two books of interconnected short stories—that you need not overexplain. The white space around the words and between sections or stories can do some of the telling. In these notes, she's recording her redis-

covery that the same truth applies to nonfiction essay writing as well. What matters is the “emotional stamp on the page.”

We experience our adult lives and memories in similar episodic fragments. And the power of art is that it can reflect back to us the sense of disintegration and reconstruction that forms the stories we tell ourselves. It was Huggan's *Belonging* that first taught me how an essay collection could be larger than the sum of its parts, could circle a place while still being about many other places. The expressiveness of that book shaped my own dream of drafting a series of personal essays that would circumnavigate my own homeground.

Such a rush, that *feeling* of art condensing down into a form capacious enough to hold the truths that are trying to convey themselves. Bottled lightning on the page. A stalk of wheat, a pen.

“Start now,” she tells herself in her notes. “1000 wds a day.”

And then this gleaming gem at the bottom of the page, right-aligned like a poem's surprising, closing line break:

“oh god. I am so happy.”



“Interview with Isabel Huggan in Orillia, Ontario,” I say into the microphone before setting it down on her kitchen table. She's laid out muffins and dark chocolate, a kettle of black tea. She turns her chair aslant the table and leaves the sliding door open to the smell of cut grass.

We begin with *Belonging*, working backwards to *The Elizabeth Stories* and some of the pain that came her way. I'm curious about her approach to realist fiction, the way she talks of borrowing from real life.

*Belonging*, for all its nonfiction essays, turns to

“Stories” in the last section. And it’s bridged by an astonishing, near-tragic 1950s period piece, called “S.E.M.A.P.H.O.R.E.,” which opens with the line, “This story lies between true and not true.” It tells of a troop of Girl Guides earning their badge in semaphore—“that is,” the narrator explains, “you had to be able to send messages by flag across large bodies of water. Seems laughable now, but we took it seriously then....The scene I am remembering, in the middle of Canada in the middle of the last century in the middle of the winter, unrolls like old film, grainy and shadowy.”

But who is this “I”?

When their captain steps out, the girls play lights-out tag in the school gymnasium and stage. A sudden scream in the dark. Someone flicks on the lights, whereupon the girls discover “bright blood pouring from Sharon’s throat.” The narrator recalls, “no one knew what to do, we had not yet come to badges in Emergency First Aid, but someone held a scarf to Sharon’s neck as she gasped for air. And then we heard the siren of the ambulance.”

Following all the preceding nonfiction, the first-person narrator sure seems like Isabel Huggan telling us a true story, except that the voice could also be Elizabeth Kessler’s: “I walked home along the leaf-strewn street in the lamp-lit dark, bewildered by how easy it was to make mistakes and vowing I would never speak again myself. I too would clam up forever.”

But of course, she does not clam up, neither Isabel nor Elizabeth-as-narrator. “All these decades later,” the narrator writes, leaping forward in time, “those feelings have flagged themselves into the present. Curious and bewildered by what I am remembering, I write it down...and from Sharon’s injured throat there springs a story of silence, a way of telling what it is to lose your voice.”

That is, some facet of experience—learning

semaphore in Girl Guides, a severely injured friend—conjured from memory and true-to-life, runs the thread of the story ahead of its author out into an emerging fiction.

Though many readers missed this pivot to fiction at the end of *Belonging*, Huggan’s giving away the game here, explaining how she uses memory to create fictional art that moves beyond her own intention.

With *The Elizabeth Stories*, she tells me she wanted to capture what a period of time was like for children. “You don’t have to talk about how things have changed,” she explains. “You just have to describe the way things were. And any fool can see things have really changed!”

She explains by email later that she’s “always been fascinated by how human beings ‘get things wrong’ and what heartache we suffer when we ‘meant well’ but were misinterpreted or saw that our good actions were harmful to someone else.” It’s a central theme in all her stories: characters trying hard to do right but still messing up.

But that kind of realist writing takes such courage, I say aloud at her table. It comes with great risk. Especially when stories about childhood sexuality can produce the kind of shock that people continue to experience with *The Elizabeth Stories*.

She leans forward and acknowledges some of that daring impulse without a hint of excess pride: “It’s not that the stories come directly from my life, but what I wrote is a truth-telling about growing up in a certain place and a certain time. You know, without any harm coming to any of us, when I was a little kid lots of us would ‘show each other what we had’...we were probably even more interested in those ‘private parts’ because they were meant to be hidden.”

“But I never set out to shock,” she insists. Rather, she simply wanted “to speak ‘truth’—not necessarily my personal truth but truth as I saw it around me.”



After a sleepless night in the hotel, I'm driving home from Orillia over the long hills that hump and hollow Highway 89. I'm still chewing on the words Isabel used to explain her art. And I'm suddenly thinking back to Nouwen's wisdom about spiritual reading, about not just reading but being read. That is, feeling the relief of shared experience, or a searing truth perhaps, from someone else's words, some absent author who is, despite distances of geography and historical time, somehow also a companionable presence as I read their words.

I'm borrowing certain phrases here—absent author, companionable presence—from another writing teacher and mentor, Daniel Coleman, and his extraordinary book *In Bed with the Word: Reading, Spirituality, and Cultural Politics*. Coleman repeatedly calls attention to “the structure of absence” in which we live: distant family relations, far-flung friends, that loneliness of consumerist individualism, the sense of the absence of God from the pressing injustices and despair of our world. The act of reading, he argues, presents us with a similar experience—sitting alone, hungering for connection, and then finding presence in the structure of absence. Reading, in his words, can help me “to connect meaningfully with myself, the world around me, and to the Otherness of God and humanity.”

Such had been my experience with *The Elizabeth Stories* in school and then with *Belonging* when I first began writing in earnest. Huggan's writings facilitated all kinds of connections for me—to my innermost self, to my homeland, to my nascent aspirations as a writer. Then, from across the ocean and over the course of our mutual Ontario moves “home,” her letters expressed a warmth and honesty that blossomed into an unexpected friendship.

But I knew now I hadn't told her all that *The*

*Elizabeth Stories* had first offered me. And what I realized as I stared past the windshield wipers was that I would need to write it out here. The thread of the essay draft had run on ahead of me. It was demanding now that I catch up, fess up.



“Dear Isabel,” I wrote a month or so later. “I've finished the transcript of our interview, and I'm attaching it here.” I tell her that over the past months, I've been talking with friends about *The Elizabeth Stories* and have been surprised by the number of people who've disclosed their own childhood sexual explorations with friends or siblings. All of them describing those distant memories with some measure of grace and amusement at their younger selves. But some with a quiet guilt too, a shame that still impacts their lives. One friend's therapist explained that nearly half of all children explore their bodies in a sexual manner with other children between the ages of four and nine.

“And me, too, Isabel,” I admit by email. “I played once with a female friend. We shucked our clothes and laid atop one another and felt those strangely ticklish sensations of contact. All entirely innocent, of course, and for which I bear no shame, not now anyway.”

The problem, because it did become a private problem, arose a year or so later when two older friends were debating what, exactly, sex is. I explained what I'd done, and they both grew wide-eyed and giggly, then mocking: “That was sex! You had sex!”

“A horrifying awareness bloomed in my mind right then,” I wrote to Isabel. I knew only that sex was something married people did to make babies. But due to my religious upbringing, the homophobia of the wider culture in the late '80s, and my severely limited understanding of the news I'd overheard, I thought people got AIDS by either ‘being gay’ or having sex before

marriage. That chain of associations caused me several years of pained anxiety while I waited for the punishment of AIDS to wreak its havoc on me. I told not a soul. Eventually, it seemed clear that I wasn't in fact getting sick, but even as my anxiety faded, I never forgot the pain of it.

"And I think now—really I'm only naming this consciously to myself, post-interview—how great a gift was my encounter with *The Elizabeth Stories* in high school, especially the second story, 'Sawdust,' about Elizabeth and her friends discovering each other's bodies at such a young age. The emotional stamp of that story is just so palpable to me. It taught me in my late teens the normalcy of my own childhood experience before I had dared speak it aloud."



"Thank you for sharing your story," Isabel writes back within the hour. "That's the kind of open-hearted exchange that makes writing a kind of sacred act. When something you've written causes another person to openly tell his or her own story. I have to say that in the years following *The Elizabeth Stories*, at readings I heard some of the most extraordinary confessions from people who would come up to talk and get a book signed....Elizabeth's experiences were nothing by comparison!"

But these confessions were not always sexual in nature, Isabel insists. Many readers identified with Elizabeth because she "didn't fit the mould" of her family or society. They found in Elizabeth a companion through whom they could better understand their own childhoods.



"Dear Isabel," I wrote a few months back, "I'm now

finished a full draft and would welcome your feedback." The epistolary form, each section beginning with its own salutation, had finally given structure and meaning to the essay, a way of evoking and honouring this other kind of writing work Isabel has been doing all her life. But I was now quoting from our correspondence, something she surely wasn't expecting. In a spirit of co-creation, I sent her the draft.

"I've also been thinking about your home office," I wrote, recalling the wall-mounted type drawer that had followed her all these years, the one with the cut-out of "One Art"—Elizabeth Bishop's poem. That poem, I think, is the key to this whole piece.

The shelf's tiny compartments were filled with photographs, dried flowers and other small mementos. The Bishop poem stands out though, curling yellow at the edges, print so sun-faded you need to lean in and squint.

"The art of losing isn't hard to master" goes the recurring refrain.

Isabel had snipped it from her copy of *The New Yorker* in 1976, a few years before Bishop's death and still eight years off from the launch of her own writing career.

Our interview had turned on a series of losses: her mother to a stroke at age 63, her father to emphysema years later, her husband Bob a decade ago, and now friends, too, near and far—felled and falling by all manner of ailments. Houses also. Her childhood home in Elmira—gone. The stone house in France—gone.

"The art of losing isn't hard to master."

Life is about adjusting to loss, she tells me. Each loss requires its own rebuilding. It matches her own philosophy of home, which is not so much about place as what you carry with you, within you. She's been turning dramatically different places into homes her entire life, including now in Orillia amidst this wonderful, surprising new chapter: late love with a friend

from fifty years ago. She's cultivating a small flower garden, put art on the wall, filled a lovingly crafted bookshelf with the literature of a lifetime. She's been rearranging all the set pieces in order to say, "Okay. Now I'm home."

She says making home has to do with belief, too. Like a commitment in a relationship where "if you hold yourself back and don't quite believe it's going to work or you don't believe in the person," it's already not going to work. "I was unhappy in France," she recalls, "until I said, 'okay, this is only going to work if I commit to it.'"

"It's the same thing with writing basically, isn't it?"



"In the mail" reads the subject line from Isabel a mere five hours after I sent her a draft of the essay by email. She's giving me a quick sense of her skills as a longtime correspondence mentor for hundreds of students in Humber College's low-residency MFA program. Two days later, the package arrives. Out slides the printed draft with line edits, seven pages of commentary, and *Surfacing*, Kathleen Jamie's book of essays about digging up the past. A new loan on top of the two slim Claire Keegan hardcovers she handed me at her door. "Here," she'd said as she passed me the books. "Give

them back when we see each other next."

Such effusive generosity.

I had first written to Isabel because we shared a hometown and her writing had been a gift. The pandemic had also made me afraid I wouldn't get to say thanks. But what was plain as grace by now was that we shared an approach to writing, too, and a sense of wonder that it's possible to build a life around the crafting of words, a life that can yield such surprising friendships.

And isn't this just what we want when we read and write, when we speak and listen: to share our lives, our pain included? To find community in the cause of living?

In the final scene of *The Elizabeth Stories*, eighteen-year-old Elizabeth watches her friends getting married while she smiles at her ex-boyfriend across the pews. She's relieved that she and Dieter have avoided being coerced into marriage by an early pregnancy. But the freedom she feels, poised as she is to leave Garten, isn't one of breathless escape from her past. Her and Dieter's social environment, as with the utterly unique contexts of our own specific childhoods, is "imprinted on our brains forever." We are indelibly shaped by the places and people we emerged from—our individuality is staked in the collective. And "wounded though we may be," narrates Elizabeth in the last indelible line, "we are still intact."