This book contains disturbing information surrounding child sexual abuse. Reader discretion advised.

For the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls,
and survivors of residential schools.

"What is a poet? An unhappy man who hides deep anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so formed that when the sigh and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music. . . . And people flock around the poet and say: 'Sing again soon'—that is, 'May new sufferings torment your soul but your lips be fashioned as before, for the cry would only frighten us, but the music, that is blissful.'"

SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or*

1975

Sometimes we would hide in the closet when the drunks came home from the bar. Knee to knee, we would sit, hiding, hoping nobody would discover us. Every time it was different. Sometimes there was only thumping, screaming, moans, laughter. Sometimes the old woman would come in and smother us with her suffering love. Her love so strong and heavy it seemed a burden. Even then I knew that love could be a curse. Her love for us made her cry. The past became a river that was released by her eyes. The poison of alcohol on her breath would fill the room. She would wail and grab at us, kissing us, kissing the only things she could trust.

Fake-wood panel walls, the smell of smoke and fish. Velvet art hung on the walls, usually of Elvis or Jesus, but also polar bears and Eskimos.

The drunks came home rowdier than usual one night, so we opted for the closet. We giggle nervously as the yelling begins. Become silent when the thumping starts. The whole house shakes. Women are screaming, but that sound is

overtaken by the sound of things breaking. Wet sounds of flesh breaking and dry sounds of wood snapping, or is that bone?

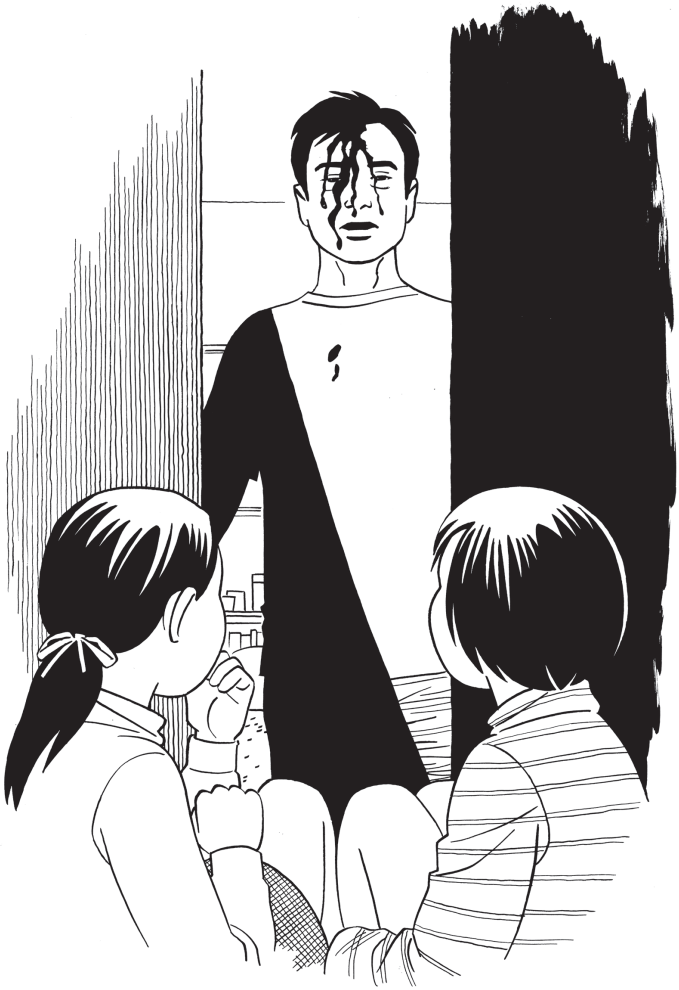
Silence.

There are loud pounding footsteps. Fuck! Someone is coming towards us. We stop breathing. Our eyes large in the darkness, we huddle and shiver and hope for the best. There is someone standing right outside the closet door, panting.

The door slides open, and my uncle sticks his head in. Towering over us, swaying and slurring. Blood pouring down his face from some wound above his hairline.

"I just wanted to tell you kids not to be scared."

Then he closed the door.



A DAY IN THE LIFE

It's 9 a.m., late for school
Grade five is hard
Rushing, stumbling to get my pants on
Forgetting to brush my teeth
Dreading recess
The boys chase us and hold us down
Touch our pussies and nonexistent boobs
I want to be liked
I guess I must like it
We head back to class
The teacher squirming his fingers under my panties
Under the desk
He looks around and pretends he's not doing it
I pretend he's not doing it
He goes to the next girl and I feel a flash of jealousy
The air gets thinner and tastes like rot
School is over
I leave for the arcade
Watch out for the old walrus
The old man likes to touch young pussy
We try to stay away
I wonder why nobody kicks him out
Things are better at home now

Three's Company and a calm air
Archie comics and Lego
Goodnight

Smells unleashed from the spring thaw lift us into a frenzied desperation for movement. The air is so clean you can smell the difference between smooth rock and jagged. You can smell water running over shale.

Lichen smells sweet. The green lichen smells different from black. In the spring you smell last fall's death and this year's growth, as the elder lichen shows the young how to grow.

The freeze traps life and stops time. The thaw releases it. We can smell the footprints of last fall and the new decomposition of all who perished in the grips of winter. Global warming will release the deeper smells and coax stories out of the permafrost. Who knows what memories lie deep in the ice? Who knows what curses? Earth's whispers released back into the atmosphere can only wreak havoc.

Sprigs of green begin to push their shy lives through the ice blanket. The songs of migratory birds are like alarms that awaken us from the torpor of winter. Life has arrived! The ice begrudgingly recedes, promising vengeance in a few short

weeks. Winter always wins. The sun scoffs. Nothing can stop the cacophony of gluttony and procreation about to ensue.

The sea ice is still strong, but the ponds have melted and are now open. The mosquito larvae swirl in their figure eights, hypnotizing and beautiful. A stark contrast to what they will be in a few days, when their metamorphosis turns them into the cyclone of bloodthirst. I am certain that if I ever had the opportunity to torture an enemy, they would find themselves naked on the tundra in mosquito season, with their hands tied behind their back.

As children in spring, we have the run of the town. Just as we have grown weary of our parents' company, they have been tolerating our frenetic housebound antics for half a year. The twenty-four-hour sun is feeding our visions and keeping us warm. We run the dusty streets looking for adventure. Large gangs of kids and large packs of loose dogs roam the town. I wonder which group is more rabid. None of my friends have curfew, but I do. We must get our adventure done before eleven!

We leave town and come upon a smallish pond. It's about fifty metres long, half as wide. There are blue Styrofoam pieces lying around, wind-blown from construction sites from the last building season. We decide to play hero and use the flimsy pieces of Styrofoam as boats. Considerations like the high winds, the near-zero temperature, and the depth of the pond are carried away like bits of Styrofoam. These things never occur to eleven-year-olds.

No one knows how to swim. We take turns paddling out with sticks as paddles, our little bodies balancing precariously on our wobbling blue vessels. The wind picks up. One of us inevitably gets blown out too far, his makeshift paddle grossly inadequate to get him back to shore. He is the smallest of the group. He always was. Meek, quiet, and always smiling. No wolves picked on him because he was so good-natured. He was the prettiest of the boys, and the girls carried either a maternal instinct or a quiet crush on him. We kissed once; his mouth small and soft, his tongue slow.

The wind pushes him out deeper. If he falls in, he will drown. Everyone knows this. Nobody speaks. We let the wind do the howling, as his little face grows worried. He is in the middle of the pond now. His thin windbreaker is flapping up against him, revealing protruding ribs and a slight shiver. I can see his slightness, sense his vulnerability. The only sound is the wind and the flapping fabric of our clothing. His face becomes perfectly calm, more calm than normal. He looks like a serene old man; he looks like everything is all right. The wind gusts and the Styrofoam tips to one side, and then the other. But his body knows what to do. I see him take a deep breath, and his breath steadies his ride. He is close to the far side now. I see his hands shake as he dips his stick back into the water. He is safe. He has reached the other side. His eyes look more grown up. We have witnessed him become a man. We all cheer! It is past eleven; I rush home.

We made it our Styrofoam game. The next week, seven kids drowned in a larger pond closer to the airport after using a water tank cut in half as a boat. We never played our Styrofoam game again.

Inhale small fears they turn into doubts into words into ideas into anger into hatred into violence.

Exhale large fears and large words they tumble back onto you it's easy to get buried by our own mirrors.

Inhale small fears and they whisper and travel to your mind observe them and thank them for trying to protect you.

Exhale acknowledgment of the beauty within your instincts and the courage to love small fears.

Inhale hard love suck in the smell and reward reap eat chew swallow devour all the goodness and love that is given to you.

Exhale calmness in acknowledgment of the beauty within the courage it takes to not fear love.

It's a dusty summer night in the High Arctic. The sun is shining brightly overhead. The sun always brings life and mischief, serenity and visions. It's two o'clock in the morning and I've shrugged off my curfew. There will be hell to pay when I get home and my father's thunderous footsteps shake the house with a blazing ire that only he can conjure.

It's worth it to disobey and join my brethren in our celebration of freedom, electricity, and curiosity. Fingertips anxious and knock knees oscillating, we conjure and conspire; we harness desires and swat away doubt. The winter was long and oppressive. We all knew that soon we would be in our teenaged years and this time was precious. All children on the cusp of puberty seem to understand that this magic time will end soon. Greeting the future and yearning for maturity and yet planted firmly in the moon. Revelling in our youth, wishing it would never end. Never seeing past the tips of our noses as we are driven through our bodies with the perfect lightning strike of growing cells and perceived immortality.

We transcend time and pluck smiles off each other's faces. Dig giggles out of rib cages and shoot insults as if they were compliments.

There is a siren that sounds in our small town to announce the curfew. At noon and at 10 p.m. Every time the siren sounds all the sled dogs howl, and I imagine that they think there is a large, loud god dog that rules the land howling. I equate this with religion. A short-sighted and desperate attempt for humans to create reason and order in a universe we can't possibly comprehend. The simple truth is we are simply an expression of the energy of the sun. We are the glorious manifestation of the power of the universe. We are the fingertips of the force that drives the stars, so do your job and FEEL.

Our black-haired human pack has decided to hang out by the steps behind the school. Our gnashing teeth and gums hungry for activity, tongues generating conflict and imaginary realities where we were interesting and relevant, not just kids on the school steps. Not part of this boring old town of twelve hundred souls (if you only count the humans, but whoever said only humans can have the universe living in them?). The back steps are a less conspicuous choice than the front because the summer sun reveals all to prying eyes. There is a large water tank by the back steps; this is good. We can use it to hide behind if we hear the bylaw truck. This is one of our favourite games, hiding from the bylaw

enforcement officer. His job is to drive around town and chase the kids home and shoot stray dogs. He wants us to be safe in bed. Are beds safe anyways?

Brightness. Laughter. We are a gangly group of five girls and one small boy. We are stuck in the horrid torrent of awkward crushes and curious sideways glances. Clumsy advances with no goal other than to say someone liked you. The time of wistfully watching the teenagers French kiss by the jukebox and hoping one day we would be free to say yes. In those days I didn't even know how to say no.

All I had was my speed and agility. Alas the boys have just recently gotten faster, stronger, and taller than I and it breaks me because I used to be the best. My ego is in a state of flux. I am powerless now and have lost my flagpole in our social setting. I was the fastest. It's a tough pill to swallow for a tomboy. I miss being able to beat the boys. I used to be a ball-kicker. The one boy hanging out with us this evening is a little younger than the rest of us; cocksure, and small for his age. His skin is dark brown and his eyes so black. I love the way his hair is so black that it shines blue in the sun. He is so very cute, yet his voice has not cracked yet, his balls haven't dropped. The girls want to hold him like a doll. But he's a dick, the way only insecure people can be a dick. He annoys me in a lot of ways, but nothing needles me more than the way he makes fun of me for having a crush on my friend. She doesn't know it, so the boy's adolescent judgment leaves me

embittered and confrontational. I've always loved girls, and our insufferable town sees this love as deviance. This little shithead is not helping.

We are picking up stale old cigarette butts and smoking the last puffs off them, burning our lips and fingers on the indignity of it all. There are always plenty of butts around the Bay or the Co-op, but we have exhausted the supply tonight. The high school kids usually smoke around these back steps, so we find some good long ones because the kids have to throw them away when the teachers try to sneak up and catch them red-handed.

The little boy is in a taunting mood. He is yapping about how boys are just better than girls. Boys are stronger, boys are faster, and boys are smarter. Faggots are disgusting and he hates them. He looks like a mosquito to me. I have an idea. I jump down from my perch on the railing and grab him from behind. He is so slight. I wrestle him easily to the ground and tell the others to help me. We are laughing hysterically. I peel off his shirt. His little brown tummy is so taut. Wiry little six-pack, skinny little arms. We take off his pants too. His ankles are so thin. He is so delicate. He has large black moles peppered on his dark skin. He smells like smoke and panic. He has no hair yet. Two girls hold his legs, one his arms, and I'm pulling his clothes off. It's our turn to be mean.

He is yelling for us to quit it, but we are tickling him, so he is also laughing uncontrollably. We leave his underwear

and socks alone for dignity's sake and take his pants and shirt. We run as fast as we can towards Main Street with our bounty as he follows, screaming for us to return his clothing. As we turn the corner onto Main, we see other groups of kids. I assume that he won't dare be seen unclothed, but he bravely turns the corner and simply throws the other group a toothy smile and keeps sprinting. Gasping breaths and burning lungs, thighs aflame; we let the world own us. Soles flying and hearts pounding, we turn the next corner and see a group of adults. Gleefully squealing, we keep going knowing he will not pursue. He won't risk being seen by adults.

I think of all the times I have been told I was inferior for being a girl. I think about all the times men have touched me when I didn't want them to. I think about how good it feels to be waving the pants of one of the cocky boys in the air while he hides behind the corner. We keep running and circle the school. He is waiting for us on the other side, swatting mosquitoes and crying. This is not the last time he will get himself into trouble with bravado that cannot be backed up. He ends up dying that way.