



Pulse

LYDIA KWA

Pulse

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Moreover Jack sees that Jill herself knows what Jill thinks Jack knows, but that Jill does not realize she knows it.

—R.D. Laing, *Knots*

ONE 脈

Becoming possessed happens when you aren't watching. Sneaks up on you. You know without knowing. You mustn't argue with the seduction, the pull of the trance. When the moment arrives, something in you understands it's pointless to resist.

I was set off by the registered letter. When I recognised the handwriting on the envelope, my heart started to race.

I offered our postal carrier a thank-you smile, did my best to look normal as I signed for the letter. Possession is serious, and there's no need to share it with a stranger, especially the man from Canada Post. When he turned around and walked off, I frowned to myself.

How long has it been since I received a letter from Faridah? Far too long. When I get nervous, it helps to focus on minutiae. I can see from the stamped date on the envelope that the letter was processed at the Singapore Post Office on July 17. The *par avion* envelope with its border of red and blue flags boasts three stamps, all bearing an insignia on the top right-hand corner: the dark figure of a lion's head. Referring to the "Singa" in Singapore, the city of lions. One stamp features a pair of blue turquoise fish. I've never seen such pretty fish. The other two stamps are a study in contrast:

one a two-dollar stamp featuring a modern Singapore Bus Service double-decker bus with neither driver nor human passenger; the other, worth only thirty cents, of an electric tram with silhouettes of a driver and nine or ten passengers. I suppose that kind of tram would have been used in the early 1900s in Singapore, after a century of rickshaws and buffalo carts.

I can't risk reading the letter just yet. Have to wait until the end of the day, after seeing my patients. I stuff the envelope into the front pocket of my blue denim wraparound skirt.

I'm dressed for work, wearing a green linen blouse with this skirt, my favourite, a gift from Michelle, who found it at a thrift store on College. I like its clean lines. Minimalist yet funky. The large front pocket is smack in the middle of the skirt, right over my belly, covering my navel.

It's been ten minutes since the letter arrived, but my heart is still racing. I flex my left elbow and find the acupuncture point Heart 3, also known as *Shao Hai* or Lesser Sea. I press it for a few seconds, and then work on the same point on my right side. Then I press Heart 7, *Shen Men* or Spirit Gate, at the crease of each wrist, on the side of my pinky finger. This will bring down my anxiety.

Hiding behind partially drawn curtains in the living room, I watch a group of children playing outside: the two Vietnamese sisters with Hello Kitty barrettes in their hair, the lanky son of Iranian parents and the cute, wide-eyed Korean boy with the mini mohawk haircut, dressed in oversized jeans, a hand-me-down from his brother. Afternoon heat, shimmering along the edges, enters the pores of the children and suffuses them with glee. Sunlight animates the trio of

plastic Canada Day flags, nestled among the cascades of blue lobelia in the planter box across the street.

Our stretch of old brick duplexes and townhouses on Baldwin between Huron and Beverley Streets in the area bordering Chinatown is only a block away from the trendy section east of Beverley. But it's a whole different world here, with its own sublime magic. Beneath the shabby deterioration exists an unconventional beauty. Unbeknownst to many, our street name, nicely transliterated into Chinese characters, means "Precious Cloud".

It's peaceful here. That's the way I like it. Many of our neighbours are immigrants. Some have been here more than thirty years. Others, like the Falun Gong people across the street, only months. Our neighbours are extraordinary people who have triumphed through quiet perseverance, unheralded in the larger social sphere. Some of them have had children only since arriving in Canada, sparing their offspring hardship they themselves endured in the old country. At least I'd like to think so, but I could be over-romanticising.

I turn my head when I sense a slight movement from behind. Must be a mistake: Papa hasn't stirred from his seat. Sunlight filters through the gauze curtains and falls across his lap, razor-thin streaks of light running at an angle to the softer dusk blue waves of his corduroy pants.

Papa doesn't move much these days. The stroke occurred almost two and a half years ago, not long after Lunar New Year in February 2005. That would have been less than a week after we returned from our last trip to Singapore.

Ever since then, Mum and I feel as if we're living with a stranger. Since neither of us can claim to be mind

readers, it's crude guesswork for us to imagine what Papa thinks or wants. During the day, if not prompted, he would sit for hours in his tan Ikea recliner, still as a Buddha. Who is this man with a vacant look and shell of a body? He has recovered some mobility in his right side, but he still requires help when walking, even with the support of a cane. What's worse is the loss of speech: although Papa will occasionally say a few words, he's no longer the man whose confident, booming voice once ruled our home in Singapore.

Oddly enough, music revives him. When we play his favourite songs, he starts to hum some of the lines and sometimes sings out loud. Twice a week, during rehab at St. Michael's, he waltzes gracefully across the floor with his occupational therapist. Debonair. That's when I believe my mother's stories of the charming man who romanced her. Funny yet touching to watch the old man doing the cha-cha with young Miss Turner to the tune of "Tea for Two".

When I was a student at U of T many years ago, I was taught to think of the brain as a conglomerate of site-specific functions. We read about Dr. Wilder Penfield's experiments at the Montreal Neurological Institute. Touch an electrode to a patient's raw, exposed brain and suddenly what seemed long lost is experienced freshly, as if it were happening in the present. Talk about magic. Talk about possession. All it took was a touch to the right spot. A simple and elegant concept. One spot for each memory, one spot for a particular kind of movement.

But Dr. Penfield couldn't settle for what he observed. Despite the compelling power of his own experiments, he wondered if the mind existed beyond the physical limits of the brain. When I read that about him, I was impressed. Now,

that's a true scientist, someone who would remain open to alternative hypotheses. There must have been something Dr. Penfield felt, a hunch that came from being there, holding that electrode to the naked brain. So exposed, almost surreal. Even creepy.

If Dr. Penfield were here in this living room, touching an electrode to Papa's brain, I'm guessing that he would wonder about the mystery of my father's mind, whether Papa might recover and to what extent.

The news in Cantonese drifts in from the kitchen. I can tell that Mum is paying close attention because of the way she crunches crisp shrimp crackers. The rhythm of her snacking seems to track the tempo of the Toronto Chinese Radio announcer's voice. My mother uses her front incisors like percussion instruments. When the announcer mentions the recent killings by Chris Benoit, the professional wrestler known as The Canadian Crippler, the crunching stops momentarily, evidence of Mum's fascination with the case.

Our ancient clock chimes its tremulous melody, lagging a few minutes behind the news.

"Lunch ready," Mum calls out from the kitchen.

The twenty-something-year-old guy across the street revs the engine of his beat-up Yamaha motorcycle. Papa looks blankly at me, but his right hand moves a flicker, shifting perhaps an inch on the armrest. His arm, once muscular and tanned, is now limp and wasted, defined by large age spots and rubbery, wrinkled skin. He moves his mouth slightly. I lean closer to catch the sounds that he coaxes out with great effort.

"Scoo..." he begins. Then stops. Tries again, the hiss harder, more effortful, "Sc-sck-scoo..."

“You mean school? School’s been out for a month now; that’s why the kids are playing outside at this time of day.”

He blinks once, keeping his eyelids shut a little longer. That’s his way of saying no.

He tries again, this time whispering, “No car.”

It was a familiar mantra we lived with in Singapore:
We have no car.

“Scooter?”

He blinks twice for a definite yes. Maybe the sound of the Yamaha awakened a memory in him. Those early days when he used to ride a Vespa. Who knows? Maybe even Papa, in his silent state, is possessed by the past.



After slurping briskly through my bowl of rice noodle soup topped with fish balls and shrimp dumplings, I run into the washroom to brush my teeth. Check my face. I’m constantly told I don’t look my age, whatever that means. Maybe it’s the good hair dye job. I think it means that people don’t want to believe they can’t deduce age from physical appearance, or that mortal decline isn’t merely a tangible phenomenon.

I turned forty-eight recently. June 6, to be exact. That makes me as old as modern Singapore. After all, I was born that momentous day in 1959 when the People’s Action Party (PAP) government, under Lee Kuan Yew, began to run the country, independent of British rule. Even though the country remained part of the Federation of Malaya until 1965, the PAP under Prime Minister Lee took over the running of the island six years earlier, on the very day I

appeared out of my mother's womb, two hours ahead of the government. To have one's existential debut coincide with the emergence of the country's self-government—I couldn't help but grow up believing that my fate could never be severed completely from Singapore's.

Every time I look at my reflection, I swear I can see my maternal grandmother Mah-Mah. I have her eyes. I remember the way she looked on a lazy afternoon in my grandfather's Chinese medicinal shop, Cosmic Pulse, as if her eyes were exploring another realm. Cosmic Pulse was my whole life until Papa decided our family needed to immigrate to Canada, in 1979.

My grandfather Kong-Kong had passed away in January 1978, leaving Cosmic Pulse in Mah-Mah's hands. She relied on Mum and my uncle to run the business until Papa changed all that.

I mustn't get too nostalgic. Too much pain to be had.

Check the time instead. It's 12:40 p.m. as I leave the house. I cross the street and pass the Benjamin Moore store on the corner, go by First Baptist Church on Huron. The sound of *mahjong* chips being shuffled on tables drifts out from the two Chinese organisations near the corner of Dundas. I pop in to the Ten Ren store to get a taro milk bubble tea before I head toward Spadina.

Dundas is noisy, thick with the sounds of Toishan, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog and an occasional flurry of Vietnamese. Cantopop spills from the store selling pirated DVDs. I glance at the display screen just inside. It's Anita Mui performing "Bad Girl".

A few more blocks south, past the twenty-four-hour Asian Farm at Grange, then China City Supermarket before I reach the teashop downstairs from my clinic.

“Hey, Dr. Chia! Why don’t you come in for some herbal tea? *Yit hei, tai duo yit hei*. You work too hard!” shouts Mrs. Kong from the back of the store.

She’s right. Too much heat in my system. I nod in polite acknowledgement. “Sorry, no time right now. Another day!” Then I take the short flight of stairs adjacent to the shop, up to my clinic on the first floor.

Once inside, I open the three windows, one in the small waiting room and two in the treatment room. Take a few deep breaths. The smell of fresh towels lightly scented with lavender competes with the telling scent of yesterday’s moxibustion treatments.

I switch on the fan in the treatment room, making sure to aim it away from the table. Then the quick check, an automatic set of habits I’ve performed for over twenty years. Stainless steel needles wait to be liberated from their sealed paper envelopes. Cotton balls in the glass jar. Cones of moxa, rolled late last night before I left the clinic. Lined up on the square plate like soldiers in Qin Shi Huang’s army. I sigh with pleasure at the sight of my army of moxa, the tiny cones of wormwood that I burn on patients’ skin to unblock channels of energy.

Back in the waiting room, I sit down at the rosewood desk and flip open my appointment book. The LED clock shows 12:55 p.m. First client, 2:00 p.m. Even when I don’t have much to do, I come early just so I have some time to myself. There’s a feeling of privacy in my clinic that I don’t get at home.

Just behind me are two charts, drawings of the female and male bodies, depicting the hundreds of acupuncture points. These charts embody the principles I embrace. The Chinese character for “needle” is *zhen*: the radical for “gold” on the left side, and a symbol on the right that looks like a cross, or an arrow piercing a target. Shamans in the Shang dynasty used needles along with oracle bones to placate the anger of the spirits, thereby restoring harmony between the living and the dead.

I take the letter out of my skirt pocket, feeling momentarily tempted, but quickly slip it to the back of my appointment book. The past is sometimes so present. I was such a bitter young woman when I left Singapore. I feel tears come to my eyes. *Can't indulge, not now.*

From my position behind my rosewood desk, I stare out at the large mall across from me, then farther south to the large old buildings and the sign that announces CHARISMA FURS.

Not far from my clinic is the place where I experienced acupuncture for the first time. I was in my final year at U of T, completing a major in biology, with a minor in psychology. Just before Thanksgiving, I began to suffer frequent recurring nightmares, from which I would awaken confused and terrified. Alone in a dark room, lying on a bed with white sheets, I felt a heavy force push down on my whole being. The bed and I would fall through a deep shaft, toward the centre of the earth. I struggled to free myself, unable to move or speak.

While in the dream, I tried to convince myself that I was merely dreaming and therefore had no reason to be frightened, but some other logic in me insisted that I had

to escape the dream in order to survive. I needed to make a sound, to cry out or scream, because I believed that speech would free the rest of my body and allow me to break the paralysis.

The nightmare kept returning. The world of sleep felt ominous.

Music became my refuge. During sleep-deprived days, hauling myself from class to class, my mind turned to scenes from *The Hunger*. I kept myself fuelled listening to “Bela Lugosi’s Dead”. All through the nights in the genetics lab at Ramsay Wright, as I carefully crossed *Drosophila* flies from F1 generations, watching their progeny and noting down the characteristics, I heard the refrain of “Undead, undead, undead” echo through my loneliness. Walking home at 2:00 a.m., I would sing David Bowie: “*Hunt you to the ground they will, mannequins with kill appeal.*”

The more honest the lyrics about the threat of harm from other humans, the more reassured I felt. I wasn’t the only one afflicted by a prolonged episode of possession.

By the time winter solstice arrived, I was desperate for escape. One afternoon, while trudging through the snow-caked streets of Chinatown, I spotted a sign in the second-floor window of a shop on Huron. Those few lines in English, a translation of Lao Tzu, startled me:

Mere existing

Sheer dead weight

Only in emptiness does life begin.

Even though I didn't have the slightest understanding of what those lines meant, there was something both disturbing and appealing about the notion that emptiness was a prerequisite for becoming alive. There were a few thousand years between Lao Tzu and David Bowie, between Taoism and punk rock, but it wasn't hard for me to imagine the old sage dressed in black in a goth music video, singing those lines.

What did emptiness mean? The saying seemed to imply that inanimate objects didn't possess this quality. *Well*, I thought, *a person could be dead while alive*. Did emptiness have something to do with the ability to move, to change oneself?

I felt dizzy with the effort of trying to make sense of this riddle, and shut my eyes tightly. It didn't take long before I saw bats hanging down from the ceilings of dank caves—thousands of them, their eyes looking out into the darkness. Searching for Dracula, or Bowie, or some representative from the undead that could inform about death, dead weight and the possibility of redemption.

“What the heck,” I mumbled. I opened my eyes and ran up the stairs to the herbal shop. Dr. Ting peered carefully at me, then asked many questions. Next, she told me to stick out my tongue so she could study the signs of imbalances showing up there. Last, she took my pulses on both wrists. She pronounced the problem as “rising fire in the heart” and inserted that first needle into the side of my wrist below my left pinky.

It's impossible to capture precisely what happened. When the needle entered the side of my wrist, an arrow of sensation penetrated further, deep below the skin. It was an

electrifying leap that startled me. I breathed a huge sigh of relief without understanding why. Everything around me—the chairs and books, the glass cabinets, even Dr. Ting’s white coat—seemed to settle more easily within my awareness, as if the world was no longer so threatening that it had to be kept outside.

That was my first encounter with Heart 7: *Shen Men*, Spirit Gate. That magic needle summoned my spirit back and calmed my mind. It was inexplicably powerful.

Five sessions later, my nightmares disappeared completely. I’ve never had them since. I decided not to pursue graduate studies in biology and instead switched to acupuncture, following in my grandfather’s footsteps as a traditional healer.



The afternoon passes quickly as I see three patients one after the other. During a half-hour break at 5:30 p.m., I run to the nearest bakery to buy a steamed chicken bun. Then two more patients, the last appointment being Michelle’s father.

Mr. Woo is seventy-eight, three years older than my father, though he seems much younger. He jokes a lot, eyes glimmering with mirth, and walks with a light step. He likes to take my last appointment of the day at 7:30 p.m. because he says it ensures a good night’s sleep.

On the treatment table, he relaxes completely, with his eyes shut. Unlike my father, Mr. Woo doesn’t mind needles. Besides being my girlfriend’s father, he’s also my *taiji* teacher. He teaches *taiji* and *qigong* at the neighbourhood community centre. During his root canal surgery last month,

he didn't need anaesthesia or acupuncture. That's what I call impressive.

Around the time of his wife's passing, five years ago, his pulses indicated a weakening of the lungs due to grief. He came down with a bad case of the flu and was at risk of developing pneumonia. But he recovered and has remained remarkably at peace.

"Watching soccer lately?" he asks, with a slight smile on his face, eyes still closed.

"No..."

"You and Michelle crazy watching World Cup last year."

I laugh. He likes to tease. It's really his daughter who's soccer mad.

"I only went crazy during the last game."

"Who can stay calm watching World Cup? Even I got excited. What was his name, that man lost temper? Start with Z."

"Zidane."

"Yeah, not enough yin. Need do *qigong*. Can help a lot."

"Are you sure that wasn't you in *Pushing Hands*?"

He smiles. I know he recognises the reference to Ang Lee's movie about a *taiji* teacher. I'm guessing he takes it as a compliment. I put in needles to nourish his kidney energy, needles in the heels of both feet, and needles to disperse heat from his liver meridian—acupuncture points just on the inside of his knees, near the crease. I leave him for twenty minutes, with the needles in him, while I dart into the

waiting room. While writing down some notes in Mr. Woo's file, I glance at Faridah's letter waiting for me at the back of my appointment book.

When I touch Mr. Woo on his arm to indicate we're done, his eyelids flutter open with a gentle grace. After he's left the clinic, I lock the front door and smile to myself. Such a pleasure treating him.

When the sheets and towels are finally in the dryer, I sit down with a cup of ginger tea and pull out the envelope. I tear it open carefully, along the short edge, wanting to spare the stamps. Inside, there's only a single sheet of paper, as fine and delicate as skin.

Faridah's handwriting remains distinctive, her letters shaped as if they belong to a long-extinct language. Unafraid to show flourish. The ink is smudged in a few places.

Dear Nat,

I've struggled countless times over the past week with whether or not to write to you. But I have to, need to.

Look, I don't want you to misunderstand my motivation. True, I had to choose a direction that took me farther away from you, but I've never veered from my feelings of affection for you, nor have I ever doubted that you were devoted to our friendship. I'm sorry it's come to this.

I'm reaching out to you during an impossibly trying time. I feel adrift. We have no idea just how long we still have to enjoy this life.

What an odd and serious beginning. I force myself to stop reading, to pause for a few deep breaths. She still has a way with words. Used to make me feel breathless just listening to her argue with Miss Rajah in class. Dramatic and assertive. That girl I had fallen in love with.

My attention drifts outside, drawn by the mix of voices and traffic on Spadina. Just past 8:30 p.m., but Chinatown still bustles with diners and shoppers. A Falun Gong message from loudspeakers up the street penetrates my consciousness. A few moments later, I resume reading the letter.

How could we have suspected? What's the meaning of this? Our beloved Selim is gone, taken from us. He's dead, Natalie. He killed himself. I was the one who found him hanging from the ceiling in his room. He had rigged up ropes from the overhead light fixtures.

The delicate paper quivers in my hand.

I can't bear to repeat all the details. What words could adequately convey the extent of our loss?

I imagine her at the desk, struggling to write these words down. The paper so thin that, if she had not been careful, it would have been ripped by the force of her handwriting. The next few lines mention the funeral, which occurred already, on July 20, five days ago. But there will be a memorial service in two weeks.

Our son's death has devastated our family. Christina is frightened now of sleeping in her room, which is next to his. She thinks she can hear her brother's voice teasing her late at night.

The police are investigating, as a matter of course, to rule out foul play.

But what a phrase! "Foul play".

I've taken time off work, but Adam can't afford to break down. The teachers and students need him.

I find myself panicking about some unresolved issues. This is also why I'm writing to you. Taking a risk, perhaps asking too much. I wish you could return to Singapore in time for the memorial. It's a need that I can't rationalise away, Natalie. There still exists an ache for what we lost, which, I realise, we can never recover.

There the letter ends, as abruptly as it began. She signs her name, the large flowery "F" and the bold upward tail to the "h" trailing off to the right, as if she never wants to be stopped or held back. That was what she was like, all fiery and rebellious. Her handwriting is as elegant as ever. Devastating news conveyed with a steady hand, yet the words on the page are smudged by tears.

Can't believe it. Selim dead? I fold the letter precisely along the same creased lines. My hands are still trembling.

The neon lights outside glare at me as I start to cry. A hollow sensation comes over me, spreads from the centre of

my torso out toward my arms and legs. I lose track of time.

When I finally pause to wipe my tears away, I decide to check my pulses.

I rest my left hand on the small cushion on my desk and position the index, middle and ring fingers of my other hand along the radial artery on the wrist, taking pulses the way I've been accustomed to doing as a Traditional Chinese Medicine acupuncturist. I close my eyes to concentrate better. The index finger on the *cun* position detects patterns from the heart and small intestine meridians; the middle finger on the *guan* position, from the liver and gallbladder meridians; the ring finger on the *chi* position, from the right kidney and bladder meridians. I begin with the first reading, using a moderate pressure of the fingers, what we call "searching"; next, I apply a firmer pressure for the second reading, termed "pressing". Last, I lift my three fingers up for a light touch, called "touching". Then I take pulses on the other wrist, fingers on the same positions, which indicate patterns of the lung and large intestine meridians, spleen and stomach meridians, the left kidney meridian and the adrenal system.

There are no detectable pulses on both wrists at the light and medium levels of pressure; only when I probe more firmly—at the "pressing" level—can I pick up a faint pulse through my ring fingers placed at the *chi* point on both wrists. The quality of the pulses confirms it: I'm showing the signs of someone in shock, the kidneys and adrenal glands most affected by the news about Selim.

I take a slow, deep breath. *Try to calm yourself.*



My mind is caught in a swirl of questions as I walk down Spadina, heading home.

I used to think that possession was a rare dramatic occurrence, the province of temple mediums.

I'm not a temple medium, but I know what it's like to feel overcome by the force of memories, to feel disoriented and lost, if only temporarily. I shelter my left hand inside the front pocket of my skirt, cradling the letter as I try to focus on the surroundings.

Many of my favourite eating haunts have disappeared, the places I used to frequent after midnight while I was studying at U of T. Delectable displays of barbecued ducks hanging in the window don't have the same power of reassurance for me tonight. A strip of sky is pale yellow behind the storefronts on the west side of the wide avenue, light failing under the weight of dark mauve. Each neon sign is an afterthought against darkness.

I pause in front of the LCBO before I turn onto Baldwin. Wish I could push away the feelings welling up inside me. I count thirteen whites and four people of colour going in or out of the liquor store. Ridiculous habit, but at least it distracts.

When I've had enough, I resume my walk home. By the time I reach our townhouse, the living room is sheathed in darkness, the curtains fully drawn. But I catch a glimmer of light filtering out from the kitchen into our hallway. I don't feel like rushing inside. I stand there, in the cool night air, listening to the silence of the street, shivering as sadness takes hold of me.

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This is a work of fiction. Although some characters and incidents are drawn from history, they have been altered to suit my narrative purposes. Any resemblance to figures living or dead is purely coincidental.

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The layout of Cosmic Pulse was based on a herbal shop called An Tin Tong that existed in the same location on Joo Chiat Road in the 1960s and 70s. Details for the rooms above were inspired by a visit to the Baba and Nyonya Heritage Museum in Malacca.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Kwa was born in Singapore. She now lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. She is the author of three novels, *This Place Called Absence* (shortlisted for the Books in Canada First Novel Award), *The Walking Boy* (shortlisted for the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize) and *Pulse*. She has published two collections of poetry *The Colours of Heroines* and *sinuous*. Her visual art has been shown at Centre A gallery for Contemporary Asian Art in Vancouver. For more information, see www.lydiakwa.com



Credit: Hideaki Kanamaru

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Touch like a pulse.

A young man dies by his own hands, and leaves behind a note urging his mother to remember Godzilla's touch, a reference to her relationship with Natalie Chia in 1970s Singapore.

Pulse is the story of Natalie, an acupuncturist in Toronto's Chinatown who decides to return to Singapore to uncover the truths behind this tragedy. Selim and Natalie, although a generation apart, share secrets that they've kept from their families. Natalie discovers that her past with her domineering father may be the key to understanding Selim's death.

A novel about unrequited love and the compelling power of memory, *Pulse* investigates the disturbing force of personal and collective trauma, while testifying to the resiliency of the human spirit.

“...there is a fullness in *Pulse*, in both characters and settings, that gives the novel colour, complexity and a kind of buoyancy...”

— David Fedo, author of *Carrots and Other Poems*

“*Pulse* relentlessly explores the limits of knowability—cultural boundaries of knowledge, the seemingly impassable divide between one person and another, and the temporal gaps that render memory unstable yet ever-present.”

— In *Canadian Literature* by Chris Lee

“...courageous piece of fiction...” — *NOW Magazine* by Susan Cole



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