

The Stone Collection



Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm

Sarton Women's Book Award Finalist

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Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm

HIGHWATER
PRESS



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For my beautiful sons Kegedonce and Gaadoohn. I love you every minute of every day, all the time, no matter what.

For my boy Theo and for Teddy and all Indigenous babies and children hurt while in the care of Child and Family Services.

For Michael Akiwenzie and all of the other children who entered the Indian Residential School system and never made it home again.

For all of the missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.

We remember.



stone song

like stones are alive
like stones dream stillness
like stones are alive
like stones hold energy
like stones are alive
like stones store history
like stones are alive
like stones hold story
like stones are alive
like stones dream winter
like stones are alive
like stones are alive
like stones are alive

you are the earth in winter

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PICKING STONES

YOU RIDE BIKES PAST THE LUMBER MILL TO A SHELTERED BEACH. Leaving your bikes you walk, finding a large piece of driftwood to shelter you from the wind. The wind is steady. Riding there she pointed out spots of interest, spinning small webs of understanding for you. You watched intently. Sometimes you just watched her, concentrating so seriously on her that you lost track of what she was saying. She is one of those people whose movements speak very strongly, very clearly even when you aren't yet capable of fully understanding. So without forethought your mind locks on what she is doing, the way the muscles in her legs propel the bicycle forward, the way her hands grip the handlebars, the way her lips form each word, the way she exerts a steady, silent presence in the pauses. Her words slip past you sometimes, taken whizzing past your ears by the wind. And somehow it's okay.

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It's okay even though what you do hear knocks you on the skull.

As you rode your leg muscles began to twitch and your breath began to grow ragged around the edges. Then you noticed with some embarrassment that she continued to talk evenly, peddling with an easy rhythm despite the many more years she has weathered. You secretly blamed the wind, the borrowed bicycle, your fear of testing the gears, but you continued watching, listening, and propelling the bicycle with your legs. You continued to concentrate on her and began to suspect that there is some other form of communication occurring between you. Some form of communication that you are only vaguely aware of and that you have never experienced before.

Now in front of the driftwood you sit and talk. You pick at rocks and shells. Examining them, replacing most, pocketing a couple. One that is typical of the rest, that will remind you of the place, the people, the talk. One that is special, that will remind you of the beauty you found hidden in certain people, places, words. Then you stretch out on your side, listening, soaking in the place, her presence, still looking at bits of the shore as she tells you some small fragments of what she knows. And the stones are like stories piling on the shore of memory.

The lumber mill has ripped the face off the hill.

The people allow it in exchange for money and, in the past, a few jobs, she tells you.

But the jobs, like eroding pieces of the hill, are gone now. Still the money allows them to keep the land, that's what they say. The land that is slowly falling into the sea.

Easy for you, you have good-paying jobs, they say. And there is no easy response. So the hill is sacrificed bit by bit for now in the hopes the people will have a future. Easy for the lumber mill. Difficult for everyone else.

You rise together and walk. The shore, as far as you can see, is covered in stones. You imagine each one is a story she has told

PROLOGUE

to other listeners on other bike rides, other walks. Then stopping, stooping, you scoop up a handful of stones, pebbles, shells. As you let them sift through your fingers, you notice one, a little different from the rest. You notice its texture, imagining the layers of silt that have combined with incredible forces of energy to form this solid piece of earth. You notice how the movement of the waves has worn the rough edges smooth, how the stone is solid in your hand and soft against your skin. Clutching it in your palm, you feel its energy pulsing into your flesh, and it becomes part of your memory, your mind memory, skin memory, muscle memory.

You skip along the stones knowing without looking that she is just ahead of you and to the left, waiting. She jumps onto a rock to scan below the surface while you catch up. Just as you reach her you stop and dip your hand into a little pool along the shore. Is it cold? You wiggle your fingers then look up. Yeah. But not enough to make your bones ache. You add that last bit with just a hint of bravado. Wouldn't want to go for a swim though. You both smile.

You jump up on the rock, and the two of you stand together. The sea isn't yielding what she wanted to show, so she continues walking, and you follow. She picks up a plastic shampoo container washed up on the rocks. Japanese, she says. Those boats are supposed to stay 200 kilometres offshore. You glance at the container, noticing the foreign script. Later you come across a rusting oil drum. You both stop and look at it, saying little. She sets the shampoo container down eventually as you walk.

At a small pile of oval whitish rocks you stop. You pick one up. It's lighter than expected. She turns and watches.

Pumice.

You nod, rubbing your finger against it.

You can use it to rub away dried skin, calluses. Again you nod. Do you have it where you're from? she asks.

Nah, we have to buy it.

THE STONE COLLECTION

It's lava rock. Take some, she says simply.

Okay, you agree, bending over and selecting a smaller-size stone that you stuff into a pocket with the other stones you have collected.

And so you walk along, talking, stopping to look at stones, birds, a beached buoy, shells. You walk along chatting easily, sometimes saying nothing. And the silence is light and easy between you.



It's Not So Much

IT'S NOT SO MUCH BEING DEAD HE MINDS, IT'S THE WAY IT happened, he likes to tell the other Invisibles.

What freakin' difference does that make? Tony would always ask. You're dead! He's always a real smartass like that.

Then Kowhai or one of the others would tell Tony to shut up, and a big argument would break out. Good thing Invisibles are also Unhearables, I tell them, what with all that racket going on all the time. Sometimes though I wish some of my friends could hear them too. Some of it's pretty funny. Some of it makes those little hairs on the back of my neck rise like little ghosts. Those Invisibles have seen some crazy stuff, and they just love to talk about it.

Like take Jervis. Always on about the way he died. Made my skin crawl the first few times I heard it. The first time I heard him I went to talk to my Mishomis.

He was sitting on a tree stump outside the old place. Ahnee, I say to him.

Ahnee, he says back. Then he points his lip at the blue-and-white nylon lawn chair beside him. So I sit down. It was one of those grey November days. The ones where it snows, and it seems like the whole world is melting just like the snow is melting, and everything is damp and cold. Together we watched the snow turn to small grains of ice falling from the sky.

aHmmm, I say to him.

Ya know, he says, it's not so much the cold, it's the dampness.

Yeah. I wrap my arms around myself. Wasn't so damp last night, I say. He doesn't say anything. So I say, I was sitting there in my room, and that door opened, and I could hear footsteps, but no one was there. Was pretty cold though, eh. He looked at his hands, so I went on. Yeah, so anyway I can't really see him, but I know someone's standing there beside me like he's just waiting, so I say to him, hey, whaddaya want?

I blow on my fingers and hunch my shoulders to keep warm. I clear my throat before I continue.

I don't hear anything at first. Then I hear kind of a buzzing like there's a fly trapped in my ear, moving down my ear canal. Then I hear this guy yell, how about now? Can you hear me now?!

Just about jumped through the ceiling. Geez, I say, ya don't haveta yell. You're new at this, hey? Ya scared the crap outta me.

He told me his name was Jervis. So I said, Jervis, buddy, you're dead. And he said, Yeah. He said it wasn't so much being dead he minded, it was the way it happened.

Mishomis stares at the trees across the road. So I stare at them too.

Got a smoke? he asks after we've been staring for a while. I'm not supposed to smoke, but I pull out my pack, hand him a smoke, and take out one for myself. I take out my Bic in that beaded case

IT'S NOT SO MUCH

Pechi made for me when she liked me, and I lean over to light his cigarette first. Mishomis sucks his cheeks in so far I swear they musta hit each other inside his mouth. But I don't say anything. I just light my smoke.

He blows the smoke out real slow, real long. Like I think he's gonna pass out or that his lung's gonna collapse or something. Real slow. And just staring across the road the whole time.

I blow smoke rings for a while. By now we're covered in a thin film of ice and I'm starting to shiver. It really is the dampness, not the cold that soaks into your bones.

We both stare at the horizon, that old man and me. The sky is that strange translucent grey-white colour it gets in November. The maple trees across the road are bare, poking their scrawny fingers at the navels of clouds. In the distance the escarpment looms, one of four limestone warriors protecting the land, the people, and the sapphire bay curving around our peninsula. There's not a bird above us, not a bird in those bony trees, not a sound except the sound of my breathing. Mishomis is blowing cigarette smoke at the sky.

So, I say.

He shrugs. One time when your Gramma was visiting her sister someone sat in the rocking chair by the fire all night. Mighta been that uncle she inherited the chair from when her mom died. Maybe. He inhales slightly then exhales real slow again. Said he'd been trying to walk home from one of them residential schools. No boots, no warm clothes. He's shaking so bad he falls down; after a while he stops shaking, and he falls asleep. He said it was the wind, and the damp. Mishomis takes four big drags from his cigarette and blows it towards the tops of the trees. Then he sits there looking at the sleet dropping onto the dry leaves that stretch from his feet to the maple trees and disappear over the edge of the escarpment. I put out my cigarette butt with my fingers and place it on the cold ground at my feet, covering it with a few dried pieces of leaves and grass.

THE STONE COLLECTION

That tobacco ain't jus' for blowing smoke rings, he says.

That Jervis can be a real pain in the ass.

Comes running into the house, yelling like a crazy person.
They found him! They found him!

Who, I say. Geez, Jervis, who?

Suddenly I'm outside, it's drizzling, and I'm walking down a road. I can hear tree branches rattling. Then there are lights shining in my eyes. Next thing I know I'm in an old shed. It's pitch black except for a bit of moonlight falling through where some boards fell off near the roof. Look at the truck, I hear, but I can't see whoever's saying it. All right. All right, I say. Ever pushy! Then I'm staring at a truck bumper, and there's a dent and scratches in it. A shiver runs from my tailbone up to the base of my skull. Next thing I know I'm staring at an outhouse. Then a rock.

Mom gives me a funny look at breakfast. I'm reading the back of the Cocoa Krispies box. This is crap, I say. Pure crap! We shouldn't have this stuff in the house. Mom raises an eyebrow. Well, I say, it is. We should eat porridge. Dad walks over, grabs my bowl of cereal and the box of Cocoa Krispies, marches past Mom, and flings it all out the patio door.

Hey! I say.

Mom and Dad are wiggling their eyebrows and pursing their lips at each other, and their eyes shimmer like moonlight on the bay.

Hey, I say. I was eating those!

Later Mom asks me what's wrong. Well, actually she said, "Who shit in your Shreddies?" but that's what she meant.

IT'S NOT SO MUCH

That damn Jervis, I say.

How is he? she asks.

Dragged me all over the place last night, I say, and I tell her about my dream.

Hmmm... she says. What was it you saw at the end?

Some stupid outhouse, I say.

A what? she says.

You know, an outhouse. She looks at me like I'm speaking Chinese or something. A toilet, a privy, a.... a john! I say real exasperated like.

Oh, she says and grins.

And then a small rock, I say.

A what? she says.

A what? Am I speaking English, 'cause I'm starting to wonder. A rock, I say sighing. You know, a rock? One of those hard things Jack's head is filled with?

She gives me a blank look like I'm speaking Tibetan or something.

A rock, a little rock... you know, a small, little rock....

More blank stares. A big pebble, a small boulder, a.... a stone, I blurt.

Oh, she says and grins again.

Oh, now you get it, I say real sarcastically, because hey, I'm a 17-year-old guy, and sarcasm and silence are what we do best in these situations.

A john and a stone, I repeat, emphasizing the words *john* and *stone*. She puts her hand in front of her mouth and giggles.

Ha-ha, I say, very funny. I try to say it real angry, but I feel like an idiot.

THE STONE COLLECTION

Hey, says Dad.

I look at him. He's kneeling in front of the woodstove placing wood in as if he's building a house of cards. Careful.

I go over and sit in the rocking chair.

That brother of yours is pretty smart, he says.

A smart ass, I almost say, but I don't. Dad doesn't like it when I call my younger brother names. Guess so, I say.

Taught himself how to make elm bark baskets after we saw them ones in Saratoga last year. Coming back from that Leonard Peltier march.

Yeah, I say. But bark ones don't last. He should make them out of old plastic pop bottles or ice cream tubs. Recycle and all that. That'd be smart.

Hmmm... says Dad.

And they'd last, I say.

He strikes a match, and smoke rises from the centre of the wood pile. He blows on it, and it crackles and flares.

Nothing lasts, he says.

The fire is spreading, and we watch it licking at the kindling and moving to the larger blocks of cordwood.

You better bring in some more wood, son. Gonna get our first winter storm tonight.

Okay, I say, and I stand up. How can you tell? I ask him.

Tell what? he says.

That it's gonna storm.

Oh, he says, that. See that window there? he asks, nodding his head to the side.

Yeah, I say, and I go over and look at the sky. It's darkening, and I can see swirling grey clouds moving towards us from across the bay. Oh, I say.

IT'S NOT SO MUCH

Yeah, he says, now turn to your left. More...more, okay, stop. Now I'm staring at the TV. Weather report comes on every 30 minutes, he says.

I sigh. Being Anishinaabe is to be surrounded by jokers. A regular laugh a minute.

Hey, says my dad.

I look at him.

If you see a cereal bowl out there bring it in. He looks at me. For the porridge tomorrow.

Okay, I say, and I sigh right at him.

Hey, says my dad.

I look at him.

Tobacco is one of the gifts from the Creator.

I hang my head. Maybe I turn red. I'm not sure if it's noticeable but my ears and cheeks feel burning hot. How did he know? I'm thinking.

Maybe I could smell smoke on you, Dad says, which makes my forehead turn hot too. I feel like I was standing there in my underwear, and now they've just fallen around my ankles.

Or maybe it came to me in a dream, maybe you act like someone who's been doing something he knows he shouldn't, or maybe your grandpa told me....

I shift from one foot to another. I want to say, But Mishomis was smoking too! But I don't.

Or maybe when I was walking back from cutting wood up on the bluff I saw you.

Shit, says Tony, you a jerk or what? Sits right out where anyone can see him, blowing smoke rings.

Yeah, says Jervis, you really should be more careful.

Look who's talking, says Tony.

Leave him alone! says Kowhai. You're such eggs.

Yeah, says Nani, grow up. He's trying to talk to his dad.

What? says Tony. It's true. One's just about as smart as the other. Shit. Right out in the open where anyone can see.

That starts an even bigger argument, and soon they're all yelling about how dumb I was. Like was I really incredibly dumb or just dumb enough to do something stupid once in a while. And they shout examples of my stupidity at each other to support their positions.

Oh, just shut up about it, would ya! I finally say. Can't I do anything without you watching?

Hey, says my dad. And he turns and stares at me. He raises his eyebrows and crosses his arms across his puffed-out chest. He looks like a wrestler.

Jervis...Jervis and them, I say. Not you, Dad. And I pull on my gloves so fast I look like O.J. Simpson struggling to make my own gloves fit. Better get that wood, I say. My ears and cheeks are on fire.

Jervis, Tony, Kowhai, and Nani laugh all the way out to the woodpile.

Jerks.

I had a girlfriend too, says Jervis out of the blue. Then he pops a picture of her into my head so I nearly drive the truck off the road, and Jack says, and I quote, Hey, perhaps I should assume control of this vehicle.

You drive? You don't even have a license, I say.

True. However, at least I am capable of driving straight on a straight road, he says.

I scowl at him.

Pretty, hunh? says Jervis. I don't answer him.

Mistake. He flashes her picture in front of my eyes again for longer this time.

Geez! I yell, waving my arm in front of my face.

IT'S NOT SO MUCH

Hoh-laaay! says Jack, as we zigzag on and off the road. Jervis? I pull over and let Jack drive. Take the back way, I tell him. There're nothing but back ways, he says.
Whatever.

He puts his pow wow CD in the stereo. I get to select the music since I'm driving he says. There's not much I can say since I made the rule. I figured it'd be a while before he could drive, so it seemed pretty smart at the time.

Whatever.

You know, says Jack, you should do a ceremony for Jervis.

What? I say.

A cer-e-mo-neee, he says.

I look out the window. Jervis is nattering away in my head. The truck's kinda like this one, he says. Except bigger. And without all that rust. Faster too I bet. And the high beams both work.

What ceremony? What are you talking about?

You should go to see that old man. You should ask him about participating in it. I heard him discussing that ceremony, eh. He pauses, undoubtedly for effect, then he starts talking real slow like the old men do. He clears his throat. It was during the time of the Ground Freezing Moon, just after the new moon, during the time of...uh...when I...uhm...when I had seen 15 winters. Even Jack seems temporarily confused by that, and his eyebrows bunch up on top of his eyes.

We sit there in a stunned silence for a moment, calculating. Oh brother! I groan. You mean last week?! He ignores me.

That old man, he spoke as the sun moved across Father Sky, Jack says, and it was then I knew Jervis would like....

I can still see those headlights, Jervis is saying. Ironic, eh?

Oh, yeah, I say interrupting, isn't it ironic! My voice fills the cab like a hundred arrows flying. Jack stares at me—he knows I hate it when he does that.

So if you know so much why doesn't Jervis talk to you?! I growl at him.

Jack's hands clench the steering wheel, and he stares straight ahead. His mouth is a straight line.

Yep, says Jervis, it was just like this truck.

My heart starts pounding. Beads of sweat form on my temples. It feels as if a boa constrictor is wrapped around my heart and lungs. Would you quit that! I tell him.

Sorry.

Why can't you just tell me? I ask. It's not like you can't talk. You hardly ever stop! C'mon, I say. Just tell me.

When I wake up I'm standing outside in my pajamas, covered in snow.

A light goes on behind me. C'mon in, says Mom.

We were walking down a dirt road, I tell her.

Yeah, well, do it inside, she says. Where it's warm. She puts her arm around me and guides me into the house. She tucks me into bed like I'm six years old again, and she stands there, looking at me. I look up at her, but I don't know what to say. She turns to leave. My feet are cold, I say.

She walks over to the dresser, opens a drawer, comes back, and hands me a pair of socks my auntie knit. Big thick ones.

She watches me put them on then tucks me in again. Kisses my forehead. When she turns to leave, I clear my throat. She stops and looks at me.

Oh, I say in my deep voice. Sure is cold out, eh?

Yeah, she says.

IT'S NOT SO MUCH

It's not so much the cold as the dampness, I say.

Want another blanket? she asks.

Sure, I say. In a minute she's back with a big Pendleton blanket, medicine wheel design. She throws it over me and smiles. When she turns to leave I say, Uh...

She stops and looks at me.

Uh, I say. That crazy Jervis.

She picks up something from the dresser and walks over to the window by my bed. When she steps away, my dreamcatcher is hanging there throwing feather shadows across the bed.

Have a good sleep, Son, she says.

I stare out the window for a long time. But why? I keep asking.
Why?

Maybe it's like that movie, ya know, that one where that kid sees ghosts! says Duck.

Duck always has an answer for everything. Some theory or something. And it always ends up as a warning. That's how he got his name. He almost ended up being called Chicken Little, except that he has that funny voice and that big ole ass that wobbles from side to side when he walks. That's one thing about nicknames around here. Nothing is considered too private, too embarrassing, or too mean to tease you about. It's kinda nice actually, 'cause the names are a sort of acceptance in an Anishnaabe sort of way. Like nothing is too terrible. Got anorexia? You might get called Stick like my cousin Meredith. Real name Lucas and got three fingers burned off when you got drunk and set your house on fire? You're Cool Hand Luke. Even Jack's name isn't really Jack.

Like maybe Jervis wants ya to do something for him! Ya better be careful.

Maybe, I say.

Maybe he's lost, says Jack, and you're the only one who can assist him in finding the way to that path, that path of stars.

Duck and I stare at him. As if he knows anything about that. Jackshit.

Maybe you got special powers for seeing ghosts, says Duck. Like The Old Lady can read dreams, or like I know when the smelts are running, or like Jack can talk to birds.

Jack can't talk to birds, I say, glaring at Jack. Jack just shrugs.

Just as an example, I mean. Like if he could.

Great, I say. I... I see ghosts. I whisper it like that kid in the movie.

AND talk to them, says Jack.

And talk to them. Whoopee. I'd rather be able to predict lottery numbers or know how to disappear when I'm walking in the bush like old Sasquatch.

Yeah, man, that's cool! Remember when we went deer hunting with him, eh, Cuz? You'd look and he'd be like 20 feet behind you, and next thing he's 10 feet ahead, and you didn't see or hear a thing. Spooky!

All of the hunters were able to do that back in the time before the Shaaganaash, says Jack. All of the hunters for our people could walk like that.

We think about that for a while.

After a while Jack says, You could banish him.

Who? says Duck. Jervis?

I can't, I say.

Why?

I dunno. I just can't. Not yet.

Ya better be careful, says Duck. Maybe the way he got killed was for a good reason. Maybe he's trying to lure you somewhere so he can take your head off!

Duck!

Slowly the story gets told.

Jervis had a girlfriend with long dark hair, big brown eyes, and soft smooth lips. He'd go visit her, and they'd walk along the road, holding hands, kicking gravel, and laughing. When she laughed he could feel a partridge beating its wings inside his chest. He'd walk for miles just to see her and miles more just to hear her laugh.

The story was like a long road, full of twists and turns, stops and starts. Some of it was well travelled, some dark and desolate. Some was familiar. Some seemed familiar, but before you knew it, you were lost, going around in circles, taken on a long detour.

One day Jervis didn't show up for their walk.

He was angry at his girl, who knows why now, for nothing maybe, who cares, the reason doesn't matter anymore. He was angry, and he decided to go talk to another girl, one he had just met and who didn't have big brown eyes or a laugh that made his heart fly. Just a girl.

His girl waited and waited for him. When he didn't show she started walking, that much we know. I can see her walking that road, her heart dragging behind her like a dying child on a travois. Yet still believing she would meet Jervis along the way. After a while she probably forgot about the child dying behind her and began to worry that Jervis had been hurt. Somewhere along the way, she must have finally realized he wasn't coming. Jervis wasn't coming to see her. Just after that must have been when her brother Vin met her on his way home from work. He felt sad for his sister because she was so sad. Come home, he'd said. But she wouldn't

and she cried and pushed him away. She ran down the dusty old road right into his dreams.

He tried to follow but she slipped away.

When it was getting dark and she didn't return home Vin stopped pacing. I'll find her, he told his mom and he took the old truck out and drove the back roads for hours. He went back home thinking she'd be there, even though his heart was sinking into a deep dark snake pit where his stomach used to be.

For a long time they didn't find her body. Just pieces of her clothing and some blood. It was a man not an animal the old tracker told them. A man took her when she was walking.

When she was looking for Jervis.

Jervis was walking the same road when the lights bore down on him. He searched for her, though everyone had warned him to stay away. It had just been a moment of anger. Just an instant of not loving her. But she'd fallen into that moment and disappeared. Jervis walked the same lonesome road looking for her.

Though he was warned.

When the bumper folded around his body and knocked him into the sky Jervis smiled. He had seen her face in the lights, and she was smiling that special smile that was just for him. Jervis could fly.

He knew the boots that stood beside his face as he lay crumpled on the shoulder. He knew it was blame for not loving her that the boots kicked into his ribs. That it was outrage at his thoughtlessness that the pipe drummed into his skull. And the blade in his throat told him not to tell. Never to tell.

And he wouldn't.

Except for one thing. He did love her.

Damn, Tony says. He nearly lost his head for her. Damn near cut right off.

That's sick, says Verna.

What? says Tony. Itsa truth, ain't it?

How do you know? I say.

Look, says Tony. He loved her, she loved him. He got blamed for what happened to her. So her brother beats him to death. Out of love for his sister. So she's dead. He's dead. The brother rots in jail. And Jervis is stuck here. End of story.

But what about the man, the one who took her? I say. What about the man?

That night I'm back in the shed with the truck. Then I'm outside staring at the outhouse and the stone.

When I wake up I'm sweating and crying. I knew Jervis had an ugly death. He talked about it all the time. But it took me a while to find out about his girlfriend and her brother and how love and rage and guilt and blaming had gotten so mixed up. I wake up, and I cry for them. For Jervis who made a small but terrible mistake and lost the love of his life. For his girlfriend who probably died in a hateful way at the hands of a man who'd never been caught, and all the while she knew that Jervis hadn't come to her that day, that she would die alone in that very moment Jervis's love was weakest. And for her brother who loved his little sister but let himself go crazy with blame and rage and despair and killed the most precious part of himself. I weep for all of them.

When I finish I go to see my Mishomis.

Hey, says Jack. Lookit this! and he points at the television.

I walk over. It's a cop show telling about the case of a serial killer. I can't stand these shows, I say.

Yeah, but this one's different, says Jack. I put some tobacco down for Jervis, like I do sometimes, and when I came in, this show was on.

Jack is so excited, he's talking like a normal person so I stop and look. I can't help but to watch while Jack prattles on.

The guy passed through here, like 50 years ago or something. There's something almost.... I can't put my finger on it, but ya gotta watch, he says.

I sit down. I can't take my eyes off the screen. The hair on my neck is all right angles.

He killed a bunch of women all over the place, says Jack, his words tumbling over each other like rocks in an avalanche. Really sick guy. He was always travelling, a drifter they said. A loner. Then something happened to him, and he found God and became a minister or whatever, right, working with the homeless. So they never caught him till now....

What's his name? I ask.

...he's like 80 years old or something—killed mostly young Native women. Look, he's got blue eyes and they said he had red hair. They say he's part Native, his mom gave him up for adoption when he was like four years old, she was too young or something. It's kind of sad, actually, foster homes, beaten—so he hated...

WHAT'S HIS NAME? I yell.

Geez, what a grouch! says Jack. You oughta go to a sweat or something.

JACK!

Okay, okay. His nickname was Red. Red, uh.... Geez what is his real name? Something weird. He pauses staring at the ceiling. Hmm....It's, uh... Atticus....

JOHNSTONE! we both say it at the same time. Jack stops watching the TV and his head swivels towards me.

He killed Jervis's girlfriend, I say. Jack's mouth drops open.

But they didn't say....

He did it. He's the one who killed her.

We found out later that Atticus Johnstone had a massive heart attack, practically blew his heart apart. That was the day after that story aired. Died in his sleep.

That's just the way things happen sometimes. There's no real reason. None that you can see or make sense of anyway. Something happens, it causes a ripple, and maybe years later that ripple hits you. Maybe one person does something and his great-great-great-grandson feels the impact like a punch in the back of the head. Maybe someone who seems to be a total stranger gets knocked sideways. Or maybe it's him, but lifetimes later when he's forgotten that thing he did, and he can't see why this bad stuff is happening to him now. But we never get away with anything even when we get away with it. We've just put it on credit and one day, we'll pay. With interest on all the sorrow and fear that have accumulated.

Mom comes to my room with a cup of hot chocolate and a couple of pieces of her famous cranberry bread. She leans against the doorframe and tilts her head to the side, watching me ripping big bites of bread off and shoving them in my mouth. She grins.

Megwetch, Mom, I say, spitting little bits of bread and cranberry on my shirt. While I pick them off and pop them in my mouth she answers, ehhenn.

Seen Jervis? she asks after watching me eat for a bit.

Nah, I say between bites.

Jervis disappeared the moment I said that it was that man. I could feel it, like a cold wind. A kind of emptiness like when someone's sitting shoulder to shoulder beside you and when they get up and leave there's a cold space where they used to be. I kinda miss him sometimes but I feel happy 'cause I know that he's probably with his girl now.

You been seeing your Mishomis again, eh? Mom says.

Uh-oh, busted. I stop chewing and discreetly sniff my shirt for smoke. Well, as discreetly as I can with her standing right there looking at me.

When you were a baby, I used to wish you could've gotten to know him, she says.

Yeah, I say. That would've been cool. To have known him when he was alive.

Yeah, she says. She reaches over and moves some hair that's hanging in front of my face. But you know him pretty well anyways.

Yeah, I say. There're all different kinds of ways of knowing, I guess. I mean, it's not so much about life or death, I say, it's spirit.

My mom raises her eyebrows and the lights in her eyes dance like jingle dress dancers. She tilts her head to the side and makes a sort of cooing sound when she smiles at me. It makes me blush but I feel like I have a sun shining inside my chest.

Yes, she says, tousling my hair. It's about spirit.

KATERI AKIWENZIE-DAMM is a writer, poet, spoken-word performer, librettist, and activist from the Saugeen Ojibway Nation. She is the founder and Managing Editor of Kegedonce Press which was established in 1993 to publish the work of Indigenous creators. Kateri has written two books of poetry, was a contributor to the graphic novel anthology *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, was editor of the award-winning *Skins: Contemporary Indigenous Writing*, and has also released two poetry and music CDs. Kateri's work has been published internationally, and she has performed and spoken around the world.