



A letter from the author

KATHRYN KUITENBROUWER

Dear Reader,

The civil war sections in *Wait Softly Brother* came easily, as if they were an unconscious analogue to the family strife I was enduring, my own small world at war with itself. It's maybe a cliché of a story to leave a marriage in midlife but, for me, it was a devastating and necessary decision.

My whole career, I've been beguiled by the limits of fiction, its weird admixture of drama and plausibility. The eighteenth century is said to have manufactured the novel as a disenchanting form, an empirical document to parallel the rise of rationality. In my opinion, the novel has never succeeded in disenchanting itself. It relies on its reader's willingness to forgo the rational and enter a space of nonsense. The novel is a respite from, and commentary on, rationality.

There are two protagonists in *Wait Softly Brother*: me and my ancestor, Russell Boyt, who was hired into the American Civil War as a substitute soldier. Substitution came about through enforced recruitment when America's eligible warriors, seeing the carnage in early photographs, decided they weren't feeling all that patriotic after all. A loophole in the conscription act let men wealthy enough to pay a \$300 bounty hire someone to fight in their stead.

In the novel, Boyt becomes a psychological substitution for me. I liked the way that substitution harkened repetition. I knew from trauma theory that we repeat what we cannot resolve. They say you should write what you know but we always do write what is latent within ourselves. And so, I am Boyt, and all the other characters, I am the plot, the landscape, the dialogue. In the story, I leave my marriage and family, I'm miserable, I go home by way of escape, seeking the story of my stillborn brother. Another cliché is that you can run but you cannot hide. I find, once home, that I can't write my way out. The only escape is the truth and no one wants to tell it to me. My parents stonewall me. They put me in the basement where my unconscious festers amid the generations of accumulated keepsakes and in the pigshed to sort the overflow of memento. These spaces present as dreams, the objects fraught with meaning I can't decode.

And it is raining. The global story—the one also born in the eighteenth century—is capital, and with capital comes climate catastrophe. The rain is ceaseless, a percussion to my sense that I am drowning in information and yet the puzzle still won't come together. I can't write myself out of the past, the constraints of the heteropatriarchy, or my own head.

How to use language to tell a different story when language was devised in the image of the predominant story? Fiction, unlike life, wants an arc. A protagonist with a problem to be confronted in three acts, the details put in proper order. **Writing this book has been archaeological insofar as I dust off my own and my family's artifacts. I've made things up, lied. I've written a dream not only to code my wounds but also to salve them. I've also done it for you, dear reader, so that you might ask: is this true? Is this false? What is a life but bricolage? Let you discover from sorting the fiction from the autobiography in *Wait Softly Brother* that you, like me, can create a life outside of the normal way of things and it can be a good one.**

Yours sincerely,

Kathryn