

LISA BIRD-WILSON

BILLY BIRD

Lisa Bird-Wilson (1966-) is a Nêhiyaw-Métis writer from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. As a child she was taken from her Indigenous parents and adopted, which disconnected her from her heritage—an experience that informs much of her writing. She was also a founding member of the Ânskohk Aboriginal Writers' Circle as well as founding president of the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network. The following story was published in the autumn 2008 issue and included in the collection *Just Pretending* (2013), which won four Saskatchewan Book Awards (including Book of the Year) and was a finalist for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award. As Ibi Kaslik wrote in the *Literary Review of Canada*: “Powerful, troubling and painfully real, Bird-Wilson’s short fiction speaks to the emotional, cultural and geographic diaspora of an indigenous culture that is as fragmented as it is historically misunderstood.”

Billy Bird looks through the slits
of his fingers and sees his knees
wrapped in the denim of his jeans
the toes of his runners patiently waiting
politely looking away.
Billy’s run himself down
run it all out in throaty sobs
that caught and choked like barbs
tearing up his insides
and Billy thinks he might be finished now.

IF YOU PUT YOUR HAND to a light like a flashlight you can see through it
to

blood and dark and creases crimson
fingers laced with veins and nerves

and what else Billy can't remember but he knows sitting on the toilet with his pants intact looking at his fingers from this close-up view mashed against his face that he hasn't done that flashlight trick since he was a little boy and he should because he couldn't feel more like a child than he does right now helpless in this public toilet looking through his fingers no idea what he'll do next.

The usual thing is to go home to his home to his woman to the home he's made out of guts and will and need and fear and eventually love he made it at last with one woman and no other way and she's there and he can finally finally convince himself that she'll be there when he gets back, patient and calm and what did he ever do in his life to deserve Shelby besides nothing.

Seven years and no sign
he's going to fuck it up soon

But these times with Billy's grandfather who used to be his Mooshum they make him low and Shelby is just intuitive that's what it is because she knows how to wait him out like a bad cold or bitter weather while he hides his head under the hood of the Chev that he believes in the way some people believe in God or Jesus. He tinkers and slams and mutters and bangs at the altar of the Chev and pretty soon her lack of intervention of response of need to know to ask to see soothes the sore hard lump in his chest below his throat that's raw and the little boy inside Billy slowly gives way his grip like he's had him by the balls all this time and Billy didn't notice until the moment when he got let go. And then Billy can go inside and take a sip of Shelby that eases the knot down to a softer spot where it doesn't pinch and bind so bad.

A little earlier he watched his grandfather watching him touching his stuff.

The grandfather who used to be Mooshum

growled at Billy

but that's okay because now Billy's used to it. And pitched his head about on the pillow. Billy knows his grandfather likes to keep a close eye on his things the dozen or so things that belong to the old man in this whole world all his worldly possessions Billy touches and messes with to agitate the old man to see if Mooshum is still there still in there somewhere. And then Billy comes in here to the public toilet to do his secret weeping thing that's probably not so secret those nurses must have seen it all before.

In the early days at the Rehab Centre Billy's grandfather not his Mooshum would masturbate earnestly making deliberate eye contact with the nurses his one good hand working furiously

convince me convince me convince me

(convince me I'm still alive convince me I've something to live for, even this)

Hopeful good eye casting about

convince me convince me

That's enough now Mister Bird sing-song pleasant voice declaring you're not shocking me little-boy-old-man taking his hand from under the covers his one good hand while he giggles and grins so they have to wipe the drool. Tucking him in straightening him out keeping him tight smoothing wrinkled sheets and applying comfort like a salve with cool competent hands to hover over and offer blessing to a big full-grown man child. This is what's become of his Mooshum Billy's grandfather one arm frozen for all time in a rigid bend, hand a down-turned claw, skin so fine his bones can be seen right there by anyone who cares to look none of it made any better by the nurses who try to feed him so he clamps his lips shut to the mush that Billy hasn't had much better luck at though he's willing to stick with it longer. Some days the old man will take the water but Billy can't deny the dry smell of tepid breath and they say he's lost another twelve pounds.

You can stay if you like

But Billy doesn't like

the curtain zipping shut the yanking open drawers Billy's grandfather throwing his head from side to side on the pillow bloated eyes, neck craning

my things my things

just before she whips the sheets off exposing stick limbs, tugging the gown away and Billy's grandfather who used to be his Mooshum lies stiff in silent protest he has no obligation to aid this terrifying thing. Turned on his side a patch of white dressing down low at the buttocks peeled back to show where the pressure of lying all day has broke open the old man's skin to a crater the size of Billy's head Billy can see the hole goes right to the bone raw and flaming edges hopelessly determined to divorce themselves from one another rather than cooperate and reconcile and Billy thinks

when did this get so worse

The nurse gone the woman in the next bed begins her scream again thigh high stumps thrashing Billy doesn't need to see to know it's happening just the way it's happened every day for the last how many months or years the woman is ignored her flaccid grey hair pushed away from afflicted full-moon face eyes searching and of course no one comes. Billy's grandfather groans low and deep and Billy wipes crusty tears with a damp cloth. No less than eight beds a mixed ward modesty rendered irrelevant women and men stripped and sponged and when no family are present there seems little reason for privacy curtains. His grandfather's silent weeping isn't new he's been doing it for years—around the same time he started stopping to eat. Sometimes he used to laugh—slyly like someone told him a dirty joke

Billy Bird heard his Auntie

call his grandfather an ugly word

a vegetable

convince me convince me

convince me this is the man

the same man who as a boy saw his own beloved Mooshum attacked by a demented *muskwa*. The story Billy knows so well

tell me again Mooshum

Billy's been mad at his Mooshum for twenty years for not being able to tell him the stories

tell me who I am Mooshum

a Mooshum should tell his grandson the stories.

Stories about who his Mooshum used to be make meaning for Billy—both of them, Billy and Mooshum, christened William Bird and because of that namesake Billy had grown up thinking of the *muskwa* story as being about himself and his own Mooshum—a whole two generations removed from the facts but not so removed from the truth in the mind of Billy blood memories running deep.

The elder Billy Bird was witness to the day in the season *miyoskamiki* when the frogs will start their singing right before dusk—a great sickly bear burst into the small cabin Billy shared with his Mooshum. Young Billy Bird crouched behind the wood box sending spiders scurrying, the scent of sap and fresh cut wood enfolding him as the murderous look in *muskwa*'s eyes turned his knees to jelly. The bear rose up ten feet in the air towering over his Mooshum the big man Billy had known all his life now *kiseyinis* old

and small in *muskwa*'s shadow.

Mooshum lashed out at the bear with a first pre-emptive strike and it seemed to Billy his Mooshum had himself turned into a *muskwa* rising to slash the bear with the razor sharp claws of a fire poker that tore half of *muskwa*'s face away with a single blow sending him reeling the animal shaking his snout with such furious wonder little Billy Bird was splattered with a warm red cascade. *Muskwa* swiped one massive paw belting out his fury in time with Mooshum's bodily thump as he was flung across the room easy like an old muskrat pelt. The bear pounced and set to work throttling Mooshum until it seemed he would tear his head off finally stopping after seconds that seemed like forever great steaming breaths escaping from his massive snout. Billy watched as *muskwa* turned to look directly into his eyes. It was then that Billy felt the fiery surge spread as he wet himself and *muskwa* lumbered his way before hurtling through the open cabin door and into the woods. The *onipahtakew* (murderer) was gone.

Billy remained behind the wood box until well into the night unable to loosen his grip on the rough-hewn boards, tiny red spiders zigzagging across his fingers. The door of the cabin torn clean off, the angry buzzing of flies around Mooshum's bloody head bringing Billy to his senses enough to be afraid of other animals who might come for the smell of fresh blood. He found the courage to move from his hiding place to fix the door over its frame and build a large fire the first lonely night spent sitting beside the body vainly trying to prevent ugly blue-black flies from laying eggs in tangled flesh. In the morning, Billy prayed to the east and the eagle as his Mooshum had taught him before dressing the body in a shroud made from Mooshum's clothing finally leaving to follow the road that led to his parents and siblings. His Mooshum was buried behind the cabin after a three-day wake.

It was this story of his Mooshum's own Mooshum that inspired Billy's anger over the erosion of his grandfather's dignity bit by bit year after year stripped of the largeness of his life as Billy's Mooshum. *Tell me the stories Mooshum. A Mooshum should tell the stories.* For twenty years this plundering had been occurring sometimes while Billy had been away in prison where he couldn't see it and other times right under his nose.

At night after one of his visits Billy would consider the turns in his own life—his name well known by local cops and JP's an unhappy drunk to be

counted on to smash a few skulls after last call at the Prairie Inn or Embassy but then a thing had happened between him and Shelby. First Shelby made it known she was special different from the girls he usually went with and there was no question about that and just because she knew about his past in jail didn't mean he wanted her to have to visit him there. Second Billy heard one night he was going to be a father and it was what he needed not as another excuse to slop away a twenty-six but to find himself tired of bar rooms and split-knuckle hangovers. He got a punishing job on a construction site that offered all the overtime he was willing to take and he worked his body into submission until he no longer craved a drink was too exhausted to lust after any fight he moulded a new reality out of sheer resolve to impress and to be a good father and when that unborn baby died one night in an oily hemorrhage of grief and panic he still denied it as any excuse to pick up a bottle. All that time his Mooshum was there in the Watershed Rehab Centre mashing his head into the pillow and laughing slyly.

Billy returns to Mooshum's room just as the nurse is finishing she leaves Billy with his cheek on the pillow lips whispering into the old man's ear a chant something like this

convince me convince me

and when she returns not long before her shift is up Billy's gone and Mooshum lies quiet on the pillow his bent arm at ease the woman in the next bed halting her screams to listen to the mighty *muskwa* bawl outside the window her hands on her face so she looks through the fine red stream of fingers

ruby flowing tendril threads
a Nêhiyaw-Métis sash.