

# Broken Windows: Stories

A Thesis Submitted to the College of  
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing  
In the Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

by

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## Abstract

*Broken Windows* is a collection of sixteen short stories, diverse in structure and tone. Point of view in the stories varies as well, though these stories tend to employ restrained or skewed interiority. None of the stories strives towards particular themes, but what often emerges are characters who have difficulty communicating with people who should be their intimates. The restrained interiority resonates with this theme, inviting readers to enter the stories and see more, perhaps, than the characters themselves. Most of the stories are set in Saskatchewan, in places that are urban, rural, or in between. The fictional town of Mackadoo will be familiar to readers acquainted with any of Saskatchewan's many small communities. These are "prairie stories" and, although there are no dust storms or blizzards, physical risk remains as part of the landscape. The crises are internal, however, and more accurately they can be termed "stories of prairie people."

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. Jeanette Lynes, firstly for her work as my supervisor, including all her many encouragements, guiding nudges, warnings, and helpful criticisms. Secondly, my thanks for her work as a professor. I am privileged to have enjoyed two years of her wisdom on the craft of creative writing. More than that, I am privileged to have been in a program led by her. I cannot imagine a more positive, enthusiastic leader, setting the tone for everyone.

Thank you to my mentor, Dave Margoshes. You are a truly generous person. We agreed, early on, that you would pull no punches and you held your end of that bargain. Perhaps. When you offered praise, I valued it, not for its own sake, but because you were helping me compare my good stuff to the not-so-good. Thank you in particular for helping my stories deserve their endings.

Thank you to Dr. Sheri Benning for her wisdom and inspiration in writing genres that I did not consider “mine.” I do now. My regret is for the non-poetry decades behind me.

Thank you to my classmates for their help and encouragements, particularly their workshopping efforts. My stories were improved and, more importantly, I hope to carry forward the echo of your diverse perspectives. Your email inboxes will be hearing from me.

And to all these people, I say this last but think it first, I thank you for your friendship.

## Artist Statement

“What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.”

(the warden in *Cool Hand Luke*)

*Broken Windows* is a collection of sixteen short stories that narrates the emotional distance that occurs between people who should be intimates. I did not write these short stories as a collection in the conventional sense. I did not deliberately connect them with shared themes, settings, or characters. I wrote them to explore the craft of story writing: to try out the writer’s toolbox of dialogue, narration, description, exposition and interiority, to feel their heft in my hand. My approach to story making is informed by Michael Kardos’ *The Art and Craft of Fiction: A Writer’s Guide* that includes sections such as “nuts & bolts” (65-88) and “elements of fiction” (42-64). Each story was inspired, written, workshopped and revised as if it were a stand-alone piece. And yet, just as lead pellets scatter from the barrel of a shot gun, they nevertheless maintain a pattern. A hunter can walk up to a paper target and see what he has done. I, too, see patterns in what I have done—patterns in theme and treatment of point of view.

In the majority of the stories, the protagonists experience acute emotional distance. There are important matters they are unable to tell their co-workers, children, even spouses. Often, they can barely tell these matters to themselves. The title of my thesis is therefore inspired by this emergent theme and is taken directly from one of the story titles. Secondly, while none of my stories is told in purely objective third person, the character interiority offered to the reader is restrained, restricted, filtered, or skewed. My intent has been to allow the readers to bring their own sensibilities to the story, adding to and mixing with the limited understandings of my protagonists. Readers and characters, shoulder to shoulder, look through the “broken windows” of my stories.

Theme and point of view top Rudy Wiebe’s list of ways in which “modern short story gets at the deeper facts of life” (*Story-Makers*, xxiii). In what follows I discuss the themes which emerge in my stories and the craft choices that I have made. I situate my collection of stories in the literary landscape of the modern short story, emphasizing the regional tradition where appropriate.

The words that form the epigraph, above, summarize the plight of many characters in my stories. My protagonists often experience a disconnect from the people around them. There are things that they cannot communicate to their closest friends or family. The university student in “The Very Large Woman in the Blue Apron Dress” cannot explain his anxiety and depression to his parents. In “Crossing King Street,” a man returns to his hometown with his new wife but is unable to explain to her, or even to himself, the reality that was his childhood. The woman in “Keiki Pools” cannot explain to her husband the grief she feels after multiple pregnancy losses. A man going through a divorce, in “Garage Sale” clings fondly to household items from the family’s past and cannot understand the others’ indifference. In “Davey Goes Down,” the characters see “Grandpa” as just an old man, perhaps too old to be on a toboggan. But to Grandpa, all his virile, younger selves still form part of his identity. Even my younger protagonists feel a disconnect with the adults or the adult world. Their worries stay buried, as the adults or older siblings around them are unable to give them comfort or validation. In “Fatty,” for example, a twelve-year-old girl must cope with a mother who cannot accept her daughter’s obesity. In “Boy with the Glass Bones,” a boy gains fleeting celebrity, but only for his freakish bone condition. And when two brothers explore an abandoned farmyard, in “View from a Broken Window,” the younger must construct his own view of the man’s world into which he is growing.

The writing of Guy Vanderhaeghe is in important influence on my work. Vanderhaeghe also deals with themes of emotional distance. Appraising the writings of certain Saskatchewan writers including Vanderhaeghe, Aiden Morgan contends that, “all of them share a preoccupation with characters attempting to understand and cope with past traumas” (1). Referring specifically to Vanderhaeghe, Morgan states, “[The stories] all trade in men experiencing uncanny encounters with past mistakes, uncertain futures or their own ungovernable natures” (5). While my stories trade less in acute trauma and more in broken relationships, there is much of that same structure: the past and present walking in lockstep. The older man looking back. Or, in the case of “The View from a Broken Window,” the young man looking forward. I offer this as evidence of my recurrent theme, emotional distance, but where such duality exists—older and younger selves in communication—there is also evidence of a recurrent craft choice. In this, perhaps I have again been influenced by Vanderhaeghe. Some of his stories are rooted in a child’s point of view yet have the adult-to-be as the ostensible narrator. In “The Watcher,” eleven-year-old

Charlie tries to make sense of the actions of the adults around him, while we readers, together with the adult narrator, consider the experiences of the child (*Man Descending*, 1-36). In my “Smithereens,” the adult narrator takes a more active role in the story; he makes a deliberate attempt to make sense of his childhood. In “View from a Broken Window,” there is no adult narrator, yet the story ends with Mikey’s gaze—both visual and mental—firmly fixed on an adult future.

Clearly, prairie writers have no monopoly on this theme of emotional distance. But it is recurrent and has been more influential on me, perhaps, than the geographical settings that receive more critical attention. Geographically, there is little in my stories to compare with the prairie stories of the mid-twentieth century, stories where, as Alison Calder describes, “The land and climate are everything. The prairies exist in a permanent, drought-produced dust storm, the tedium of which is broken only by the occasional blizzard” (*Prairie Realism* 55). Where I do find overlap between my fiction and the type we know from Sinclair Ross or Edward McCourt, such overlap comes not from geography. Admittedly, when I read “Painted Door” in high school, it was the landscape that was most vivid. What did I know of adultery? But a blizzard I could understand, and that ghastly image of the frozen man clinging to a fence. Only now, were I to acknowledge how the story compares to my own writing do I see what resonates: that terrible, hollowed landscape between two people who cannot speak to each other, have no voices that can be spoken or understood. Christian Riegel notes: “Sinclair Ross’ writing during this era is exemplary of this notion of a determining landscape that is a central part of the writer’s figurative strategy *but is only one component of the work, the other being the complex and nuanced depiction of the sociocultural world of prairie inhabitants*” [my emphasis] (87-88). Yet Ross’ stories, removed from their landscapes, would no longer be recognizable. My stories are determined by place; we write what we observe. We make observations on universal human behaviour, but we tend to place our fictional characters into that default landscape of our childhood. However, many of my stories could be uprooted, set elsewhere and still retain much of what they are. It is an admission that I belong to a later generation, that my writing is more urban and transferable. The specificity lies in the characters themselves.

Even in the writings of Guy Vanderhaeghe, thirteen years my senior, the prairie farmscape has retreated somewhat, if not entirely. Aidan Morgan appraises the work of certain Saskatchewan writers, including Guy Vanderhaeghe, that they all, “share an attentiveness to

place....” (1). However, I suggest that attentiveness to place is not the same thing as *bound* by place, something that could be said of earlier “prairie” writers. Perhaps the writings of Edward McCourt represent a transition. Colin Hill, referring to McCourt’s novel, *Walk through the Valley*, states: “[T]here is almost no mention in the novel of the typical travails of prairie farm life that are the central focus of many prairie novels set during the same period. Instead, the central themes of the story are less regional...” (66). Themes can be less regional, but a writer comes from a particular place. My “place” includes the prairies, but it is a prairie with particular farms, towns, and cities, and populated with particular people I have known or observed. What I do recognize in my writing is that it is *informed* by place. Even Rudy Wiebe saw limited usefulness in labelling any writer a “regionalist.” Wiebe said, “I don’t like to think of myself as a regional writer. Certainly a novelist has to be rooted in a place and with a particular people. He has to be specific, he can’t write about people in general” (Melnik, 204).

In many of my stories the protagonists struggle with what it means to be manly. Men, at one time, were considered the primary economic providers. But, in “Unicorns in the Basement,” the protagonist’s career is in danger of spiraling downwards, and, in that spiral, he has cause to question his notion of himself as father and husband. In “Crossing King Street,” the protagonist compares himself to his brother, doubting his own financial success and his own bravado. In “Davey Goes Down,” the man’s image of himself as virile is preserved in memory vignettes he keeps to himself. So, too, the patriarch of a family should be the fount of all wisdom. I speak of “should” from a dated, societal standpoint. Yet, the protagonist in “Danger on the Hanson Lake Road” is unable to teach and is barely able to learn. For the boys in my stories, their masculinity is tested in violence (“Smithereens”), and risk-taking (“View from a Broken Window”). In “The Boy with the Glass Bones,” a boy’s strong heterosexual drive stands juxtaposed to his physical frailty; his masculinity is twice tested by standing up for himself—literally by “rising and puffing out his puny chest” and then tragically again at the end of the story. I am reminded of Guy Vanderhaeghe’s character, Harry Vincent, in *The Englishman’s Boy*. Harry’s dog-eat-dog world of Hollywood has a violence that compares to the violence of the North American “wild west,” but Harry must negotiate this world with a physical disability: a game leg. As Nadine LeGier states: “[I]t is an always apparent part of his identity and affects his navigation through spaces. It is Harry’s disability and the various meanings his disabled body invites that affect him most significantly in his progress through Hollywood. He alternately uses and denies the impact of his



disability throughout his navigation of the city, and he must negotiate tensions in notions of masculinity and assumptions about the disabled male body” (245).

Often the men in Vanderhaeghe’s stories fail to live up to society’s expectations of manly success. Such failure evokes both the theme of masculinity and the theme of emotional distance. Consider the protagonist in the title story of *Man Descending*. He is so far out of the running, in the very-male rat race, that he quits. He cannot relate to his wife or the successful men that surround her. Instead, he embraces failure: “[I saw] a large black Labrador taking a crap on somebody’s doorstep. We established instant rapport” (189). My protagonist in “Unicorns in the Basement” has not quite given up the race, but he senses that he is losing and, as in “Man Descending,” this angst causes erratic behaviour.

Vanderhaeghe has been forthright in describing how his world has affected his stories. In an interview with Nicola Faieta he states:

My generation was often described as particularly masculine, which meant physical prowess (sometimes regrettably associated with violence) and tended to be thought of as atavistic in some sense. So there were a whole series of things considered to be male identity markers that suddenly disappeared. Then the question that arrived was “What is left to define a male over and against what defines a female?” The women had, I think, arrived at a very strong definition of themselves. The men weren’t sure what it meant to be male. Now, I grant that’s a huge, sweeping generalization. But it came to be a question of “What are masculine virtues that are valuable virtues?” And that’s very problematic (265).

Vanderhaeghe’s comments resonate with my own upbringing. In none of my stories did I deliberately write towards a theme such as “confused masculinity.” Themes, if they are there, are merely a byproduct of the characters, as I come to understand them on the page, and as I refine them and add particularity to their conflicts.

The theme of masculinity overlaps necessarily with the theme of risk. To what degree should we take risk or avoid it? The boys in “Smithereens” honour each other for how long each can hang on to a firecracker, at the risk of burns or other injury. When one character’s bravery is questioned, he goes to extremes to prove himself. The theme of risk emerges again in “Keiki Pools,” but the female protagonist fears risk not for herself, but for the apparent danger to an

unsupervised toddler. When she decides to act, there is no fear whatsoever for herself. For my female protagonist, risk, or the taking of risk, forms no part of her self-identity.

Several of my characters seem at odds with their times, as if the currents of change have swept around and past them. At a writers' conference, "Guy Vanderhaeghe... argued that Saskatchewan short stories lean toward the anecdotal and in that way have similarities to the realistic novel. He explained that perhaps that tendency arises because Saskatchewan writers realize that so much of what we have been and are has not been preserved and is escaping us" (Abdou, 42). He refers to more than just grain elevators. Saskatchewan tends to be a conservative place. Changes happen elsewhere, then migrate to Saskatchewan and inform us that we are out of touch. The visible prairie landscape could stay the same, but we have less control over the internal landscape. Technology. Ideas. The way things are done. What it means to be a man. In the same way that Harry Vincent in *The Englishman's Boy* limps through this revised masculine landscape, so do my characters struggle to find new footing. The male narrators in "Smithereens" and "Crossing King Street" are both nostalgic for a previous age, one they remember as being rough-and-tumble. But in "Danger on the Hanson Lake Road" and "Unicorns in the Basement," the male protagonists must gauge themselves on a more modern scale. In "Unicorns," Conrad struggles to keep pace with changes in his workplace and must also reconsider what it means to be a good father and husband. As in "Man Descending," the protagonist's sense that the best part of his career is behind him, drives him to crisis and breakdown. In "Danger," Ernie's self-perception as a fount of knowledge is challenged. But, more than that, his notion of his Canada as a white/traditional/good space is challenged. For Ernie, what it means to be a "prairie boy" is to be open and gregarious.

Between thematic issues (organic, less deliberate) and craft issues (very deliberate) stands the issue of gender. Only three of my stories have female protagonists. We write what we observe, and I observe through a man's eyes and mind. But with those three stories ("Keiki Pools," "Fatty," and "Paradise Penguins Aqua Aerobics Club") I made a deliberate choice to write from a female point of view. Carol Shields once stated: "[I]t is still considered a rare achievement for a man to have created a believable and significant woman, and a woman a believable and significant man.... What is needed is permission to leave our own skins, worrying less about verisimilitude and trusting the human core we all share" (90). Indeed, no character shares all the attributes of the author, and it would be a very boring literary world if we did not

take a few risks. Shields asserts, “observation and imagination may lead us to what we intuitively know, and have known all along” (90). I suggest that, because all genders share the same humanity, there is greater chance of striking true than false.

The risk of striking false is perhaps greater when it comes to the use of dialect or creole. The speech of Aolani Kapule in “Paradise Penguins Aqua Aerobics Club” includes traces of Hawaiian Pidgin English. I could have avoided a character such as Aolani and avoided the challenge, but she is important to the story. Aolani is culturally different from Agnes. By refusing to get to know Aolani better, Agnes denies herself a widened experience—precisely the kind that Agnes’ husband had hoped for her. My ability to write Pidgin, as it is simply known in Hawaii, stems from having been a part time resident of Oahu from 2007 to 2017. I have come to know Native Hawaiians and other locals who use a degree of Pidgin, not always consistently, and perhaps tailored to my mainland ear. I have also relied upon Lee A. Tonouchi’s *Da Kine Dictionary* and Douglas Simonson’s *Pidgin to da Max*. I toned down Aolani’s Pidgin, for example substituting “more bettah” for the more likely “mo bettah” that she might use among other locals.

Many of my craft choices concern the handling of point of view. In some stories, the narrator is not to be taken at face value. Consider the tall tales in “The Last She-Bear of Cypress Hills and Other Stories Told from a Bar Stool.” Or consider the narrator in “The Very Large Woman in the Blue Apron Dress.” The challenge is to keep the voice true yet convey important information to the reader. Where the story is told in third person, one could call the device “unreliable protagonist” instead. But here there is an extra challenge. Normally we believe what an author (or narrator-author) tells us in a story. However, in “Measurements,” I wished to preserve a bit of distance between the reader and the protagonist, a schizophrenic man with autistic co-morbidity.

In other stories, the protagonist, while not “unreliable” in the classic sense, is nevertheless incapable of seeing things that, perhaps, the reader will see. Examples of what I have tried to achieve include “Danger on the Hanson Lake Road,” “Unicorns in the Basement,” and “Crossing King Street.” I think of Ryabovitch in Chekhov’s famous, “The Kiss.” How pleasantly excruciating it is for readers. We want to say, “Come on, man, you’re wasting your life away thinking about one woman instead of embracing life.” The story is full of interiority, despite Chekhov’s admonition against it. Ryabovitch’s thoughts are indeed depicted, but he is

myopic. In my own stories, there are often dilemmas of the same sort. Ernie, in “Danger on the Hanson Lake Road,” cannot see that his narrow settler-centric world has changed. He does not share the clear thinking afforded to the outsider (an exchange student) or to the reader. In “Crossing King Street,” the protagonist is brought to a crisis, as he climbs the trees of his youth, but is unable to see the unhealthy paradigm that was the relationships with his brother. Julia Bell describes these sorts of stories as being ones “in which the character continues blithely on in error off the edge of the page without realizing anything at all, but instead it’s us, the readers, who have the light bulb moment about the character. We are led by the story to a moment of truth about the life of the character, but the epiphany lies entirely with us, rather than in the action on the page” (90).

In many stories, I am frugal with how much character interiority is shown. While some authors feel comfortable in one style, I note how the author, Sharon Butala, has embraced more than one approach: very restrained use of interiority in the short story, “Eden” (155-167), but forthright, and spelled right out in her story, “Acts of Love” (177). In my stories, rather than go full-on “objective third person,” as did Ernest Hemingway in “Hills Like White Elephants,” my choice has often been to write “scene only” but with an occasional view of the character’s sensibilities. The effect perhaps is akin to a dual focal length offered to readers: floating above the character, but occasionally zooming in to afford a thought or rooted perception.

My instinct is to always go with less and, in this, I admit being influenced by writers such as Chekhov and Hemingway. Chekhov warned his younger brother, “[T]o avoid depicting the hero’s state of mind; you ought to try to make it clear from the hero’s actions” (Lamb, 12). I also have an appreciation for the stories of Raymond Carver, whose work has been described as follows: “[w]ith their brevity, plain style and lack of resolutions, stories collected in [Raymond] Carver’s book *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* became an epitome of the minimalist approach to the short story” (Just, 304). Less is more, as they say. But the risk, Just warns, is that less could simply be less (303). At the end of “View from a Broken Window,” Mikey has a physical view of his cousin on the swather. What I hold back from the reader is Mikey’s emotional and mental view. One might suggest that, if Mikey has an epiphany—about where he fits in an adult world—that the writer should simply say so. But that scene distills my artistic intent like no other. I understand the less-is-less risk, but I want readers to bring their own sensibilities to that moment. Instead, I guide them with particularities such as the pencil marks

on the door jamb: Ted 1970, Bruce 1969. I balk at giving the reader Mikey's full thoughts, but still need to put Mikey in that room with the book and the nail. Lamb states: "The writer cannot engage the reader's senses through abstract language. In fiction, unlike philosophy, such prose carries no force" (Lamb, 20). This warning is akin to Flannery O'Connor's advice: "No reader who doesn't actually experience the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched" (Lamb, 20). So, while I resist writing down Mikey's thoughts, I do offer a series of actions, set in a particularized farmyard, culminating in Mikey at the broken window.

Those details—those hard bricks that build—must be true to the story and the characters. Only then can I pare back the interiority. Hemingway said, "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them" (May, 369). I suggest that the pleasure in the "feeling of those things" can be had without the characters themselves sharing those feelings. My protagonist in "Garage Sale" could not think to himself, "I can't fix my marriage, but I will placate my male ego by fixing this damn toaster." Indeed, "thinking things" is the antithesis of my artistic intent. Yet I still need to have the man fix the toaster. I still need to have him mix his rum and coke, have him dump it out and watch it swirl down the sink. Those are the hard bricks I offer.

Most stories in the collection follow a realist tradition. In his introduction to *The Story Makers*, Rudy Wiebe described the short story as "the attempt to draw a picture which makes us recognize, perhaps with a jolt very much like a jolt of fear, 'Ah-h, life is like that'" (xxii). Wiebe's "jolt" is not far off Flannery O'Connor's "glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask" (51). But here is where two of my artistic inclinations intertwine. I believe that those truths are revealed between the lines, jostled out from the page by the actions of the characters. Realism. Restrained interiority. How do my choices fit with other modern authors of short story? Philip Marchand compares two writers: "Unlike the realism of an Alice Munro, the realism of a Guy Vanderhaeghe is rarely enigmatic. It is not hard—usually—to grasp the point of these stories" (F15). Perhaps the difference is that, in Vanderhaeghe's stories, things happen in the conventional "cinematic" sense. There is action. There is conflict. There is a Freytag's pyramid of sorts. If my story type is closer to Vanderhaeghe's than Munro's, perhaps it comes down to

my own concept of realism, a concept necessarily born of my own observations. The glimpses of truth that come to me, come in the aftermath or the imaginings of physical action.

While most of my stories are written in the realist tradition, a few stand out. Both “Tethers” and “Boy with the Glass Bones” contain non-realist premises: the time machine in the former, and human bones played as instruments in the latter. But the two stories are dissimilar. “Tethers” continues with the feel of a contemporary short story: the protagonist is unable to “move on” from his wife’s death, even as the town folk physically and temporally move on. It’s as if, experimenting with the craft, I changed just this one variable. Everything is normal, except of course there is a time machine. But in “Boy with the Glass Bones,” the characters do not act or speak in the manner we would expect in realist fiction. I gave myself license, or rather, I gave my characters the license to be absurd: “As the last note warbled around the operating theatre like a sound effect from *Star Trek*, the two adults locked eyes, leaned in, and kissed each other through their surgical masks—tongues racing around like mice trapped under blankets.” And, if I could have adults like that, I could have mothers with motivations that, in a realist piece, would be dismissed as implausible. In “Boy with the Glass Bones,” Conrad’s mother seems too oblivious to her boy’s pain, as he lies on the hospital bed. She says, “I suppose if something came of it there could be a spot of money in it for him, which is better than what he got from that paper route—splayed out on Ronnie Rueben’s icy front step. Weren’t that awful, Conrad?”

Two of my stories seem to diverge from the realist tradition but are, instead, experiments with point of view. Not everything that appears to happen in “Measurements” actually happens. The story, “Very Large Woman,” seems, in its first few lines, to be outright speculative fiction. But the reader surfs on top of Kevin’s frail psyche. Was there actually a giant woman in the story? I say not. But, if a reader says there was, that is okay, too.

My “Last She-Bear” story, in its awareness of story *as story*, comes closest to being metafiction. There are stories here, then there are stories within stories, and stories about stories. At the most “meta” level, there is the story being told to the unseen “you.” It goes beyond “the story you would have heard” because there continue to be these asides to “you.” Things that the listeners, Chad and Crystal, never hear. What Chad and Crystal do get is a series of stories, ones that are not delivered *fait accompli*. The stories are made in the making, and the characters are active participants. In this, I have considered Rudy Wiebe’s story, “Where is the Voice Coming From?” In it, the narrator makes the readers aware of his presence *as a narrator*. The actual

story, that of the life and death of the Cree man, Almighty Voice, comes at us in snippets, sometimes hidden in the pomp of official proclamations, sometimes surging in “hey injun” poetics. But all the time, Wiebe (or rather his narrator) is aware of this layering, this mixing of vantages. A creation of something new. The narrator says, “The problem is to make the story” (22). At the end, the narrator becomes the listener, but unable to fully understand the “incredible voice that arises from among the young poplars” (31). So, too, in “The Last She-Bear,” the narrator is aware of this making of story: the one he tells to the absent “you,” the tall-tales that he spins from his bar stool, and the creation of something yet again as his listeners interact. In the case of “Last She-Bear,” I also owe a debt to Wiebe for the use of the absent “you” of the story. In “Shadow of a Rock,” such use draws attention to the story *as story*, and jars the reader into questioning where they themselves fit in. “For the purposes of this story you have no wife, no daughter or son...” (358).

I chose not to exclude from this collection the outliers, the stories that diverged from the pattern. The core of the project has been about the development of craft, the testing of how point of view is handled and how such handling can form synergies with emergent themes. But, more broadly, the project has always been about making stories. It is still about Kardos’ “nuts and bolts” and so the outliers are necessary inclusions in this project, proof that the elements of fiction can be combined into fresh forms.

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September, 2020

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