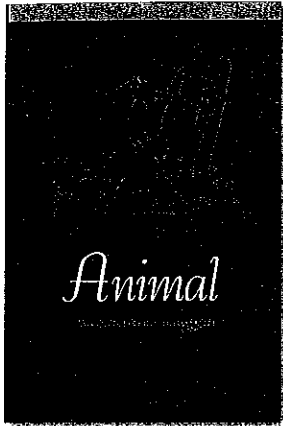
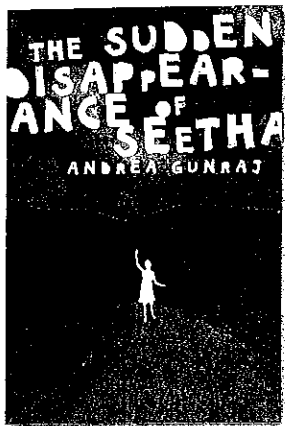


arts & culture

SUMMER READING



male romantic partner who becomes abusive. This psychological territory is marked by iconic city views that seem to jump into the characters' sightlines, asking readers to feel the story through the landscape instead of the plot.

Chudolinska is one of the few female storytellers to experiment with the wordless graphic novel form. The first was Czech artist Helena Bocharakova, whose book *Childhood: A Cycle of Woodcuts*, published in 1932, is acknowledged by printmaker George Walker in the foreword to *Back and Forth*.

Walker is the editor of the series of wordless graphic novels to which *Back and Forth* belongs. The newest title in this series was released in May, by Toronto woodcut artist Megan Speers. *Wanderlust* tells a story about a young woman participating in the punk, anarchist counterculture of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, at the close of the 20th century.

Chudolinska and Speers are in good company with other Toronto-based narrative artists, including Shannon Gerrard of the comic book series *Hung* and cousin team Mariko and Jillian Tamaki of *Skim*.

THE SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE OF SEETHA

ANDREA GUNRAJ

Alfred A. Knopf Canada

REVIEW BY NIRANJANA IYER

The Caribbean town of Marasaw is home to young Navi and Neela, whose mother must leave to find employment in the West as a child minder. That bleak reality sets the tone for Toronto-based Andrea Gunraj's novel, *The Sudden Disappearance of Seetha*.

Brother and sister grow up under their grandmother's care, competing for attention

and longing to escape both each other and Marasaw. While math prodigy Navi wins an academic scholarship, Neela spurns her family and her friends to elope with local bad boy Jaroon to a tourist resort, Eden, in the rainforest.

The Caribbean is labelled a tourist paradise, but what is the cost to the locals? Eden is anything but idyllic, for corruption breeds at the heart of this enterprise. Neela, who planned to be a schoolteacher, discovers the school building is comprised of four sticks on a concrete slab and then learns that she won't be paid for her work. Inevitably, Jaroon prospers in this system while an isolated Neela faces his abuse. The powerlessness and humiliation experienced by victims of domestic violence is searingly described.

Neela, slapped by Jaroon, feels thrust into "that clumsy, in-between condition of part-child, part-woman, foolish and slighted and put in her place." When Jaroon spirits away their baby daughter Seetha, Neela must look for help from the family and friends she once discarded. Her search for Seetha provides the note of suspense in this story.

Gunraj, whose parents immigrated to Canada from Guyana, deals with other weighty themes, including racism and the bitter aftertaste of colonialism, in this layered tale. The most intriguing detail, for me, was Neela's mysterious magic. Her gift, which has been passed down the maternal line, enables Neela to influence certain events.

This power vanishes, however, upon her move to Eden, and Gunraj provides no explanation for this loss. My guess: Neela's thoughtlessness in abandoning her family and friends kills her abilities; such power cannot flourish without goodness. And if my

answer doesn't quite cut it for you, well, this rich text provides plenty of material from which to form an alternate theory.

ANIMAL

ALEXANDRA LEGGAT

Anvil Press

REVIEW BY MEGAN BUTCHER

My favourite Alexandra Leggat story doesn't appear in this collection, though it, too, is about an animal of sorts. In "Impala," from her second collection *Meet Me in the Parking Lot*, a man ostensibly mourns a car, and the last sentence spins the whole meaning of the story on a dime. In her aptly titled third collection, she displays that same skill with plot, although here the animals are mostly sinew and bone.

The collection opens with "Wide"—a reference to Jess's mouth as he silently screams. In the novel's middle story, the main character defends herself after having a 60-year-old maple tree chopped down: "I don't relate to trees, Gabe, okay? Not like animals. I have an affinity for animals. I like the way trees look, but I don't sympathize with them."

This sentiment will ripple back over your memories of the previous stories and carry you through the rest: the not-pretty sister who is adamant that she only wants to meet the dog in "Sweet Tea," or the panoply of dead and butchered animals in "The Market."

There is one exception to the living animals in the stories of this collection. A glinty-eyed blown glass bird is the sanest character in "The Blue Parrot." As Leggat see-saws your sympathy between warring sisters-in-law, the parrot becomes the fulcrum between them. In a collection of strong stories about almost-likeable people in tense and strange situations, this is one of the strongest stories emotionally and one of the most surprising plot-wise.

Leggat's prose style tends to be elliptical and clipped. In the last story, which seems intentionally cheerful and assured, the language often has a sombre tone: "The doctor writes in his notebook. I don't even care what he's writing. I'm not the insecure one. I look out the window at the half-lit sky. Rain spits against the window."

Most short story collections are up and down. Unlike most, however, *Animal* is more than the sum of its parts. Without linking any of the stories through character, or place, or plot, Leggat is able to build upon and echo them through one another.