

from "Six Boxes"

Helen Guri

One day, finally, after several years of numptime, and a lifetime before that, when the details were not yet known to me, I went to my shelf and made the section. As I singled out each spine and moved it to the space I'd cleared below, I pictured the blurbs and jacket copy replaced by short, true summaries of violence: *This man beat and bruised women writers without consent during sex. This man attempted to kill his collaborator, a woman writer. This man encouraged his women writing students to drink to the point of passing out; some now believe, but cannot be sure, they were assaulted. This man groped women writers at parties. This man sent a death threat to his ex, a woman writer. This man saddled his ex, a woman writer, with an enormous debt. This man, without warning, shoved his tongue sequentially into the mouths of two women writers who happened to be sitting on either side of him. This man tried to coerce a woman writer into sex by withholding a reference letter at the last minute. This man repeatedly dated his women writing students and assaulted some. This man addressed a woman writer on a ferry deck. He told her he would push her off, then lunged at her, turned, and walked away.* In the way that books all together on a shelf are repetitious—colour, format, author names, paper texture, smell, themes, font, images, letters, words—these acts circled back on themselves. As I made the section I began to access a feeling of vertigo, the way I think you are supposed to feel when you read about Borges's infinite library. People, people, words and people, all of nature, sounds, syllables, the alphabet recombining: Many things on the list had been done by more than one man. Some of the men were the same man. These were just the men I knew about, the books I happened to own. I had been social with everyone. There were more acts than I yet knew about, and more men than I could ever be friendly with or successfully ignore, and some acts committed by people who weren't men, and many people who had written books.

Hello, Literature, I said, addressing it directly for the first time. This love I'd had since childhood. Because the occasion of my standing there, in the lamplight with the scuffed white Ikea unit and the growing terrible pile, was love, just as the occasion of my purchases and attention and friendships and conversation

and education and paid and unpaid work commitments and relationships and gifts and time alone with words in bed had been love. People are social creatures. The occasion of everything is love. It is important to remember this.

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There was the conversation I had with S about the section. S had been feeling what I had been feeling, and had made a section too, and had put the section in boxes, two of them, and was going to have a book burning. I was in awe of this decision.

She had given it a lot of thought and had arrived at a place of clarity: Thrift shops—not an option. Then other people would buy the books, ignorant of the violence they meant. The street—same. You would not leave a loaded gun in a box by the road. Recycling—a possibility. But the glue in the bindings apparently fucks up the municipal process.

At the same time I felt, acutely, that I could not do this with my own section, not yet. I still had questions.

Here were the words of the rapists and manipulators and assailants written down. If I studied very carefully maybe I could identify the warning signs, learn to spot danger in an aesthetic, in a grammar.

I didn't see the violence because (a) I did not read the book, or (b) I did not see the violence in the book, or (c) the violence was invisible in the book, and then later or beforehand or all along it happened.

Or (d) I saw the violence in the book and everywhere in the world and didn't mind.

Seeing is a skill. Code-breaking is a skill. Minding is a skill. Total rage is a skill. I could keep these books in the closet like dumbbells in escalating stacks, for resistance training.

Was there a system by which I could identify the violence in other books, by authors I did not personally know. Was there a system I could master to NEVER ACQUIRE ANOTHER VIOLENT BOOK.

If I read the violent books I had loved backwards, could I journey back inside myself and extract what I had eaten.

Was there a system of reading and writing and shelving that would lead to justice. I wanted to know.

Was I interested in justice or just having trouble letting go.

I knew these books did not ultimately belong on my shelf. Did this mean I should get a chest freezer.

In the end S did not burn her books either. Blue bin, blue bin, blue bin.

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Then I entered the part of my life where I was living beside a known monster, that I had chosen, that people judged me for.

My books took up a whole wall. It was unreasonable to try to hide them.

And I had cultivated the kind of life where it was normal for people to come over to drink and eat and smoke pot and develop feelings about my books, and by extension, me.

It was normal for me to talk about my feelings about my books, or even more normal to talk about something else, with my feelings about my books on display in the background.

As a young bisexual semi-femme repressed genderqueer reader whose tastes were regularly questioned by guy friends, straight friends, even lesbian friends, I had developed some defences against shame. I would feel it begin to well up inside me, and then I would do these little internal curl-ups to keep it down. I was strong. I was reasonably, adequately strong to be living in my particular body.

But now I encountered a different situation. The people judging me were not misguided or uninformed. They knew what I knew: my bookshelf was not a sanctuary or a clear idea or the beginning of an evolution in a positive direction. It was not a worthy love. It was a history of things I had let into my life that had not, for whatever reason, disappeared yet. It was what I had eaten to become who I was.

By this definition it was my body.

It couldn't be.

I wanted to tell people that I knew how bad my books were, that I was keeping the works of the rapists, the attempted murderers, especially, to learn from. That there was something about literature and my relationship to it I still had to figure out. This always seemed to come out wrong.

The people I invited over to drink and eat and smoke pot were not strangers, but beloveds. Maybe they did not judge me. It seems likelier they were only worried for my well-being, confused at my decisions. Maybe it was love. Maybe I was so wholly unfamiliar with the sensation of actual love that when it cut me, when I felt the welling, I did little internal curl-ups to keep it down.

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Most of the women and genderqueers and trans guys I know have been raped. When it happened to me it wasn't by an author.

It started in a movie theatre, a full one. My friend from work was sitting two rows ahead. My rapist was sitting next to me. During the previews he put his hand up my skirt and started shoving his fingers inside me, all at once, without warning. My efforts to get him to stop did not succeed. People began to stare.

I stood up, keeping a death-grip on his wrist, and this got his hand out of me. He stood up too, and, as we fumbled to the end of the aisle, tried to put his hand back in. I held it away from me with both hands thinking *I can make this look like hand-holding*.

I took him home to my basement apartment. That seemed less humiliating. On the way there, to keep his hand out of me, I ran. He ran too. For a while I was ahead. When he caught me up, I went back to hand-holding, and we jogged alongside each other in a strange sort of arm wrestle. Google Maps now tells me the distance was thirteen blocks. Did he think this was romantic?

When we got inside I said okay fuck me. I felt clear and on fire and insane in a way that was almost like having power. I felt like I had power. He did not fuck me. He took his limp dick out and slapped it across my face awhile. Slapped it against different parts of my body. Observing a little claw mark on my shoulder from when I'd had sex the week before, he called me a slut. Did he really say it so baldly. I remember the feeling. Then he zipped up his pants and I probably offered him tea or a drink and he either accepted or didn't then left. He complimented me on my books. I think he meant what he said.

At that point in my life I really liked my books. I didn't own that many yet. I had five or six Anne Carsons and a little paperback copy of *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* by Stan Douglas, which has a fold-out photograph, taken from an impossible perspective, of every building on 100 West Hastings, just like the title promises. I liked Gerald Stern. I was weirdly into Gerald Stern.

I could not tell whether those people in the theatre were judging me or whether they were concerned for my well-being. If they were concerned for my well-being, it was not a feeling that led them to any particular action.

I know that there are people who would say, *Well what about your actions*. But I knew, even at the time, that I had aced this. *I aced this*.

I aced it so well I never really became a victim until nine years later, when someone asked me directly: Have you ever been raped? and I had to admit it—I had to realize it, then admit it. It was a safe place to do so. I felt dizzy with the scale of my achievement: the bravery of my body, and the care my body had shown me in keeping this information tightly boxed until we arrived in a safe harbour. And now my mind shaking the contents loose and turning them instantly into conversation. I was having such a beautiful conversation. But at the same time I was sad to understand, in a way that would take time to sink in fully, that I had left my body and its political position just sitting there, somewhere outside myself, for nearly a decade of my life.

This was a decade in which I finished school and wrote a manuscript and became a published author. This was a decade in which I read and acquired a lot of books...

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To read "Six Boxes" in its entirety, please visit thecapilanoreview.com.

Note:

When I wrote the list of violent acts that appears at the beginning of this piece, I anonymized the stories to prevent victims/survivors from being identified. I recombined, stripped out, or, in some cases, altered details. As I did this, a new difficulty opened up. Abuse is repetitive and unoriginal to begin with. When I stripped a story of its specificity, the number of people it could apply to multiplied, and it began to encompass experiences I hadn't meant to reference, whether for reasons of accuracy (I never owned that book), safety, or ignorance. And when I invented details to distance a story from the situation I had in mind, there was the potential that these would bring it closer to someone else's experience—abuse is repetitive and unoriginal.

Despite my best efforts to keep the focus off individual victims/survivors, two frightening possibilities persist: One, a survivor of abuse whose story I did not mean to reference will see her experience in what I have written and conclude that her confidence has been betrayed, whether directly by me or through the rumour mill (I say “her” because in this essay I have spoken only of abuse against women writers, though survivors and perpetrators alike come in all genders, and some people’s genders, e.g., mine, are in a state of drift). Two, an abuser will leap to assume that his was one of the violent books on my shelf and that his particular actions were the ones I had in mind, and conclude that his victim has spoken up.

I want to greet these possibilities with a basic fact that I hope is more powerful. If you are a victim/survivor of this shit, you are very, very far from alone.