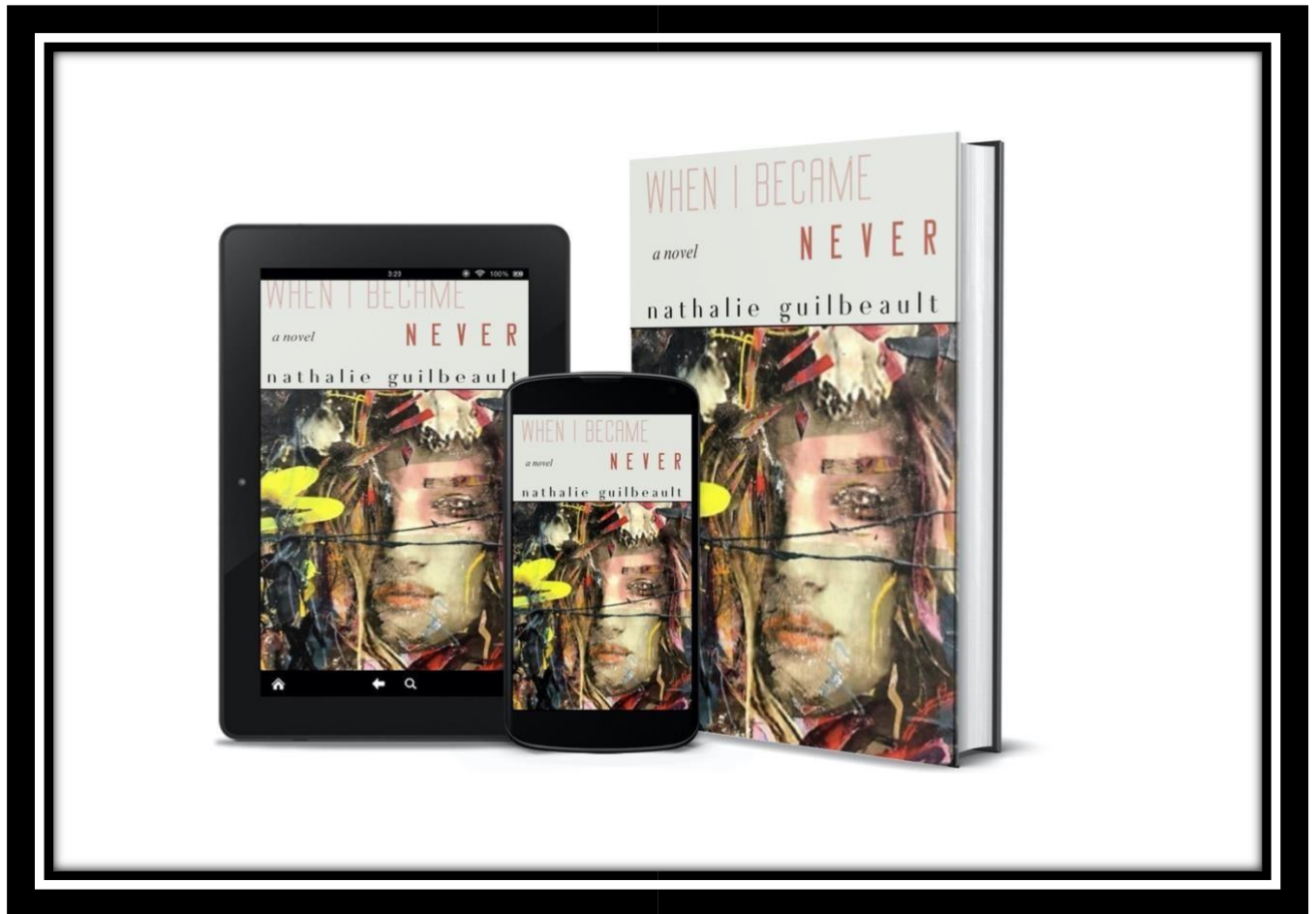


Nathalie Guilbeault/WHEN I BECAME NEVER - excerpt

WHEN I BECAME NEVER

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Excerpt



OUT JUNE 2024

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MONTREAL PUBLISHING COMPANY

I am a beautiful girl not yet conceived; not yet born—fully.

I am a beautiful girl who will die and come back—to remind you some survive and some die.

That some seek refuge in insanity.

That is I.

That is we.

And this is for us.

Again, and always—Christian.

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WHEN I BECAME NEVER

A Novel

“The Edge ... There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.”

- Hunter S. Thompson

Prologue

BOOK ONE

Deus ex Machina

Red Pappus

BOOK TWO

Mad Honey

BOOK THREE

Isabelle

BOOK FOUR

Beige Livings

Of Death Rows

BOOK FIVE

Forshores

CODA

PROLOGUE

Villanueva del Rio y Minos, Spain. 1609.

The young girl is lying in bed with her sisters, her parents' cot adjacent to theirs'. A sound has pierced through the door, a voice coming to her, lean and low. In shaded reverie, she stands, placing her feet to the wooden floor. Her legs move to the door, and she opens it, looking out—an obscurity like tenderness never felt before, and looking at her.

The young girl doesn't know why she is moving away from her house; her village; to a large oak tree rooted far from the edge of a forest made of the same bark. A different strength 1000 years in the making.

The heart of her village.

Bringing a hand to her chest, she asks nothing she can see: What do you want from me—why now?

The wind dies. Yet, in the distance, the tree sways.

Her dress is catching the ground's surface. The soil is rocky and her feet, bare and leathered, are splitting, dragging her through newfound time, long and dissipated time, blood mixing with the hard, gravelly ground. She reaches it and looking, at the tree, wide and moving, and senses dawn's breath, whispering to her: kneel—now.

There is turmoil inside the soil, an unravelling of roots, a war of debris, but she doesn't know—how could she? For the earth surrounding the tree is suddenly warming her feet and seducing her spirit with a feeling unknown to her.

And words are exchanged between soil and soul.

She lifts the skirt of her dress, and her legs collapse—she doesn't feel the ground cutting into her anymore, for numbness is expanding inside of her, an accomplice to the indenture soon to

be reached. Around her, beads scattering, and she looks up and when she does, she sees more coming to her. Shiny, red, and pink.

This rain, she thinks.

You and I are one, Sophia.

The voice is coming from below and she listens to it. Slowly, she picks the gem- like beads from the soil, rolling them between her fingers, and unknowing of her smile, she carefully gathers them inside the skirt of her dress. She folds her skirt, and she brings it up and she stands before the tree, lifting her head. The tree's branches seem to dance a dance of untangling, and a tide in her eyes threatens to sway, too. She brings a finger to its bark—a monotone of slick yellow, and pushing a fingernail into it, marks its skin with the sign of a cross. Turning around, she walks back to the village. Her house. Through the winds that have now lifted.

When she enters, the family is still unconscious, unaware. She lets her eyes scrutinize the curves above which an old blanket is covering their bodies. I can't tell you, she whispers to them, tears in her eyes, it told me it was a secret. To keep it. Still, the pull; to shake them, to tell them about the heat, about the voice—about the warmth snaking beneath her skin. She turns her head away from them and closes her eyes. Fatigue is looming but she tells herself to wait. Not just yet—
—I promised.

A few steps and she sits by the small kitchen table and feels the hem of the dress, her mother's old wedding gown, dirty and frayed, her fingers playing with its strands. From the hem she pulls a long thread of silk, and snapping it loose, she passes it through the quill of an eagle's feather. She threads the fifty-nine pearls together, forming a knot between each one, preventing the beads from sliding off, and she tightly ties the end of the silk thread together.

She places it around her neck. More love, it promised her. And you must pass it around.

Tired, she walks to the bed and slides in, beside one of her sisters.

She will sleep for two days, and she will awaken to a new morning, the house silent, the village, too. Her legs will lead her, again, to the door, half open and swinging. From there, she will remain on feet that have bled, stand on knees that have split, and the white dress, marooned by time, will be tossed by the air, alive with purpose. She will look up to the pale and cold yellow of the sky, dust twirling from the ground up, and she will walk to the tree once more, and stare—at the bodies of children hanging from the tree's branches.

All of them gone, all but her.

The soil, warmer still, and its cells are firing together, wiring farther across its surface. Lifting her head, she will be unable to look beyond the tree's posture, its beauty, for what is lurking from its core and its roots is lulling and coming from movement no one will ever be able to explain. For inside tainted life, randomness will rule.

A hand to her neck, brushing her fingers against each of the rosary's beads, Sophia will pray to a madness that plays like a child—hides and seeks—one that could have risen anywhere, from any earth. But it is here now, and sprouting from Andalucía's womb, and like a virus, travelling through her, through time, it will land inside the innards of a family too distended and weak to fight.

But it will die, this strain—a slow death made of women.

BOOK ONE

I had heard the garage door open, the clunking of its chains pulling me from under the duvet, heavy and dampened by my sweat. This sound, the usual cue telling me my parents were off to their weekly bridge game, three houses down our street.

Friday night freedom I called it, the end of my dayshift at the miso factory plant where I worked, the end of my workweek. Just like punctuation quiets the pulse of a text, the noise silenced me, allowing me to breathe again.

My parents—Georges and Mary—had become trusting of my behaviors; my words; the way I hummed to Rachmaninoff's evening vespers when I felt alone yet more alive. They kept me by their side because I had been damaged, pushed into some sort of dysfunctional mode the way some are pushed into drugs. Because, yes, one can become addicted to abnormality. I knew they believed I had landed back into some form of normalcy, and one would have thought that, yes, it's been thirteen years, she should be back. And there were days when I did feel normal, just not as normal as they thought me to be.

My mind is something I have learned to conceal, you see. It is a bastion inside which I can retreat into, a place where I can fully be, where my quirks, my fantasies, and my truths co-exist. This time, since then, I hold it, like I hold a dead leaf crinkled by the rain and the sun and the wind—fodder for new life yet to be sown, like poking my finger into blood-pricked skin. This time, here, since then, I smell it. Do you know what time smells like? It smells of mildew, black and slimy, it smells of sweat, it smells of cinnamon, it smells of feculence.

I got up from my nap wearing black jeans and a T, but mostly, still wearing the smell of umami. And I remember the scent, another one.

Salt.

Sugar.

Fruit.

A kind of earth we all crave, in our mouths as much as in our hearts.

This savoury me.

I went to the kitchen, an avocado-coloured vestige they didn't care to update, opened the refrigerator door, took the beer can, snapped it open and stared at the pasta, crusty and unappealing. Still, I grabbed the cover-less Tupperware, sat at the kitchen table and dug in. Once done, I placed the container inside the dishwasher and made my way through the house.

Those nights, when alone, I alternated between Chet Baker and Rachmaninoff—more of it. And that night was no different, except I ached for loudness, more absolutes—treble that makes the ear shriek, bass that makes the body shake—to flood my ears. I wandered a little more, stopped on the second floor and decided to enter my parents' bedroom, something I had never done since they had brought me back from that dead place, thirteen years before.

Why did I do that?

Because the steel bolt had been removed, something to this day I've never understood. I still wonder: What had pushed this new nonchalance onto them, made them forget about their own rules? For my protection. But they had, and that was good enough for me, and in I went.

The crocheted bedspread had wrinkled over a queen size mattress that had sunk in its centre. Over it, two Diane Furstenberg wraparound dresses my mother had tried on before deciding on a simple jean A-line skirt and black jersey blouse. I knew because I had heard my father insisting on her wearing her usual good luck attire. Diane Furstenberg. I brushed the top of the cover with my hand knowing the elevated patterns—series of daisy chains, interconnected garlands—would tickle my fingertips. And I remembered my feet sinking into the carpet, as I would sneak into their bed and stay there, little me, little moon they called me. Little moon. That was me.

I saw the door to the walk-in closet was unlocked, too. I saw there had been a bolt there as well; I saw the space where it had been—a white imprint on a beige-coloured door.

I entered and spotted it right away—the pile of newspapers at the end of the closet, beside my mother's shoe rack. Before fanning through them, I slipped them on, slowly. Kitty heels. Ballerina flats. Slutty heights, too. Twenty-two pairs of size 9 shoes. I wear a narrow 6 ½. Mirrors furnished two of the walls, and I had avoided them, but even then, I strutted into the cool leather of their linings, still pretending I was on a runway, somewhere inside the walls of a posh Parisian venue. Maxime's, maybe. Quai d'Orsay.

*I came back from my imaginary travels and quickly placed the Louboutin's in their place and sat down. It took me some time to realise what they contained. I read the articles; all the ones highlighted in fluorescent green, some translations mostly. I scrutinised the images, the pictures of people—especially that one—I thought I had never known. I felt the inside of my brain freeze, my pulse quickening: Somewhere inside the New York Times the killer's hands were mentioned, and inside Nicaragua's newspapers, *The Jornada* and *El Nuevo Diario*, I read and saw more of what I thought I had never known. Agile, they had written. His hands. Artfully scalped almost, these squares of skin. Rachmaninoff's own large ones came to mind. The span of them, what they had been made to create. And I imagined them, their softness, the purity of them, an eternal virginity—always wanted. That's when I started to remember.*

The sea, its turquoise set against the lead of the sky.

Sheets of rain falling on my body stretched out on the sand.

The coming of storms smelling of sewage.

Promises hidden inside the goodness of the world. My new god.

Nathalie Guilbeault/WHEN I BECAME NEVER - excerpt

And the sweat, the sweetness of my own, dripping everywhere it shouldn't have been. And I thought of her, and I thought of me, and I thought, why not me?

Deus ex Machina

These men chose carefully, their words cloaked and masked and wrapped in dogmatic charm, an abundance, so captivating. He was one of them—a cove of God who battled a land aching to remove the bowls of popery the way grandmothers yanked teeth out—riding high under a full sun, and Father Antonio Ruiz tightened the Cordovan’s string below his chin and smiled, his face painted with the dust the winds were sweeping from the red earth. Look, he said, pointing ahead, our grounds. A blow, short and loud, coming from the horse’s nostrils, as if in agreement, complicit. The tall man squeezed his thighs against the animal’s flanks, and bending over its neck, pressed a finger along the vein bulging from underneath the animal’s taunt skin. The horse trotted, faster, ears straight and twitching forward, tail up, its pace now constant. This land is my land, he spoke to the animal, and they, too, belong to me.

All of them.

As if entering his own home, the priest walked inside the Montoyas’ small house, a hovel smelling of wine that would never age, lavender that would never heal, candles that could only burn—where confusion, contrived and well fed, reigned.

And while this land rebelled against the Church’s quests to dominate loam as much as ether—the family patriarch tried to remain faithful, and clenching to all its veiled illusions. The man hoped, and struggled in doing so, pulled by the quelling of uncertainties; life’s in-betweens—lethal, and always so, and it seemed to him, a victor. Those were Romero’s Montoya’s battles. His lifelines. His family’s, too.

So he wished.

Señora Miranda, Father Antonio said, moving toward the small kitchen table, I haven’t seen you this week at confession.

Romero's wife repressed a smile. You've only been assigned to Ronda for two years, young man. For two years you've been knocking on our door—reminding us. Have we ever let you down?

Father Antonio pulled a white handkerchief from his inside coat pocket, removing dust from around his face. The Lord can never go hungry, you know that, he started. And I was worried, too, Miranda. Your last absence ... you were sick, weren't you? A fever, I remember. I came to see if all was well. So much disease around us. So much death.

Of course, Padre. Gracias. She paused, looking at her hands. Inside them, the faces of loved ones passing, lost to war's lotteries—lost to plagues; of the flesh; of the mind. She turned to Romero. I need you, her eyes said. She turned to the priest. The grapes have kept us very busy this time of year, more than last year's sad crop. And that is all ... Join us, won't you? She pointed to the wine carafe placed in the middle of the table, to the empty glasses, too, and searching for her eldest daughter's eyes. Dolores, Amorita, por favor, pour Father Antonio a glass? All of us, in fact, if you will. The taste of now, our earth, she smiled. And as she raised her head, to him, eyes knowing, Miranda took the man's soft hand in hers, pulling his body to the chair next to hers. Come and sit Padre. Eso.

The wooden table, long and narrow, around which everyone sat, Romero at its place of honor, observing his ten-year-old twin girls, Maria and Martina. With cheeks rotund and flush, they smiled back at him, huddled inside the picos Miranda had sown for them the week before. One day, she had said to her daughters while bent over her late mother's old sewing machine, one day I will make them with silk, the best kind of silk, and then you will know the true levity at the heart of our sevillanas.

In the wind, soft and cool, the purple-coloured curtains swayed, brushing against Father Antonio's shoulders. Delicately, he shooed them away, his eyes narrowing on Matías, his tone grave. I come here almost every month yet, you my son, are rarely to be seen.

You come here to teach the twins, not him, not Dolores either, Romero interfered. And Matías works the land with me. Hard work. Real work, Father.

Matías Montoya looked at the priest; this mouth always half-opened; always telling, of things to be done and not be done. And he knew, when this man, said to be of God, visited his family, each time, another moment came when everything that existed was not named—a buttress like whispered fractals. It's okay, Papi. Todo esta bien. Below the table, a foot dropped onto his. Matías moved his fingers next to her. Pushing the carafe now emptied back to the middle of the table, the young woman remained silent, observing. Dolores, beautiful sister, he thought, mi alborada, and he turned again to the priest. I fear God's wrath as much as anyone, but what good are the texts, Father, if the Reds kill us? 1929 and the monarchy will soon die. I can feel it. The country feels it. He paused. Then, Father, your life's work as a man of the Church will have been for what? He leaned forward, whispered, hell, more of it, will be here, soon enough.

Romero raised his hand. No more, Matías. We know about the fear. We inhale its fumes. Hijo, por favor, no more.

Behind the twin girls, a window from which another gust of wind came, the fringe of the mantón dancing and tickling their skin, their arms hanging side-by-side, their hands meeting, sifting their unease from the moment; their father still holding the priest's eyes. Father Antonio looked away, his fingers fanning the air. This smell, Romero. It's almost nauseating, such sweetness.

We live inside this scent, Father, Miranda said, impatience in her voice. And it doesn't leave us, either. Her head still, her eyes wandered beyond her husband. She brought a hand to the back of her neck, grabbing large portions of the curly mane that had escaped the Kanzashi pin's grip. Delicately, she collected the rogue thickets of hair in her fingers and pushing her hairpin farther toward the top of her head, secured the chignon made that morning before preparing the workers' breakfast. I know too much, she thought, of this gaze that falls onto me; of the heat tingling across my shoulders. I think the harvest will be a good one, she said, her mind absent, better than last year's.

One's house usually smells of one's earth, I would think, Father, Romero continued. I would expect the scent of holy wine in yours, no? Just as sweet, if not more. The father of four lowered his head, and with eyes half shut, and trembling lids, he let his imagination fill voids—all the spaces he felt, rewriting, too, what he saw, what he was sure was there, on his soil, sweat starting to drip from his temples. His eyes now open, his gaze became caught between two of the floor's wooden planks as he listened to the words coming from his wife's mouth. His vacancies staying.

I will come to you, Father, of course. Miranda stood and let her hand slide along her son's back—this other Romero. I will.

There were notes, lyrical and staccato mingling in essence, known to her bones, to her mind—the sound of fandangos beating between her temples, and she walked the short distance separating the table from the entrance door, changed by them. Tonight will be filled with dancing, she told them, more dancing, for it quietly lures our feet into the present only—hopeful escapes, palatable deceptions. She stilled at the entrance, pushed the door open, and looked to the vineyard. The breeze had gone, and the cold, poked by the absence of the breeze, became quiet.

For almost two years, Dolores had witnessed these scenes unfold. The actors, the words, the tone—an immovable script. Today is different, she thought, looking at her sisters. They were wriggling again on their chairs, as if a long ripple was unfolding beneath their muscles. They always do, she dismissed—move. They rarely stopped, she thought more, scurrying through the maze-like vineyard, morning to night, draped in laughter so crisp and generous the labourers nicknamed them *pequeñas diosas de la tierra*—little goddesses of the earth. But this wasn't movement—this was agitation. Dolores mouthed to them to stop fidgeting and listen. The girls obeyed.

Inside the long silence—a space where the world around them continued, the workers sang of love and loss, off pitch and low, their voices reaching them from the fields, and as it did, a barn cat landed on the windowsill, an orange feather-like particle hanging from its mouth.

He keeps doing that, Martina said. He eats all the butterflies and brings them back here. Siempre. Amused by the interlude, they watched the young girl walk to the window, and with her small hands, delicately remove the butterfly from the cat's soft bite. *Gato malo*. The insect was still alive and when she saw that it was, she placed it atop her hand, watching the wings slowly stroking the air. Come with me, she said, and she walked back to her chair and sat.

It's time for me to go, the priest said, pushing away the emptied glass in front of him. *Hasta mañana, Dolores. Y Recuerda que Dios está grande*. He stood, meticulously replacing his hat on his coiffed head. Remember, Martina, that butterflies carry the beauty of struggles with them, and the certainty of new beginnings, too. Like the Bible.

Miranda held the door for him, her knee pointing into its broken panel, below the hem of a skirt, circular and long. Her eyes fled, not wanting to meet his, not there. Not now.

The priest stepped over the sill and turned back. I'll be waiting, Señora Miranda. *Mañana*.

Si Dios quiere, Padre. Mañana.

Dolores's gaze followed that of Romero's. Ahead of them, Father Antonio's silhouette at the door, broad, menacing—God's spy. Mother, she said, I would like to go with you tomorrow.

Miranda's stance stiffened. No, Dolores. No veo porque.

Standing on the porch, they watched the priest saunter to the makeshift enclosure surrounding the house. They watched as the light waved onto the weak-tea colored coat of the Lusitano, the sun dappling flank to neck. Sensing his master approaching, the sixteen-hand horse grew even larger, and stomping the ground, neighed. Once by his side, Father Antonio spoke to the animal, a jargon drenched in softness—hypnotic and lulling—and as he did, he cinched the girth strap, pulling twice on the latigo. Still talking, the man slid his hand across the horse's mane, and grabbing the black stock of bristly hairs, climbed onto the saddle.

With the weight of eyes pushing on his back, the priest left Romero Montoya's propriety knowing what he was leaving behind; what he had continued to feed—suspended specks of dust in lieu of brightness—porous ignorance.

WHEN I BECAME NEVER

June 2024

