

Wonder and Resonance: Fiction/Non-fiction

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**Of course this isn't true.
It just feels like it.**
Brenda Draney

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Sometimes I think that everything that I have done is a painting of my mom.

I am trying to make her a monument.

I am trying to honour her.

I am trying to answer her.

I am trying to resist her.

When I was in grade six, my hometown flooded. I was at home with my mom and sister. If you saw us, you might have thought we were bored. I looked out the kitchen window. Then the living room window. The gutters were filling up. My mom was on the phone. I was worried.

On March 27, 2014, a Truth and Reconciliation event took place in Edmonton. People came from all over. I was sitting in a giant room while someone at the front announced that over ninety survivors had given statements that day. These people had travelled, found parking, stood in line, and recounted their histories. Why? And how had they found it in themselves to act with such intention and strength? "Would the statement givers stand so we may honour you?" The woman beside me couldn't stand. She raised her arms. I hope I am that strong.

Sometimes I am at home and restless. I don't know why. It must be the studio calling me. But when I get there, I am at a loss. I don't know what to do. I am drawing, working some ideas out, looking at images. Nothing is quite right. "What did you want from me?" I ask. But who am I even asking?

In the struggle, in the restless and feeble-seeming attempts, that's where the work is. But while I am struggling and searching, that's not how it seems. I am filled with panic. Maybe I have done my last painting. Maybe I need to do something else. Maybe this feeling is a signal. It feels futile, like making up a job for yourself. Until it feels like prayer.

Everyone in my town knows the story of the flood. There are even T-shirts. "I survived the Slave Lake Flood."

It seems like everyone in Alberta knows the story of when my town burned. But there were photos along with the stories.

When Slave Lake was burning, I was at home in Edmonton. I was trying to find out where my mom was. I was watching the television, computer, and mobile phone screens. My mom and my auntie Bertha were in the vehicle behind my cousin, Winona. They were part of a procession of

red taillights through orange smoke. They went to a hotel in Edmonton and stayed there for weeks, looking at screens to find out when they could go home and what they would go home to.

The Sawridge Hotel in Edmonton where my family was staying is owned by the Sawridge Band. This is my band. There was a giant room in the basement of the hotel. It had a television that was always turned on to the news. There was a line of tables piled high with donated clothes. There was also a buffet, which was switched out at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Auntie Bertha said she had not felt this way since residential school. I had never heard her speak about residential school before.

It was snowing during my artist talk for this exhibition. And I was thinking about the floods in Calgary. I listened to the people who live there, who were there during the flood. They would describe the places where the water was, sometimes gesturing, palm down, as though they could push the water back. I worried about how I could set my stories responsibly here, where the water had been.

Empathy is the best way to tell a story. Walter Benjamin suggests that all storytellers have some counsel for the receivers.

Knowing where to set your stories is important. But how does this work for painting? Maybe the physicality is an indicator. You will physically carry this thing into the gallery, so you will at least notice it. Maybe it makes things clearer to have a physical thing of an objectively measurable size that you can account for, that you can make accountable. You can also see how the maker experienced the weight and the size, so you may be empathetic.

The streets were filling up with water. My mom was on the phone with someone else, looking out the window at all the grey wet. There was a man walking by. I was thinking about his shoes. His hat blew off onto our front yard. He scooped it up and picked up his pace.

We go over the same stories over and over and over again.

This repeating is a learning thing.

There is a relationship between the paintings I make and the stories I tell. But they are not the same. So I was thinking about telling the stories of the paintings.

This part is about lying.

There are things not talked about in my family. This makes the stories more complicated.

My sister walks around the gallery. She looks at my paintings. We are quiet as we walk side-by-side. These paintings are, as Kara Walker might describe, in the temple of her familiar. So my sister is looking at these paintings as though she is looking at something of her, or something that she made. She guesses at what is there and then looks to me for confirmation. I give it to her. Even if she isn't right.

I am not the only one who calls these stories and histories my own.

I am not the only one who has been shaped by these stories.

I am not the only one who has shaped these stories to me.

I am not the only one who needs these stories to be a particular way.

If I want to tell a story I must have a secret escape route. From implication, from incrimination, from forcing my story upon others, from resistance. In the paintings there can be stand-ins and omissions. But then I have created something else again. Is it trustworthy? Decisions have to be made. Which parts are the most honest? Why is it important to be honest here and not there? My paintings can be coded.

After the Truth and Reconciliation Event in Edmonton, my mom still had some questions. She was a bit bothered. I thought I knew why, I guessed. Who did the statement givers imagine the receiver to be? Who are these statements given for? Are they congruent? Are the reasons also the same?

Mom nodded. "They have their own reasons. But some people were so angry. That's okay, but what if they are not always so angry? What if things look differently in seven years? The statements will not be amended."

The statements will not be amended.

Here is a story that I have never told anyone: When I was thirteen or so, I was babysitting my younger cousins. Their late father was my maternal uncle, Chief Walter Twinn. Their home was beautiful to me. It was easily the largest and most beautiful house I had ever been in. My cousins were outside playing. I would



Brenda Draney, *Procession*, 2012
Oil on canvas



Brenda Draney, *Evacuation*, 2013
Oil on canvas

walk around the house so that I would see them running around like sprites. But I wanted to stay in the house surrounded by the heavy red curtains in the den, the birds on the dining room chandelier, the large George Littlechild paintings, the headress up high near the rafters. I went to the master bedroom. I had been there before with my aunt but never alone. I went into the closet, and looked out the window. There was the small white house where my uncle Richard lived. Before him, my uncle Sam lived there, and before him, my Kohkom.

But there I was, looking at my aunt's jewelry. I knew I wasn't supposed to. But they were things I was sure I would never have the chance to see again. So there I was holding onto these beautiful things, looking out at the profile of the small white house my Kohkom used to live in, when my uncle Walter walked in. He may have said something to me. I don't remember. I was so ashamed. I left the room and couldn't quite look at him. Whenever I saw him after that, I felt like a criminal. We never spoke about it. Maybe that was a small mercy. My mom would have made me apologize if she knew.

After my uncle Walter died, I felt robbed of knowing such an interesting person. My aunt Catherine said he loved me and he would have liked to know me more. I wanted to believe her.

Do we tell stories to unburden ourselves? Stories can be so heavy sometimes. Even then, they may invite someone to the table. And that is empathy.

That little white house is still standing beside my late uncle's. After my uncle Richard, my cousin and his wife lived in that house. And then my uncle Richard again. Now there are plans for my mom to move in. It's remarkable how much a house can take.

The water was getting higher. It was moving onto the grass. Rose, who was renting a room in the basement, came to the house. Her car was small and red. So she had to abandon it, as the streets filled up. She was wading over to our house, yelling for us. Watching her, I stood on the concrete front step and felt it unsteady beneath me.

My mom and her sisters attended the Truth and Reconciliation event in Edmonton last month. They couldn't go for all the days. It was too much. My mom came to my house

afterwards. We talked and laughed and that felt good. Then she was talking slower and more quiet than usual.

She was so tired.

She was so tired.

She put her hands on her face. She went to bed.

She spoke a bit the next day. She said that she, like so many, started to remember things long since forgotten. She would tell me stories. I would touch the table, press my feet to the floor. I had to feel gravity.

I have a profound responsibility. I must do justice to my mom and her history by holding onto whatever she tells me.

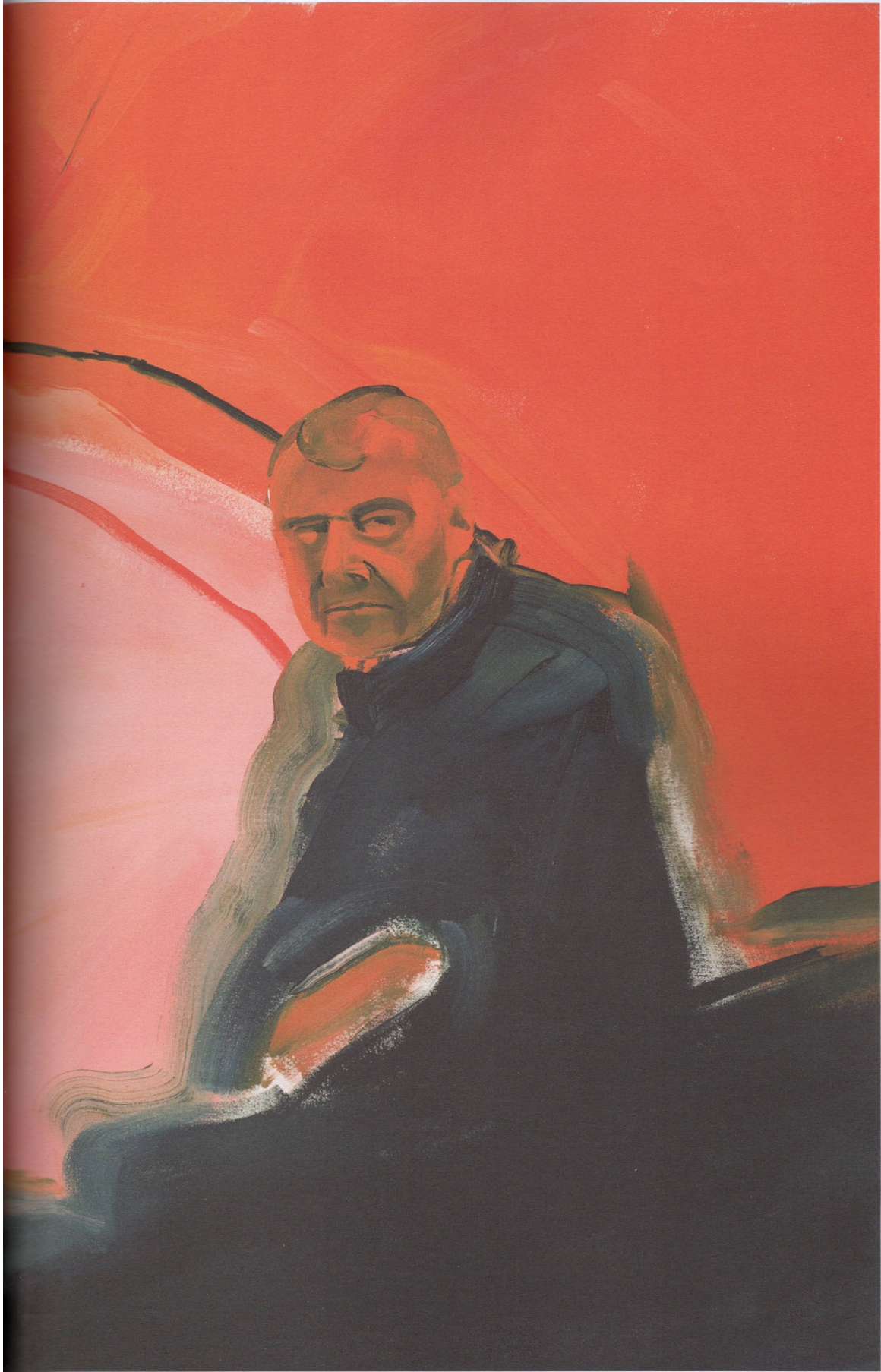
It's too much. And it's not enough.

We needed to leave the house. There was a truck waiting in the back alley. We went to the back door. I looked at the truck before descending the stairs into the cold brown water.

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Brenda Draney, 'Of course this isn't true. It just feels like it.', in *Wonder and Resonance: Fiction/Non-fiction*, Esker Foundation, Calgary, Canada



Brenda Draney, *Tent*, 2013
Oil on canvas
Collection of Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre



Brenda Draney, *First Tent*, 2012
Oil on canvas



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Brenda Draney, *Night Sky (for Sandy)*, 2013
Oil on canvas



Brenda Draney, 'Of course this isn't true. It just feels like it.', in *Wonder and Resonance: Fiction/Non-fiction*, Esker Foundation, Calgary, Canada



Foreground: Jeffrey Gibson, *Call and Response*, 2013
Thirty cement blocks, elk rawhide, artificial sinew, coloured pencil, and acrylic paint
Courtesy the artist, Marc Straus, New York; Samson, Boston;
and Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Calgary