

Laura McPhee-Browne

Banksia

for Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Frances lives in Toronto with her boyfriend. Frances is Australian, and, since coming to live in Canada, has felt fiercely so, as she never did when she was back there. Frances loves living away from home because it feels like she has nothing to expect and nothing to prove. It feels freeing, like a woman might feel when she is past the age when men stare at her. Like there is no one who does not matter to watch her anymore.

Frances's boyfriend has dark skin and curled hair and his name is Altaf. She calls him Al, which both appals and amuses him, and she watches him like a bird. He is a writer, and he professes poetic and deep love for her most days. This makes her laugh, and rounds her dusky cheeks. They dance around their living room sometimes, and watch the snow she has never known before fall.

Frances has a job in Toronto. She manages the Meals on Wheels program at a community agency downtown, and sometimes delivers the meals herself to the shrunken eighty-somethings who live in condos all around town. Sometimes they ask her in for cups of tea and stories that take too much of her heart, and when she leaves she feels tired and bored, and briefly hates herself for it. One old lady she visits does not eat the meals but simply stacks them in her kitchen; wobbling towers of fake steak and yellow potato dumplings. The old woman is Polish and some days she forgets she ever learnt English. Frances loves her, or at least feels that her body is family, and that her mind deserves rest. She holds the woman's hand as she sways.

One Thursday, Frances attends training, instead of her usual driving around and popping in and counting and dialling numbers to remind people which number Bloor Street West has Halal and which has frozen Chinese. The training is held in a little room on the twelfth floor of a building Frances has often looked up at, but never before been inside.

After arriving and writing her looping name on the sheet that proves you were actually here, and bigger again on a white piece of sticker with a thick red Texta to stick against her breast, Frances sits in the furthest chair from the front, a habit from high school she has yet to break. For some reason her back is very itchy; she tries to rub the itchiness against the seat, but it's a slippery surface and does not help. Itchiness is harder to ignore than

she has ever considered, and she decides to try and focus on the people arriving around her, to imagine where they are from and a little of who they are.

She watches a woman walk in with powerful strides and before Frances has had a chance to look away the woman looks right into her eyes. This woman must be the facilitator, the one in charge; she is giving off the smell of confidence and her shoulders sit low and calm on her small frame. Frances hopes there will be no group activities in this training. She cannot bear to learn through the questions of strangers.

The woman begins to talk before everyone has arrived and it does not seem to matter at all; rather, it seems appropriate and grand. Her short body walks up and down the space she has at the front of the room as she speaks, and each word is articulated perfectly, as if she is meant to be here and always will be—an ancient fountain. She tells Frances, she tells everyone in the room that she is indigenous, despite her pale skin. She tells them of the fury she feels and the trauma she has endured and everyone in the room cries except for her. Frances cries, and knows she has never really cared for anyone but herself, and certainly not for the indigenous people she left behind in Australia, who she never thanked for letting her live without objection on their land. She knows too, quickly, and with a slick of sickness at her belly, that she will be able to go on living her life without caring very much for all of her future, and the tears come quicker as she sits there in the acceptance of her own selfishness, the languish of it around her like water in an inflatable pool.

Frances's back still itches. It's getting worse. She can't sit still in her chair; she's never felt agitation like this, and she walks out of the room to find a toilet, imagining rubbing the sandy toilet paper against the bare skin of her back and almost salivating. In the bathroom she rubs and rubs and then feels something new beneath her fingers. At the mirror, she turns and lifts up her shirt. There are three growths along the middle of her back. They look like closed mouths and are dark and rough, like bark. She is barely scared—it is beyond that—and when she coughs some seeds spurt out of her mouth and drop onto the tiled floor. She walks back to the training room with a quick-step beating heart, and sees that there are still tears being shed in here—that there is still so much more she doesn't know.

The woman is sitting now, on the broad bean-coloured carpet floor, her legs crossed in front of her, her palms touching beneath. She is talking low and soft and Frances strains to hear as she sits down in her chair and moves to find comfort for her changed body. I do not hate White people, the woman is saying, looking around the room, into every participant's bleeding eyes. But I do expect them to hate themselves, at least a little. The statement hits

Frances' chest and she feels a powerful itch begin between her breasts. She hates herself sometimes, but never because of what she now remembers is the important reason. Touching her hand to her cleavage, Frances feels another growth already gaping there, and moves her hand down to find two more against the skin that covers her ribs.

Frances wonders whether it is too late. She doesn't know where this question comes from, and only knows what it means in a hazy way that signals she is turning into some kind of fauna, or perhaps some kind of flora that will be the punishment for her many years of apathy. She thinks she should write something down; a small story she can read to the indigenous woman to show she understands. But that would be despicable, she is starting to see.

As she is looking about for something to signal her progress, to show the woman she is different from the rest of them because at least she knows she is bad, she feels her stockings pop on both legs and looks down, under the table at them. There are two growths now, two closed mouths made of tree, on her legs, and she doesn't know what to do. She feels different: like her heart is opening up into a flower. Frances apologises loudly and stands, sees the eyes of everyone in the room turn towards hers. She looks down at the woman but the woman is not looking up.

Frances leaves the room and walks gingerly back to the toilets. There are now two more growths on her legs and the mouths are starting to open. She looks at her itchy arms and sees smaller growths along them too—the little mouths there are gaping and seeds are starting to spill forth. She looks at herself in the mirror and sees that she is shrinking; the top of her head now lines up with the top of the coffee-with-cream-coloured soap dispenser. She accepts this, for, of course, after hearing today what she did, it is only natural that her body would creep within itself, to try and figure out what to do. Frances is missing the woman's words and the growths are coming rapidly now—there is nothing that can stop them—so she runs back to the room and comes to sit on the carpet at the front, right near the woman, feeling fiercely brave in her diminishment.

The woman does not look at her, and as Frances catches her breath and begins to peek at the faces of those behind her she sees that they don't see her. She is mostly mouths now—they gape along her arms and legs and spit out seeds from her stomach and neck. They don't hurt and are not itchy anymore, but they are taking over. We wanted nothing but peace, the woman says, looking around the room into the eyes of everyone except Frances. The woman is getting bigger because Frances is getting smaller. She lies there on the ground at the front

of the room now, so small she is a banksia spike. No one notices Frances as the woman finishes and the participants leave after coming to say thank you, to shake her small hand. She is invisible, or only as visible as plant matter is, in a room on the twelfth floor of a big city building.

About the author: Laura McPhee-Browne is a writer and social worker from Melbourne. She is currently working on what she hopes will be her first book, a collection of “echo” stories inspired by the short fiction of her favourite female writers. She can be found at <https://lauramcphiebrowne.squarespace.com>