

CURLICUE

Stories

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

Department of English

University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon

By

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ABSTRACT

Curlicue is a collection of eight stories that examines anxiety in respect to loss, loneliness, and the coming of age. The stories are, in part, crafted from my own personal experiences and struggles with anxiety. I wanted the collection to reflect me as an individual, to the problems that I face with anxiety, which is why I chose to focus on characters and their relationships. Drawing inspiration from writers like Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, and Alice Munro, the stories focus on subtle, sometimes banal, every-day situations that are characteristic of realism. Alternating between flash and short story fiction, the collection aims to generate symptoms of anxiety that are not only discernible through the interiority and actions of the character but also through the implication of the narratives, the economy of words, the symbols layered throughout, and the tones of the stories. *Curlicue* attempts to share the discomfort of anxiety with its readers while also leaving room for moments of hope.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank my mentor, Bill Gaston. Your encouragement and guidance gave me the clarity needed to reposition my thesis. I appreciated your tactful and constructive feedback. More than anything, I enjoyed our informal discussions on gardening, travels, and native wildlife. These casual conversations on life helped keep me grounded in a time of global precarity.

Dr. Jeanette Lynes, you have been such a comfort and support throughout this program. Selflessness is a word that cannot characterize many people in contemporary western society, but you embody it. Your thoughts, actions, and hard work has directly impacted my ability to succeed in this program. I also want to express my gratitude for giving me the opportunity to teach. Thank you for believing in me.

To Dr. Sheri Benning, your willingness and eagerness to share your vast interdisciplinary knowledge has given me the tools and confidence to experiment with my own writing. Thank you for constantly pushing my work beyond the confines of myself and instilling a sense of pride in the work that does, however small, reveal some new way of seeing the world.

Thank you to the University of Saskatchewan's College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for the funding I received.

To my cohort, I want to thank you for your constant words of encouragement and for the meals (and drinks) we've shared together. We all come from different cities, different provinces, yet we all share the same love of writing, and it is truly a delight to be able to share a passion we hold so dear to our hearts with people that feel the same way. I will certainly miss you all. A special appreciation to Josiah and Dawn, you are some of the most intelligent, kindest people I have ever met. I will forever cherish the friendship we've built over these past two years.

To Sherry, your courage to accompany me on this journey west is nothing short of extraordinary. We've travelled halfway around the world together and now halfway across Canada. What's next?

And, to Mom and Papa, without your unwavering support, this experience would have been impossible. I am incredibly fortunate to have you in my life.

DEDICATION

For my mother and father,
Kim and Peter Pityn.

And to my friends who are struggling,
I hear you.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.”

— C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Curlicue is a collection of eight stories that examines anxiety in respect to loss, loneliness, and coming of age. The stories are, in part, crafted from my own personal experiences and struggles with anxiety. The collection aims to generate symptoms of anxiety that are not only discernible through the interiority and actions of the character but also through the implication of the narratives, the economy of words, the symbols layered throughout, and the tones of the stories. The stories focus on subtle, sometimes banal, every-day situations that are characteristic of realism.

I want to explain why I’ve chosen to examine anxiety through a realistic lens. Stemming from a background in political science and philosophy, I came into this program with the intention of writing dystopian fiction, and I wrote the first hundred pages of a dystopian novel over the course of my mentorship. Often, dystopias produce “alarmingly unpleasant imaginary world[s], usually of the projected future” (Baldick, “dystopia”). Dystopian worlds function to demonstrate a distorted future, and as Sarah Wagstaffe observes, “...one thing that literature both creates and reflects, specifically dystopian fiction, is anxiety. Anxiety that nothing can truly change, that utopia is unreachable, and that no one can be trusted” (1-2). I learned that both anxiety and dystopia share an inherent quality: both are future-oriented.

The APA defines anxiety as “a future-oriented, long-acting response broadly focused on a diffuse threat, whereas fear is an appropriate, present-oriented, and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and specific threat.” In literature, anxiety is defined in approximately the same way. In “How is Fear constructed? A Narrative Approach to Social Dread in literature,” Kairi Jets divides fear-inducing narratives into two categories: horror and dread. “Horror stories concentrate on a concrete visible object such as a monster,” whereas with “dread narratives[,] the object of fear is abstract or absent altogether” (1). While fear in the form of horror has a clear object, Jet’s interpretation of fear in dread narratives is almost identical with the characterization of anxiety. To make this distinction between anxiety and dread even more blurry, the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines “angst” as the German word for “anxiety” or “dread,” effectively describing “a state of anguish that we feel as we are confronted by the burden of our freedom and the accompanying responsibility to impose values and meanings” (Baldick, “Angst”). Anxiety in my collection is aligned to Jet’s interpretation of “dread”: the object of fear is abstract or absent altogether.

This future-oriented and abstract or absent fear is what tethers anxiety and dystopia together. Anxiety is inherent to dystopian writing, to the settings and the state of the world, to something immediately untrue but seemingly plausible in the future. But instead of making anxiety inherent to my world, I wanted the collection to reflect me as an individual, to the problems that I face with anxiety, which is why I chose to reposition my thesis to focus on realistic narratives that emphasize characters, relationships, and familiar settings. By writing through a realistic lens, I am able to focus on how anxiety transpires in conventional, everyday situations.

“Realism” is a broad definition loosely defined as “[a] mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or ‘reflecting’ faithfully an actual way of life” (Baldick, “realism”). Grounding my stories through a realistic lens, however, does not mean that the stories need to be a precise portrayal of reality. Baldick interrogates the term by insisting that “realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality (a ‘slice of life’) but a system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some ‘real’ world outside the text, by processes of selection, exclusion, description, and manners of addressing the reader.” The system of conventions that writers employ to give us this “lifelike illusion” is best detailed by David Shumway:

(1) it [realism] depicts contemporary or recent social life; (2) it provides detailed description, featuring visual and other sensory details; (3) it presents psychologically and socially plausible characters; (4) it is concerned with quotidian events or “ordinary life,” including ordinary people; (5) the events are plausible given the assumptions of the audience; and (6) the narrative reveals aspects of social life that are normally not known, confronted, or represented in artistic works. (2)

While realism binds us to the world we are situated in, there is, what Bill Gaston refers to as “artful exaggeration” (Pityn). In an interview I conducted with Gaston, he described that these artful exaggerations take mundane, every-day things and “nudge them back into the light.” This exaggeration lives typically at the extremes of human experience, which he cites in his novel *Tall Lives*: a story of Siamese twins joined at the big toe with one twin being ‘bad’ and the other being ‘good.’ While *Tall Lives* is an example of what I would consider to be extreme “artful exaggeration,” Gaston describes how the technique can be softened and applied to fit more realistic narratives, such as describing a “bully with teeth that are noticeably yellowed, and uniformly very small.”

In the collection, I aim to use small, exaggerated details, as Gaston describes, to help create a sense of unease, discomfort, and moments of humour. In “Ladybug,” the narrator describes the swarm of ladybugs outside the van as the “plague” (43). The ladybugs thud off the windows, and the narrator envisions them trying to get into the van. “Almighty High” describes two boys getting high and venturing down to their schoolyard to spray-paint the concrete building. Once there, Oliver is so concerned about choking on his sandwich that he thinks about how he chews: “Lots of bites. Slow bites. I never thought it would be an activity that I would have to worry about, *how to chew*, but I was hyperaware, I think, making sure to grind up the bread, ham, cheddar cheese, and lettuce so that I could measure exactly how much to swallow” (39). In “The Pier,” Mackenzie watches a show about sharks with his niece and nephew, and he starts to compare them to sharks: “She attacked the middle of it, notching out a chunk of flesh like a great white, juices oozing, letting the apple slice bleed out” (67). Situating my collection in realism while also using “artful exaggeration” allows for more dramatic moments in domestic life.

These artful exaggerations are also somewhat imbued on the settings in my collection. The settings are spread across Canada, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario—northern and southern. And while I denote specific places, such as Calgary in “Stampede,” Kenora in “Brittle Wood,” Saskatchewan in “Head of Wheat,” and Dorothy in “Takeoff,” my intention is not to replicate these places but rather to animate them with—somewhat—corrupted descriptions. In “Stampede,” the fair is crowded as the family is “herded in like cattle” (7). As the mother rides the gondola across, she thinks about all the people on the ground trying not to get squished like insects. In “Brittle Wood,” Kenora is only mentioned in respect to the forest fire that “spread through northern Ontario, jumping from white pine to balsam fir” (22).

Saskatchewan is described as a place that prematurely grows life in “Head of Wheat” (1). Again, in “Takeoff,” Dorothy is described as a “little hamlet with a big hill”—foreboding an existential decision that Pete has to make (26). One of my major influences is Alice Munro, and I wanted to move away from the regionalism that I had grown up with in respect to Southern Ontario.

Danelle Boynton explores imagery and theme in Munro’s fiction, and one thing she notes is that Munro “does not consciously manipulate images but ‘finds’ them, and...this is where some possibility of discovery lies” (7). These symbols and images are uncovered as she “explore[s] the surface of life” (7). Symbolism in Munro’s work can be found in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” such as games or jokes that serve as a boundary between reality and illusion, and “Royal Beatings,” such as the use of food, particularly colourful and tasty desserts, as a way to reflect the performative outward appearance necessary in society (*My Best Stories*). Similar to how Munro finds symbols, Tobias Wolff states, in an interview with Edward Champion, that symbols are “what life itself gives us.” Writers find symbols that they’ve encountered in nature or through experience. Wolff provides an example of this through the deconstruction of one of his short stories:

They [symbols] are features of the story that a reader can probably sense some consequence without being able to define it. Yeah, at the end of “A Rich Brother,” Pete’s in a bit of a fog. But it’s also a very real fog. If you drive through that valley in California — the Central Valley, that time of night — you’re going to be in a fog. (Champion)

In *Curlicue*, I like to think of symbols in a similar way, finding them in respect to our own engagements with the world—but perhaps the symbols are a bit more explicit in my stories.

Certain symbols, such as natural elements (wind, earth, fire, water, etc.), are represented throughout the collection. In “The Pier,” water is used as Mackenzie’s primary, physical fear that

represents his indecision and anxiety toward having children. Fire serves as a metaphor for cancer and loss in “Brittle Wood.” In “Takeoff,” snow, wind, and ice serve as a hazard that Pete is challenging, but this hazard also acts as an emotional barrier that he is trying to overcome. My collection also uses insects in a number of the stories, such as butterflies in “The Pier,” ladybugs in “Ladybug,” and even, generally speaking, insects in “Stampede.” The symbolic representation of insects across the collection works to foreground the smallness—the microscopic—of everyday life and give an impression of sporadic movement.

Part of this movement has to do with the restlessness associated with anxiety, but another part of it has to do with a theme of loneliness. Much of my influence comes from Tobias Wolff and his stories surrounding isolation and loneliness. In “Coming Attractions,” a young girl who is working at a movie theatre late at night is desperate to talk to someone. She phones random family members, looks up her teacher’s name in a phone book, and even prank calls a man. When the man asks her why she did it, she doesn’t have an answer (*Back In The World*). “Sister” opens with a woman looking through her kitchen window at two men exercising in a park. After working up the courage and excitement to meet them, she recognizes one of the men and her insecurities begin to affect the interaction. Consequently, she has a near-death experience, and it ends with her accepting the fact that she will never have someone to share that trauma with (*Back In The World*).

Similar to Wolff, many of the characters in *Curlicue* are alone in the world, oftentimes searching for answers that are out of reach. This loneliness in discovery produces an effect of drifting or pacing. John in “Brittle Wood” has recently lost his wife and is alone in his backyard spraying his deck in a futile attempt to clean it. In “The Pier,” Mackenzie is written with an intense, zoomed-in spotlight to highlight not only his thoughts and actions but the constant

shifting of people around him. The intention of this is to focalize Mackenzie's perspective as he comes to terms with his decision to have children. "Dark Roast" is about a young man who is alone in the kitchen preparing coffee for himself and an ex-lover who no longer lives with him. In "Head of Wheat," the loneliness is twofold: the mother (unnamed) is unable to share with her husband her feelings of guilt and shame throughout her pregnancy and after the birth of her son with her husband; the depression she endures creates a compounding effect on Ethan because he is alone in the nurturing of their newborn. In "Takeoff," Pete is driving alone across the prairies heading to Calgary, but perhaps the most important, yet sad, moment is when he reflects back on some of his cherished memories before stepping on the gas pedal—I feel that it's important to mention that I tried mirroring this flashback to something Tobias Wolff did in "Bullet in the Brain." At the end of the story, a bullet smashes through the skull of the main character, a literary critic named Anders, and a firing of synopsis happens to create an ephemeral moment as the character dies (*The Night In Question*). This pause in time, a flashback, produced a feeling of warmth and comfort. The implication of this warmth, while not exactly triumphant, serves as a way to humanize Anders—to give depth and reason to his character. It allows us, as readers, to sympathize with him, which is what "Takeoff" attempts to do with Pete.

Themes of isolation and loneliness are often paralleled with loss, which is another theme in my collection. Alice Munro is perhaps one of the most evocative authors when writing about loss, both the portrayal of loss and how loss is dealt with. Alice Munro has been called a writer of "psychological fiction" (Miller et al.). Lisa Awano and Walter Miller further describe Munro as "a master of how the mind works." A clear example of Munro's portrayal of loss can be seen in "Free Radicals." The beginning opens with Nita avoiding discussions with her friends around the recent death of her husband: "she held them off, without sounding nobly grief-stricken or

unnaturally cheerful or absent-minded or confused” (2). Nita also avoids entering the study where Rich used to work, as she feels it would be invading her “dead husband’s mind” (6). Not only is Nita dealing with death in the story, she is dealing with her own illness—cancer.

Munro engages with cancer in a number of her other stories as well, including “Friend of My Youth,” “Child’s Play,” “Train,” “Oranges and Apples,” and more (Bettioli 7). Bettioli notes that “her [Munro’s] depiction of the emotional effect of cancer on patients and their families is consistent with medical and psychological research” (5). What Munro does so well as a writer is connect illness or other traumatic experiences, such as loss, with the physiological responses that someone would actually feel both physically and mentally.

In a similar way, Bill Gaston’s *Good Body* depicts the physiological responses to multiple sclerosis. The novel is about Robert Bonaduce, a former professional hockey player, who hasn’t come to terms with his current condition and constantly avoids getting help. A powerful display of such a physiological response comes in the form of a dream that he has. In Robert’s dream, he is trying to open up a book on multiple sclerosis but his hands won’t work: “They didn’t work and didn’t work and still didn’t work, flop flop thud, two slabs of dead baloney, he couldn’t scream and couldn’t scream and couldn’t scream” (202).

Curlicue attempts to apply physiological responses to loss, primarily in how anxiety is depicted. In “Brittle Wood,” John is struggling to overcome the loss of his wife and clings to an activity that she used to do every year, which is to power wash the deck. The deck cannot be cleaned, though, as the deck had been burned in the fire, but he tries over and over again. In “Ladybug,” while not explicitly stated, Cousin Craig is dealing with the loss of his mom, which is why he visits the boys every year. In a futile attempt to have fun, he refuses to leave the beach even though ladybugs swarm around him. Underlying “The Pier” is a traumatic death that the

protagonist, Mackenzie, witnessed as a child, and as an adult, his emotional triggers result in him fixating on things, moving around, and avoiding conversations. To a lesser extent, “Stampede” touches upon the death of the horse at the end of the story, detailing Benjamin’s stress and yearning to see if the horse is okay. Loss in the collection is not only focused on death but it is also focused on love, namely lost love.

Raymond Carver’s short story collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* examines the relationships between men and women, particularly married couples. The collection is more of an inversion of love: the causalities of love, the deterioration of love and intimacy, and the problems that these couples face. “Everything stuck to me” is a framed story that discusses a pivotal decision a father (described as just a boy) makes when he is about to leave his new wife and baby at home to go hunting. The wife (described as just a girl) gives him an ultimatum: if you leave, we are leaving you. The story engenders feelings of commitment and responsibility within partnerships. In the titular story, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” two couples are having an argument about an abusive ex-husband. Eventually, the discussion moves onto more general notions about love, each person giving their opinions, but nothing is resolved at the end of the story, and the argument still lingers. As Michael Kardos notes in his book *The Art and Craft of Fiction*, “Stories...are the narratives of particular people in particular situations. Themes derive from these narratives, not the other way around” (70). My collection explores the emotional and physical space that exists between couples, particularly when there is tension, and what emerges is lost love or fractured relationships.

Emerging through the subtext of “Stampede” is the tension between a wife and her husband. There is a physical distance that exists both at home, when they are standing apart from one another, and at the stampede, when the husband wanders off with their son Benjamin.

Additionally, there is an emotional disconnect between them in terms of parental expectations and, although understated, their commitment to each other. “The Pier” explores the difficulties navigating a sensitive and fundamental difference between a couple—that being whether to have a child or not. In “Takeoff,” Pete comes home to another man in his house. While he initially appears shocked by the discovery, it becomes clear that the situation leading to infidelity was not unexpected. The story touches on the participation and effort given in relationships. Fractured love or *strained* love emerges as a sub-theme in “Head of Wheat” from the difficulties navigating mental illness within a relationship. “Dark Roast” examines the insipid day-to-day routines of couples that lead to dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment. Many of these interactions between couples in this collection have to do with the sub-theme of miscommunication.

Various stories by Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff deal with corroded or toxic communication between couples, what’s left unsaid or unaddressed, and the inability to compromise. In “Say Yes” by Tobias Wolff, a couple argues over interracial marriage, and instead of solving their argument, there is merely a sense of temporary appeasement (*Back In The World*). In “A Serious Talk” by Carver, an unstable, and likely abusive, man has broken into his wife’s house who he is separated from in order to have a chat with her. Throughout the story, the wife keeps asking him what he wants to chat about, but he doesn’t know. Out of frustration, he ends up cutting a phone cord with a pair of scissors and steals an ashtray (*Where I’m Calling From*).

“The Pier” is perhaps the most evident example of miscommunication in my collection. The topic of having children looms over the story as the foremost conflict between Olivia and Mackenzie that needs to be addressed, but the question is constantly being dismissed, overlooked, and avoided by Mackenzie. Mackenzie is entirely unsure whether he wants children

and whether he is fit for children, while Olivia is seemingly unaware, or not fully aware, of Mackenzie's traumatic background and his concerns regarding having children. In a similar way, "Takeoff" demonstrates the miscommunication between Pete and Jane when he is pacing around the kitchen trying to find the right way express his feelings, but instead he says, "What the hell kind of meal is this?" (29). In "Head of Wheat," miscommunication occurs because there is an inherent *lack* of communication. The expectant mother in the story is experiencing peripartum depression, which is revealed through a lack of energy, emotional vulnerability, and communication. The miscommunication that exists between couples also exists between friends in my collection.

Bill Gaston's "The Green House" is perhaps the perfect example of a coming-of-age story that pairs adolescence with mischief and the consequences of poor decisions. Cherie Thiessen describes the story as "a young boy's need to be 'cool' battles with his guilt and emerging self-awareness" (ABC Bookworld). The story follows a group of friends as they harass and torment a family of immigrants that have recently moved into their neighbourhood. The protagonist begins to empathize with the family but still participates in the 'pranks' as they progress into more serious transgressions (*Gargoyles*).

The mischief that is present in my collection relates to both friends and siblings. In "Almighty High," Oliver is similarly torn between being cool and doing the right thing, but rather than stand up to Jack who is spray-painting the school, he simply avoids confrontation and sits next to a tree. They boys eventually get caught and have to clean the school. In "Ladybug," the two brothers are ignoring and insulting their cousin Craig, whom desperately wants to connect with them. At the end, the protagonist realizes his own participation in the bullying and tries to engage with Craig by asking him a question. In "The Pier," there are subtler instances of

mischief, particularly between Alice and Walt; however, the mischief in “The Pier” is more playful, innocent, and not in service to a coming-of-age theme.

Curlicue attempts to infuse bits of playfulness and humour in its somber and, perhaps, soulful tone. While I don’t believe my writing is as serious as Raymond Carver’s, I am inspired by the gravity of his stories and the power of brevity throughout them. In an interview with John Alton, Raymond Carver describes what “tone” means to him: “It’s the way the writer looks at the world, and he brings his view to bear on the work at hand. And it can’t help but infuse nearly every line he writes” (*Chicago Review* 9). My own experiences with the world are likely far removed from Carver, but perhaps how we engage with it has some semblance: “But life is a serious business, isn’t it? It’s grave, life is, tempered with humor” (*Chicago Review* 9).

For a long time, *Curlicue* was a gallimaufry of stories placed in no significant order, but as I was parsing through a poem by Karen Solie named “The Bends,” a stanza engrossed me:

I pushed off from the tilting floor
with both feet, buoyed by lungs grown large
and wild, my heart, meek cousin,
beside them. Though I knew the risks
of open air, the strange desire
to empty ourselves, unprepared,
in a brief anemone to the light,

I forgot about the pain. (54-55)

There was something hopeful I felt in this stanza, something good coming from the depths, something promising but perhaps not rational, and I found the shape of my collection gravitating

toward hope. Most of my stories end in a rather doleful or uncertain way without much surface light in sight, but “The Pier” serves as that shimmer, a moment of hope, which is why it is placed at the end. It is also the longest story in the collection and, in my mind, ends with a resolve, a decision made by Mackenzie. “Head of Wheat” does not offer such a commitment, and thus, I placed it at the beginning. “Head of Wheat” does, however, engage with notions of childrearing and the complications of it, and I believe the two stories work in tandem with each other: “The Pier” as a sort of fulfillment of “Head of Wheat.” The other stories are staggered according to where they fall on a spectrum of hope and their length.

Curlicue is made up of four flash fiction stories and four short stories. While there is no fixed definition of flash fiction among literary magazines and publishers, I tend to think of my flash fiction toward the shorter end of word counts. *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction* defines flash fiction as “less than 750 words” (Naimou 21), which I use as a guideline in my collection. The intention behind the differing lengths of stories is due to its effect on the reader. The sharp and concise “flash” stories place emphasis on the economy of words, symbolism, implication, and ambiguity, whereas the short stories allow room for interiority, repetition, and scene. I strive to make anxiety discernable through both of these lengths of fiction. By staggering the lengths throughout the collection, I hope to control the pacing at which the collection is read as well as create moments of comparison and contrast between the lengths.

At its core, *Curlicue* intends to share the discomfort of anxiety while also relaying bits of insight into the experiences of anxiety to its readers. While I don’t wish anxiety on anyone, it’s quite a common feeling that most people experience at some point in their lives. Curlicues are decorative spirals or curls in regular, day-to-day objects and art. They might be carved or traced.

I view curlicues as representations of anxiety: the spiraling, yet performative, decorations that we display as people. Anxiety is something we constantly work through. For some of us, it is an ongoing and lifelong battle, but ultimately, I want my collection to come out at the end with some semblance of hope—or at least a reprieve.

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