

A Life in Pieces



Jo-Ann Wallace

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Jo-Ann Wallace

 Thistledown Press

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Thistledown Press Ltd.
Unit 222, 220 20TH Street w
Saskatoon, SK S7M 0W9
www.thistledownpress.com

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: A life in pieces / by Jo-Ann Wallace.

Names: Wallace, Jo-Ann, 1953- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20240364082 | Canadiana (ebook) 20240364228 | ISBN 9781771872560 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771872652 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Wallace, Jo-Ann, 1953- | LCSH: College teachers—Canada—Biography. | CSH: Authors, Canadian (English)—21st century—Biography. | LCGFT: Autobiographies.

Classification: LCC PS8645.A467375 Z46 2024 | DDC C818/.603—dc23

Edited by Susan Olding

Cover and book design by Betsy Rosenwald

Cover image: Russel Wright residential melmac cups

Printed and bound in Canada

Thistledown Press gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance of SK Arts, The Canada Council for the Arts, and the Government of Canada for its publishing program.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada



Canada

Saskatchewan

For Stephen

I had a flashback of something that never existed.

Louise Bourgeois

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EARLY

43 Leslie Gault

I'VE JUST FINISHED READING A 2003 MEMOIR BY Hilary Mantel. In it she writes this: "All your houses are haunted by the person you might have been." The sentence struck me with some force because I have been thinking about time travel, about the desire to travel back to other times and places. My own places, my own houses and apartments, but other places too. Sometimes I go to Google street maps and take a virtual walk past the places in which I used to live. They are changed but not beyond recognition.

Here is 43 Leslie Gault, in the neighbourhood of Ahuntsic, in the city of Montreal. I lived here from the time I was three until I was almost ten. From the outside, the building—a fourplex—is unchanged. There is the driveway sloping steeply down to the garage. When I was four or five I watched some big boys ride their two-wheel bicycles down that slope, pedalling backwards to break hard just before they reached the garage door. Down I went on my tricycle, pedalling backwards to no avail. I'm sure my wails could be heard across the neighbourhood.

Walk in the outside door of number 43, past the inside front door of the Bergerons, our landlords, and go up the staircase to our apartment. It is the staircase on which I sat as I translated conversations between Madame Bergeron and my mother. Groceries, baby carriages, tricycles, and sleds went up and down those stairs. Open the front door onto the hallway that runs the length of the apartment. Turn left and then left again and you are in the kitchen. It is not large but my parents managed to cram fifteen adults and children in there for Christmas dinner, a dinner punctuated by rye and ginger ale, canned cranberry jelly, and unaccustomed pickles. Little pink planters from Occupied Japan with stylized black cats lived on the kitchen walls, small tendrils of something trailing out. The wringer washing machine also lived in the kitchen though I can't quite remember where. It must have been beside the door to the back balcony. The spiral iron staircase to the backyard took me past the next-door boxer dog, leaping up against the fence and barking in a terrifying way. I sometimes shimmied down the central iron post rather than risk an encounter. The backyard was unadorned, the lawn untended, though occasionally Louise Bergeron's little wading pool would appear, and I would be invited to join. Once a neighbourhood boy peed against the wall, drawing a circle, a performance that impressed me enormously and made me wish for a penis. For a while I pretended I had a penis.

I think about what 43 Leslie Gault would have smelled like. In those years—in fact, for much of the twentieth century—we lived in a deep fug of cigarette smoke. My parents were both heavy smokers and our apartment had to be painted every two or three years to hide the yellow tar that gathered high up on the walls. When we took the bus or the streetcar we were wedged in with people smoking, inadvertently burn-

ing holes in each other's clothing. Holes in clothing, holes in upholstery, burn marks on coffee tables. And ashtrays. Murano glass ashtrays; ashtrays that were pieces of furniture, perched on their own pedestals; boomerang-shaped ceramic ashtrays; Spin-o-Matic self-cleaning ashtrays; primitive clay ashtrays that kids made at school for Father's Day.

Of course, 43 Leslie Gault had other smells too, breakthrough smells. Pot roast on Sundays. The smell of laundry making its squelchy way through the wringer washer. The smell of sheets frozen solid as my mother brought them in from the clothesline in winter. The hot smell of early summer, the kitchen door to the balcony wide open, the radio tuned to CJAD, maple whirligigs drifting in the wind and gathering in small mounds on the ground. The smell of my father's after-shave. The inevitable smells of vomit and fever and calamine lotion in a small apartment with four tiny children.

Across the hall from the kitchen is Catherine and Laura's bedroom where the toybox lives. Next to that is the bedroom I share with Nancy. Lying in bed, weeping helplessly in the wake of some slight or reprimand from my parents. Snot clogging my airways. "I can't breathe," I sob. Nancy, in a panic in her neighbouring bed, calls out to our parents. "Jo-Ann can't breathe." They are unrepentant in the living room, their bums planted firmly on the slippery loopy fabric of the chesterfield. The chesterfield leaves a pattern on your face if you fall asleep on it. Also in the living room is the new television set which gives us *Bonanza* and Walt Disney. If I put my head in my mother's lap while we watch TV, she will strokingly tuck my hair behind my ear.

Opposite the living room, at the far end of the long hallway, is my parents' bedroom. Dark, heavy second-hand furniture. A closet that is good to hide in, their clothes brushing

my face. A vanity with mirrors that fold in on themselves so I am multiplied infinitely. On and on I go. I feel sure there is a way to step into this world of many me's. I just have to find the key. In the meantime, I put on plays in this room, forcing my parents to sit on the bed and watch as my sisters and I skate around on the waxed and polished wooden floor. Sometimes I wear a crinoline on my head. Long golden hair. Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night and make my way to their bedroom, where I curl up like a puppy on the small carpet at the foot of their bed.

That is our indoor life. Sometimes Madame Bergeron, who has only three children and a piano, gets cross at the sound of eight small feet running up and down the long hallway. My mother gets cross at Madame Bergeron. My parents scrape together the money and we move to a brand new, split level house in the suburbs. The house is perhaps 1200 square feet and my mother worries how she will ever keep such a large house clean.

Who, to go back to Hilary Mantel, is the person I might have been in that apartment?



Photo: Stephen Slemmon

JO-ANN WALLACE is an Emeritus Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. In her younger years, her poetry appeared in several now defunct periodicals, including *The Canadian Forum*. Her scholarly work focused on little known progressive movements and women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently, her literary nonfiction has appeared in venues like the *London Review of Books*, the *Literary Review of Canada*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She lives in Victoria, BC with her husband and their rambunctious dog, Bodhi.