

THE COMING OF THE TEMPEST

To celebrate the spooky season, Giller Prize-nominated, bestselling novelist Lisa Moore wrote us an original horror story. It's not for the faint of heart. Don't say we didn't warn you

FICTION BY LISA MOORE

ILLUSTRATION STEVEN P. HUGHES





THE KEY WAS UNDER the flowerpot, a galvanized water bucket I'd painted white with green trim to match the house. All the pansies in it were dead. I lifted the bucket, and a clot of centipedes writhed in the damp ring on the boards of the well cover. They slithered over each other, the legs a blur, spilling down the cracks between the wooden planks covering the well, dropping into the water below. Their weightless bodies hitting the surface soundlessly. Not even a distant plink.

Everything was very still. There was no wind. It was dead quiet. The tide was out, and the waves were listless, as thin as paper, creeping up over the sand in jagged lines of flaring silver, until they sank into the sand, staining it dark.

I'd driven the car over the long grass up near the back door. Nobody ever used the front door, and it was nailed shut. The baby was asleep in the car seat. She'd slept the whole drive, and I knew it meant she would be awake all night, screaming, starving. It seemed she could never get enough milk.

There was a hurricane coming, but Ray was dealing with another media-relations disaster. He was supposed to come with us, I'd packed his bag and the cooler with a stew we could heat over a propane camping stove, his favourite gin, a bag of ice, and a few limes, as well as some emergency candles, the diaper bag, blankets, and pillows.

But he'd called from the office a half hour before I was supposed to pick him up. He'd be working all night. The nets for the aquaculture farm were antiquated, bought by the government at a discount, shipped from a warehouse in the Netherlands. This hurricane, he said. The nets might be ripped to shreds.

Already there was substantial evidence that salmon had escaped and mated with wild fish. They were bullies, the farmed salmon, bigger and stronger, faster, full of whatever steroids they were being fed. The hybrid babies couldn't have more babies.

I can't go to the house by myself, I said.

Forget the house, he said, furious. The house, the house. I'm sick of hearing about the bloody house. This situation could blow up in my face, cost my job.

Last month, there'd been a massive die off, 450,000 pounds of pulverized salmon. They said the ocean temperature was too warm. But it was the nets.

Someone had leaked a video, a funnel off a supply ship spewing salmon effluent, mulched or puréed, a velvety pillar of shimmering pink flesh and frothing foam hitting the black marbled ocean below like a jackhammer. Or a party dress at a gala ball. Ray had been the public face of that fiasco.

Okay, I said. I'll go by myself. Fiona and me. I was fighting tears; it was a new me, after the birth, hypersensitive, alive to the smallest sensations. My dreams were saturated with colour and charged emotion, wrenching, revelatory. Also, I'd felt sure, late in the afternoons, when the sun was sinking, that there was a presence, something both there and not there. I'd felt a draft circling my ankles, once, and woken to find I'd fallen asleep in the chair, about to drop the baby. Another time, I'd felt something brush the back of my hand, and woke to discover I'd left the burner on in the kitchen, a pot of soup blackened, the smell of red hot metal.

You're not going when they've forecast a hurricane, Ray said. Don't be ridiculous.

But I'd come anyway. The old saltbox house was my great-grandmother's,

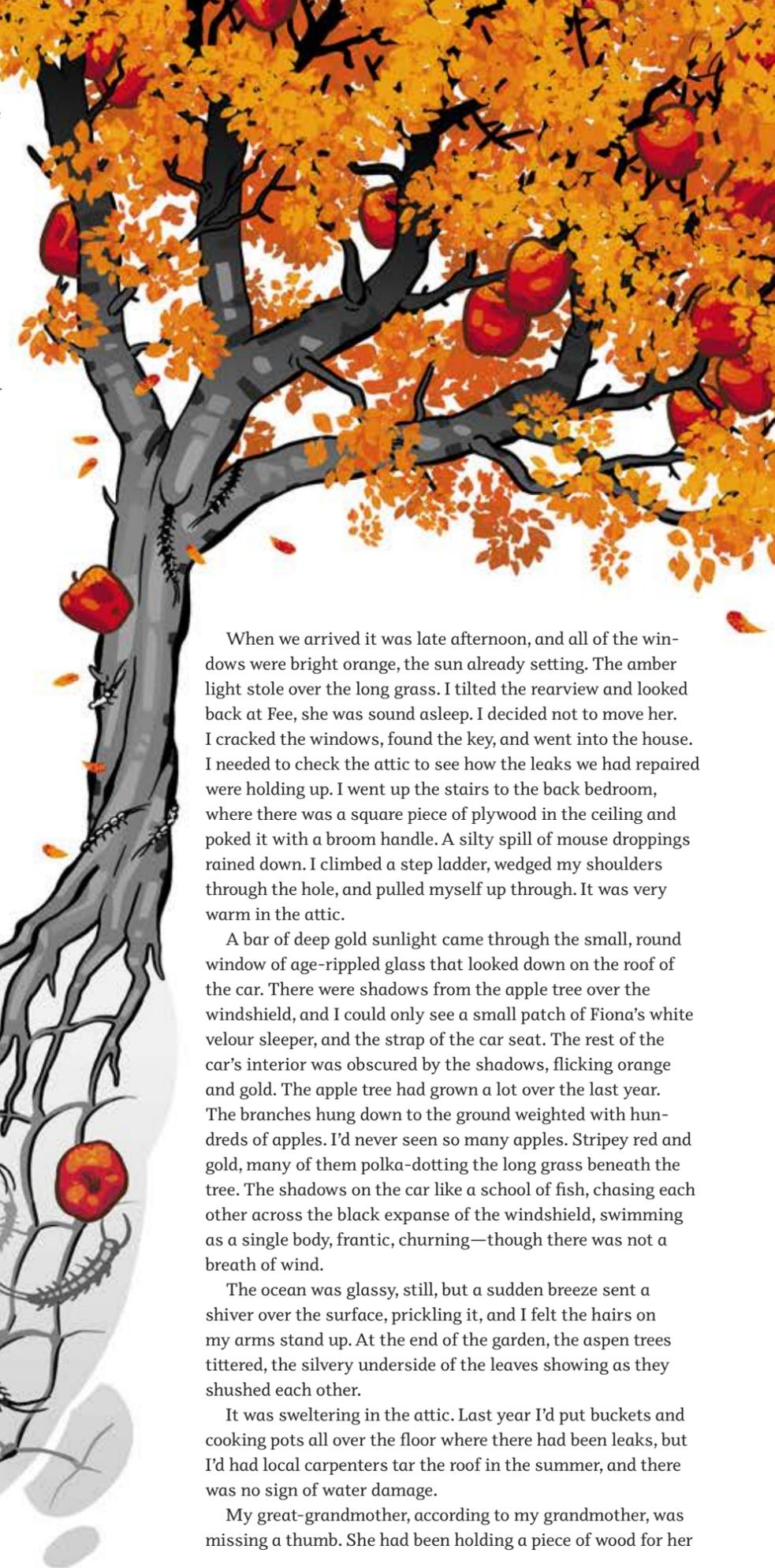
about 150 years old, and if the hurricane picked up a lawn chair or a sledgehammer and flung it through a window, rot would set in. I was worried about the barbecue; we'd left it out in the yard. And, most of all, the apple tree. I'd bought a cordless, mini-chainsaw to cut back the branches. I put Fiona in the car seat and did up the straps.

Little Fee Fee, I whispered, I love you, even if you do cry all the time.

My cheek touching her cheek, breathing in the baby scent, whisper-singing "Fee Fi Fo Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman." I told her I loved her so much I could just eat her. I said her daddy was going to be really mad when he found out we were gone, driving into a hurricane, all by ourselves, but he should have thought about that before he decided to stay late at work.

But the baby was already asleep. Fee had colic, and she was almost always screaming and twisting, as if trying to escape her own little body through her wide-open mouth. Her little fists clenched. Eyes scrunched. I was worried she wasn't getting enough nutrition, or that my milk was too thin, but the doctor said to keep trying.

I was nearing Perry's Cove when Ray tried calling. I didn't answer. Let him go home and find the house empty.



When we arrived it was late afternoon, and all of the windows were bright orange, the sun already setting. The amber light stole over the long grass. I tilted the rearview and looked back at Fee, she was sound asleep. I decided not to move her. I cracked the windows, found the key, and went into the house. I needed to check the attic to see how the leaks we had repaired were holding up. I went up the stairs to the back bedroom, where there was a square piece of plywood in the ceiling and poked it with a broom handle. A silty spill of mouse droppings rained down. I climbed a step ladder, wedged my shoulders through the hole, and pulled myself up through. It was very warm in the attic.

A bar of deep gold sunlight came through the small, round window of age-rippled glass that looked down on the roof of the car. There were shadows from the apple tree over the windshield, and I could only see a small patch of Fiona's white velour sleeper, and the strap of the car seat. The rest of the car's interior was obscured by the shadows, flicking orange and gold. The apple tree had grown a lot over the last year. The branches hung down to the ground weighted with hundreds of apples. I'd never seen so many apples. Stripey red and gold, many of them polka-dotted the long grass beneath the tree. The shadows on the car like a school of fish, chasing each other across the black expanse of the windshield, swimming as a single body, frantic, churning—though there was not a breath of wind.

The ocean was glassy, still, but a sudden breeze sent a shiver over the surface, prickling it, and I felt the hairs on my arms stand up. At the end of the garden, the aspen trees tittered, the silvery underside of the leaves showing as they shushed each other.

It was sweltering in the attic. Last year I'd put buckets and cooking pots all over the floor where there had been leaks, but I'd had local carpenters tar the roof in the summer, and there was no sign of water damage.

My great-grandmother, according to my grandmother, was missing a thumb. She had been holding a piece of wood for her

sister on the chopping block and hadn't pulled her hand away fast enough. The sisters had been just children. The axe had come down fast and taken off her thumb.

I thought of it in that incredible heat before the storm and felt my milk let down, and I knew Fiona had stirred in her sleep. I heard something then, a high-pitched urgent scratching against the little glass window. It was the uppermost branch of the apple tree, the very tip of a branch, tapping with a single bony twig.

I climbed down from the attic and went back outside to the car. I saw that my neighbours had one of those Halloween decorations sticking out of their ornamental wishing well. It was a pair of stockinged legs, black-and-white striped, and pointy-toed black shoes with big brass buckles. There was also a carved pumpkin, but someone had smashed it. The jaunty lid sat over a broken toothy grin, but the skull had caved and broken apart.

I opened the trunk of the car, and took out the cordless mini-chainsaw. I climbed the apple tree as high as I could go, trying to hold on to the branches above me and grappling with the saw. I reached above my head and cut into the branch that had rubbed against the window of the attic. It was about the thickness of my wrist and sawdust rained down on my face, and the engine squealed as I drew it back and forth. The branch gave and it walloped through all the lower branches, knocking off apples as it went, so they all thunked down and rolled down the little hill at the base of the tree. The branch I'd been standing on cracked, and I dropped the chainsaw. I felt it cut the air near my foot, the whir and noise of it.

Then I heard Fiona shrieking.

I carefully climbed out of the tree, trembling, slick with sweat. I could have lost a part of my foot. Fee was screaming, and I took her into the house, holding her with one hand, and the bag of salt and vinegar chips—which had been open on the car seat—in the other. I put the baby down on the bed and changed her diaper. My great-grandmother had given birth in that bed, to 12 children, despite the missing thumb, and she'd died there. She



had been waked in the parlour downstairs. She could read and write, and she taught the children in the community. She lay in a grave across the highway, near a cliff, the words on the headstone softened by rain, letters eroded, impossible to decipher.

I lay down beside Fee and began to feed her, digging into the chip bag, putting big handfuls in my mouth. I had no idea how hungry I had been.

Then I felt something in my mouth, something moving. I leaned over and spat everything out. It was a centipede, coated in my saliva and bits of crunched chip, wiggling to free itself of the sluicing shiny veil of my spit, like something emerging from a cocoon or caul, undulating with vigour and speed over the hills and valleys of the crunched wet chips. I kept spitting, but my tongue was swelling, and thick in my mouth. I felt such an overwhelming tiredness.

As my head spun I whispered to Fee, Maybe we'll leave your daddy, maybe we've had enough. Huh? I asked her. You and me, kid? What do you say? What do you think of *those* optics?

Then I lay back on the pillow as if sinking through a hole in the universe, or the eye of a storm. I had time to think there would be no hurricane. Perhaps it had changed course way out in the ocean. Perhaps I had dreamt it.

I woke because I was freezing cold. Shivering. The rain hammering hard, the apple tree thrashing like it was breaking its tether with the earth. It flung itself around until a branch bashed through the window and the apples pelted at me, hitting me hard on the arms, on my head, my chest. I was searching in the blankets for the baby, but I couldn't find her. I was screaming her name. I grabbed my phone and hit the flashlight.

In the weak, white beam I saw what looked like a copper river, full of glint and shine, pouring through the bedroom door, pouring into and over my boots and my jeans that I'd left on the floor, the blanket, a damp earthy coil, thickening, twisting, braiding and unbraiding, gleaming a deep red, flushing in waves lapping over my legs. A torrent of centipedes, thick as a tide, forceful, swift. It poured up over the bed, and there was Fiona, lifted on the

back of the thing, more serpent than river, the baby lifted and jostled, her arms and legs kicking, she was cooing, a soft tepid giggling or gurgle. The wave of centipedes, climbing over the backs of the centipedes beneath to form a naked muscle, a single reptilian flow of being, rose toward the smashed window and was about to drop the baby out when a child appeared in the doorway of the bedroom, staggering against the hurricane wind. All of the objects in the room had been flung against the wall.

The child was perhaps thirteen, pale, a bloodied white dress, gripping one hand with the other. Her hair blowing out behind her, the dress torn back by the wind, showing her knees, her hips. She pushed forward, pointing the raw flesh of her thumb at the baby and her gushing blood splattered the centipedes and they coiled in on themselves and fell through the floorboards shriveled in mounds of tiny carcasses, and Fiona slipped off the back of the disintegrating serpent, onto the bed where she was safe from the wind.

I tore at the bedsheets until I had a strip of cotton that I wrapped around the child's bleeding hand. I was fighting to stay standing, trying to shield her from the apples still flying through the window, bashing against the opposite wall. While I knotted the bandage, the child spoke of everything, in pulses of feeling—there was no language, no words—but everything that had happened and would happen passed between us, just as the blood pulsed brighter and brighter in the white bandage.

She drew me toward the window, both of us lurching forward against the wind. I'd picked up Fee, and I held her pressed to my chest, and under the violet moon I saw a wave, higher than the house, three maybe four storeys high, the colour of salmon flesh, eyes and tails and fins, pink and moon-glittered, rolling toward the shore. ➤

Lisa Moore has written three collections of short stories, Degrees of Nakedness, Open, and Something for Everyone; four novels, Alligator, February, Caught, This Is How We Love; and a young adult novel, Flannery. She teaches creative writing at Memorial University of Newfoundland, in St. John's.

