



ELIZA
ROBERTSON

a selection from

Wallflowers



Hamish Hamilton

Upfronts



WALLFLOWERS

Eliza Robertson



HAMISH HAMILTON
an imprint of Penguin Canada Books Inc., a Penguin Random House Company

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Canada Books Inc., 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

Penguin Group (USA) LLC, 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published 2014

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Copyright © Eliza Robertson, 2014

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

Publisher's note: This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

ISBN: 978-0-14-319140-7

Visit the Penguin Canada website at www.penguin.ca

Special and corporate bulk purchase rates available; please see
www.penguin.ca/corporatesales or call 1-800-810-3104, ext. 2477.

Roadnotes

SEPTEMBER 29

Spencer,

I have quit the library and quit town. My plan is to pursue autumn. To track the metamorphosis of deciduous woodlands. Where the leaf turns, there turn I. My first destination: the Laurentians. Mont Tremblant. La Symphonie des Couleurs. Southwest on Highway 40 to Montreal, then the Trans-Canada all the way up. From the Laurentians I will follow the colour south. The Green Mountains of Vermont, the Kancamagus Scenic Byway in New Hampshire, down, down, down, until pigment leaves the leaves, until winter strips the branches bare.

I have brought: a road map of the United States Eastern Seaboard, the *Complete Field Guide to Fall Foliage*, and Mom's lime MB roadster, which has not seen asphalt since the third impaired-

driving charge. She told us if we had two pennies left in the world, we should buy a loaf of bread with one and a lily with the other. This is my lily.

Affectionately yours,
Sid

OCTOBER 1

Spence,

Yes, the colours are a symphony. I write from a ski suburb beside Tremblant called Petit Rocher. (I found accommodation outside town because town makes me feel trapped inside a Styrofoam city plan.) We are in what is called the “first wave.” The yellow wave. Saffron leaves grope the birches like a thousand rubber gloves. Which reminds me—I found Mom’s lambskin gloves on the back seat. The ones that snap at the back of the wrist, that she wore for “Sunday spins” around the countryside. What I remember is she never needed to remove them to count quarters for parking.

After a late lunch I poked around a Tremblant souvenir shop. They sell metal spouts and hand drills for tapping. The romance of the idea overcame me. I bought one of each, then drove for an hour until every tree was a sugar maple. (There is a chapter on tree identification in my fall foliage guide, with leaf silhouettes on the

pages like ink blots.) I pulled over and selected a tree close to the road. The instructions said to drill on an incline for the sap to run down, so I did. Then I tapped the spout through the bark with the handle of my drill. I had forgotten to buy a collection pail, so I used my Snapple bottle from lunch. I was crouched nose to spout at the foot of the tree, Snapple bottle thrust under the tap, waiting for the thing to leak, when I heard a cough. A Hyundai had parked behind the roadster, and inside the Hyundai was a family of three. Their windows were rolled down and they stared from yellow, orange, and red visors. The woman in the passenger's seat (yellow visor) rested her elbow in the window frame and held binoculars. She told me that tapping season begins in February.

The Snapple bottle reminds me of my first and last ballet class, when I needed to bring a water bottle and we didn't have any so Mom sent me to the studio with an empty mickey of gin.

Next stop: Kancamagus Scenic Byway.

From Rocher with Love,

Sid

OCTOBER 3

Spencer,

On the drive to New Hampshire I tried to pinpoint the rupture of Mom's sanity. I couldn't. I think this means either A. she was born a lunatic, or B. wrongly committed. I lean toward A. Thoughts?

Reasons why A:

1. She had an unnatural detachment from loved ones (you, me), and an unnatural attachment to American naturalism (the Helga Series by Andrew Wyeth).
2. After her alumni lecture at the Art Academy of Cincinnati she burned her collection in the school ceramics kiln (minus the sold self-portrait).
3. On our drive home from the lecture series we stopped at the Texas Snake Farm and she threatened to kill herself with an asp.
4. She poached eggs in cranberry juice.

I'm in Newport, N.H. The centre of town is an opera house, which I think is an idea that should prevail more in urban design.

Had to buy a fresh battery for the roadster in Montreal, but she's purred ever since. Also picked up a copy of the *Chronicle-*

Telegraph and read the obituary. I liked how you began with “Once upon a time.”

Living Free or Dying in New Hampshire,
Sidney

OCTOBER 6

Spence,

The Kancamagus Scenic Byway is a three-hour drive on a postcard. I arrive with the prologue to the second wave: leaves the colour of canned salmon. Clouds streak the sky like lawn mower tracks, and the air is warm and thick with the scent of fermented apples. En route to the byway I passed Santa’s Village, which is home to an “electro-animated jingle jamboree” and a giraffe-sized drummer boy. Larger-than-life seasonal statuary discomfort me.

Do you remember the December we got the blue spruce? We returned from the ballet and she let me light the bottom candles, but when I stretched for a higher bough, my velvet jumper caught fire. You came running and she leaned against her armchair with eyes as grey and cold as nickels. On Christmas morning she cooked ricotta pancakes and poached pears, but for herself only took a cigarette and mulled wine from the night before. And on

Boxing Day, she locked herself in the attic with the phonograph and *Madama Butterfly*, then emerged three afternoons later in her cotton peignoir and walked to the riverbank to collect snowdrops.

Honestly, Spence? That Christmas I wanted to buy her the asp.

Sidney

OCTOBER 7

I'm sorry I never went to the funeral.

OCTOBER 10

Spence,

Happy Thanksgiving. It's nine o'clock and the moon is sickled enough to hang a coat. I'm in Cavendish, Vermont, which is a town entirely unremarkable save for the man with a metal rod in his head. (Phineas Gage. Railroad worker, 1848. Google him.)

Dinner was a can of rice pudding from an AM/PM in Ludlow. The cashier had cream soda breath and Caesar bangs (you know the kind that bisect your forehead like saw teeth?), and when I made him break a twenty, he called me a "leaf peeper."

I can count the number of times she hugged us in the last two decades. Twice. Jean-Baptiste Day, 1990: I successfully smoke like a lady. March 1992: you get into her old art school.

Haven't reached mecca yet. (Mecca, for leaf peepers, is the Green Mountains.) I spent the afternoon driving through central Vermont, and skipped the World's Largest Filing Cabinet for a town named Barre (granite capital of America and source for most of the tombstones). In Williamstown I toured Knight's Spider Web Farm, which is run by a bald veteran with webs tattooed on his elbows. He cultivates spider webs, then sprays them white and lacquers them onto black boards. This kind of art makes me think that if you stare at the sun long enough, you'll see rainbows.

Tomorrow: Mecca. Then New York.

Never moon a werewolf,
Sid

OCTOBER 11

Spencer,

An hour into the Green Mountains I passed a blackcurrant bush and stopped the car in the middle of the road. The berries uneaten by birds were plump and overripe, and I peeled them in clusters

from the vine. My lips and nails are violet with juice and it's the closest I've felt to gleefully carnivorous.

Some things I miss:

1. She cut apples width-wise so the core made a star.
2. She wore lipstick and never stained the glass.
3. She saved her watermelon seeds in a jam jar and tried several summers to grow her own patch.
4. She took milk baths.

On my last visit, she didn't speak. Not even when I told her you finished the sunflower series. And when I mentioned I had memorized all hundred divisions of the Dewey decimal system, she didn't even roll her eyes. You should have come with me.

I'm spending the night in Albany at a pie shop that moonlights as a motor inn. An elephantine sassafras grows in the parking lot. We don't have many sassafras trees up north. Their leaves have broad, rounded lobes that are layered like a wedding cake tall enough to conceal a stripper. I'm going to lie under the boughs and see if I can't get myself entirely buried.

Love Sidney.

OCTOBER 13

I'm in Auburn, N.Y. There aren't many leaves here, but there are crows, which from a distance look like leaves, especially when you cross your eyes.

There really are a lot of fucking crows. They line the chimneys and telephone wires and the awning of Curley's Restaurant opposite my window. The concierge says they arrived early this year. Every autumn since 1993, a murder of fifty to seventy thousand crows descends upon the ancient Aboriginal burial ground and proceeds to the town centre to roost.

They remind me of the baby crow Mom saved after Jacques-Joseph shot its mother with a pellet gun. Do you remember how she wanted to teach it to speak, so she clipped the tongue, and then it couldn't eat and starved to death? I think that incident neatly paraphrases our childhood.

The crows look finest when they fly. They take wing en masse and sweep through air like a hand-held fan. And when you bend your neck back to see only up, the sky looks like paper that a child has spattered with ink. The town hates them. They tear apart dumpsters and caw till the cows come home. And apparently by winter the volume of excrement is a biohazard. But I think they're magnificent.

She always wanted to move back to Ohio. Does it give her too much credit to believe we stayed in Quebec because she didn't want

to uproot us? I think we should have tried harder for the health centre in Maine.

Guess what? The U.S. Department of Agriculture has activated a Fall Foliage Hotline. 1-800-354-4595. An automated voice informs callers of the country's colour peaks. The leaves in the New York and Pennsylvania Allegheny Forest should be exquisite. I head there tomorrow.

Unique New York Unique New York,
Sidney

OCTOBER 15

Remember the lightning storm that summer we camped on Lake Kipawa? Before the trees burned down, they were backlit by this glorious blaze. The trunks loomed scarlet and the colours were divine. Well, the sun glows behind the hickory trees as I write and the likeness is striking.

Are you familiar with the botany behind fall foliage change? In late summer the leaf's base develops a layer of cork that plugs its veins and prevents the entrance of moisture and minerals. Our *Symphonie des Couleurs* is a tree weaning its leaves off water.

Two weeks tomorrow is your opening. I hate myself for missing it. Good luck. Remember the liquor licence. Don't be nervous. The collectors will line around the block.

Your Sidster (Ha, ha, ha)

PS—I think she was the most beautiful woman in the world. I think this is what redeemed her. She lived by a wild, unreasoned, breathless devotion to beauty. And not just her own.

PPS—My contact with humanity has officially reduced to you and muffler men.

OCT. 17

The bitch stole my boots! The pearl-coloured, full-quill, ostrich-skin Tony Lamas I won from the Montreal *Gazette's* "Wild West" poetry contest in 1986! The pearl-coloured, full-quill, ostrich-skin Tony Lamas that vanished a month later, that I scoured the house for until the hardwood bruised my knees, that I just found in the original box underneath the passenger seat when I reached to find my fallen crust of pizza. I am parked on the William Flynn Highway, outside the Store Shaped like a Stealth Bomber, and I'm fuming in both French and English translations of the word. Will write more in Pittsburgh.

In Pittsburgh. I think the worst thing about our mother was the way she looked at us. She watched her children as she might a painting. Like she wasn't expecting us to stare back at her. And worse still, she watched us as *her own* painting. We failed because she was venomously self-critical. And worse than that, we failed because she did not craft us. You and I were the dice that spilled from chromosome Yahtzee, and how could that compare with Tarbell's *Mother and Child in a Boat*?

At least you went to art school. I think my decision to stack books for a living prompted her second relapse.

Tomorrow I try my luck in Tennessee.

Don't be bashful, Nashville.

Sidney

OCTOBER 18

Spence,

I opened the trunk. Which is to say, I spent two weeks in our dead mother's car *without* opening the trunk until three hours ago. I was "booting it" (they still fit) down the Pennsylvania Turnpike when the roadster met its ninth hole and burst its first tire. ("Pennsylvania: where winter eases driving because the potholes fill with snow.") I

popped the back for a spare and found my: velvet riding helmet, patent leather Mary Janes, scarlet beret, flower press. Your: rock collection, private school blazer, clarinet, kaleidoscope. The buck antlers you found up north, a tambourine, and what looks to be the fourth floor of my Victorian dollhouse.

The roadster's at Esso getting refurbished. I've decided to spend a second night in Pittsburgh.

Sidney

OCT. 19

Spencer,

After two cups of jasmine tea, a bowl of won ton soup, and three hours inside an infinity of crimson dots, I'm going to Cincinnati. (In regard to the third point—there's an Infinity Dots installation at the Pittsburgh Mattress Factory.) No more bashful Nashville, no "Tennessee Waltz"; it's tin soldiers and Nixon on the I-70 to Ohio. I write from a hoisin-smearred booth at Lai Fu Restaurant, waiting for the bill and picking cabbage from my teeth with the fork my waiter gave me when he saw my attempt at chopsticks.

Do you think it's naive to believe her theft of our treasured childhood items implies a maternal sentimentality?

The bill's here. John Ruskin is inside my fortune cookie. I don't know what's odder—the quote's relevance to my travels, or the fact that an English art critic has replaced Confucius.

“Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies, for instance.”

Sid

OCTOBER 20

Spencer,

On the road to Cincinnati I passed three sunflower fields with flowers oily and yellow and spread-eagled beneath the sun, and then I passed a field of dead sunflowers, their heads bowed to the dirt like burned-out street lamps. (This fourth field would make a great finale to your set.) I passed a manor with a chimney and eaves that bled Virginia creeper, and then I passed the World's Largest Amish Buggy, and the World's Largest Horseshoe Crab, and the World's Largest Apple Basket, and the World's Largest Washboard, and the World's Largest Crystal Ball, and the World's Largest Gavel, and the World's Largest Mortarboard Graduation Cap, and an animatronic Smokey the Bear. I alighted from the roadster at a

chestnut tree near Lancaster and collected nuts in the front of my sweater. Then I stopped for coffee and a slice of cherry pie at a rest stop a few hundred metres away. But they didn't have cherry pie, so I ordered coleslaw and a burger, and the trucker on the stool to my left told me that what I collected were buckeye nuts, not chestnuts, and what I stopped at was a buckeye tree, the state tree of Ohio.

I spent last night at a Comfort Inn Over-the-Rhine. I aimed to be at the Academy of Art by now, but instead I'm on my third paper cup of coffee. What if they don't remember her? What if they have no clue?

Continued:

I met the academy dean, who sent me to the curator of the Childlaw Gallery, who sent me to the curator of the Pearlman Gallery, who told the student at the welcome desk to type something into a computer. So now I have an address for the patron who bought Mom's self-portrait, which struck me as a breach of privacy, but it's amazing how far you'll get with the right driver's licence and a death certificate. Our patron is "Ms. Izobel Moss" of Jerseyville, Illinois.

So. To Illinois.

OCTOBER 22

Spencer,

Five hours and the state of Indiana after my last letter, I pulled into a driveway littered with autobodies, a mile or so outside Jerseyville. At the end of the drive was a house the colour of a recycling bin. It looked freshly painted and under the sun gave the impression of melting. A chain link fence enclosed a leafless pear tree, a plastic kiddie pool the same wet blue as the house, and a two-legged picnic bench angled between dirt and sky like a seesaw. A woman with three arms emerged from behind the tree. One swung against her hip as she walked into the shade of the trunk, the second was bent ninety degrees and perpendicular to the ground, and a third budded from that one like a flexed lobster claw. I asked if her name was Izobel Moss, and when she stepped from the shadow, her claw became an owl. A mid-sized owl the height of my forearm, with plumage like tweed and a chain that tethered him to the woman's wrist. She said, "Who wants to know," which felt so Hollywood that I said I had the ruby slippers, and she said, "Well, that's a horse of a different colour. Come on in."

Except that didn't happen. She said, "Who wants to know," and I didn't reply right away because she stood at the tip of the tree's shadow on the grass and really, really resembled its crowning Christmas ornament. Then the owl raised his wings and flapped, and flew the length of the chain and flapped, and hung suspended

in the air like a helium balloon, and I said, “Sidney Marion. I think you bought my mother’s painting. The self-portrait. She died a few weeks ago, and I wondered if I might see it.” She didn’t respond so I offered to show her the death certificate, but she said, “No need,” and led me into her house.

And there she was. Our mother. In her ankle-length sealskin coat. You paint like her, you know. In the portrait, she wears a cloche hat, but her hair is slung over her shoulders, the ends corkscrewed and long enough to be stuffed into the coat pockets. I remember those pockets were deep enough to fit hardcover books and tins of licorice. Mom painted her skin pale except for the cheeks, which look rouged from the cold or physical exertion. Her eyes are cast toward the unopened umbrella she clutches with both hands, and her lips press together as if to keep from laughing. The portrait is exactly how I wish I could remember her.

I went back outside where Izobel and her owl waited for me on the porch, and without any sort of premeditation I asked to buy the painting. I hadn’t planned to buy it. I didn’t think I wanted to. I’m sure I didn’t want to. She said it wasn’t for sale. I said, “I’ll pay you double.” She said, “I don’t need the money,” and I said, “But she’s my mother!” Then the only sound was the chortling of the owl. Izobel’s eyes washed over me and she rotated the metal cuff from the chain around her forearm until her stare settled at my feet. “What size are your boots?”

Bitch steals my boots even from the grave.

I called the foliage hotline last week—reports for the Mark Twain National Forest look optimistic. I operate the gas in my socks because I can't find the shoes I brought with me. Mom rides shotgun.

Sid

OCTOBER 24

Spencer,

Mark Twain did not disappoint. Missouri's reached the third wave. Sweetgum and oak, black tupelo and elm: they all look dipped in ketchup.

Last night I bought three quarts of milk from the Hazelwood Grocery. I didn't know the optimum fat percentage for milk baths, so I got one carton of skim, one 2%, and one homogenized. I filled the tub with milk and hot water and rose hips I picked from the wild bush behind the motel. Now my skin is silk and I feel like Marie Antoinette, or Cleopatra, or our mother.

I miss you, Spence. If I leave tomorrow, I can be home for your opening. The Lost Maples of Texas will still be there next fall. And Mom would look fine in your studio.

Time to get my drive on Route 55.

Love Sidney