

MARTA BALCEWICZ

# BIG SHADOW

a novel

**Book\*hug Press**

TORONTO 2023

FIRST EDITION

© 2022 by Marta Balcewicz

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

*Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication*

Title: Big shadow / Marta Balcewicz.

Names: Balcewicz, Marta, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20220458316 | Canadiana (ebook) 20220458367

ISBN 9781771668316 (softcover)

ISBN 9781771668323 (EPUB)

ISBN 9781771668330 (PDF)

Classification: LCC PS8603.A485 B54 2023 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book\*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
le Conseil gouvernemental des arts  
et organismes du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada



ONTARIO  
CREATES | ONTARIO  
CRÉATIF

Book\*hug Press acknowledges that the land on which we operate is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. We recognize the enduring presence of many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and are grateful for the opportunity to meet and work on this territory.

# 1

---

**F**or a while I had a job where I'd watch the passing clouds. In a notebook that I always carried with me, I'd write, "That one went on its way," "There was nothing unusual in that one." I learned how the clouds set themselves apart, by becoming shapes that had nothing to do with one another: wedding veils, curdled milk, trails of horse droppings perfectly spaced out. I learned their proper names: *cirrus*, *stratus*, *nimbus*. The clouds in the opening credits of *The Simpsons* are *stratocumulus*, for example. Nephology is the study of clouds and nephrology is the study of kidneys. I could tell you so much more; I was hyperaware and educated. I walked around always tense, and looked upward a lot so that at the end of the day I'd feel an ache in my neck and shoulders.

Calling the cloud job a "job" is inaccurate. There was no hiring. I was really just spending time with the only two people I knew. I saw little of them and for the most part sat stationed outdoors. My cousin Christopher and his friend Alex felt I was uniquely qualified to be the one who observed, and outside, on a lawn, the perspective of a sky is clearer. Once the weather warmed

up, I didn't think to mind. I also hadn't thought to mind during the earlier spring days when this all started. Only then, I'd bring out a blanket. The job and the cloud watching it involved had been invented entirely by Alex. And it was par for the course that if he had an idea, Christopher and I usually went along with it. Or at least we considered his idea very seriously, so that it felt like a job to finally execute it. There isn't much to do when there's nothing but lawn and more lawn around. There's not much to do when you're young and stuck together like we were.

For a time I became one with my job in the way anybody with a serious calling would, and I thought myself essential. A surgeon or a president must look at their hands a hundred-plus times every day. In their palms and their hardened fingers dwell their accomplishments, like a list displayed by a computer. I had the same compulsion. I thought my notebook notations weren't far from saving a life. I'd sit on the sun lounger with a novel in my lap and the cloud notebook underneath it. In a cup set on the grass at my side, I kept a slim fountain pen that I especially liked to use. Even at the height of it—when I felt no outward disdain—the task of monitoring the sky was idle-work, in the most painful, extreme sense of stopped, sleepy, and dead. I suppose I took it too literally at points, though sometimes not literally enough.

“Do you sense something coming,” Alex would say. “That's all it's about, a *sense*.” I sensed a lot of things on any given day, and the frustrating thing about sense is that it's always highly impressionable. In answering him, I pretty much always said, “I sensed nothing relevant today and sensed nothing the day before either.” Having the cloud notebook, I could at least hold it up and point to the notations. “Nothing,” “nothing,” said my notes. Though some-

times I would elaborate: “An extra-large nimbus moved so slowly, I thought it was stopped. I was sure it was the Big Shadow. The trees were whipping, it was obviously windy, so why no movement? But then I saw that the cloud was shrinking, which *is* movement. It was shrinking very fast, actually. Imagine standing on a set of tracks, watching a train leave the station. Eventually it’s a toy, soon after it’s a dot, soon after that, nothing. It’s all about the angle from which you (the subject) watch the object (the cloud), which is also called parapraxis.”

I’d insert short-lived drama like that, written colloquially, and a little fancifully, as if it were conversation. But it was embellishment only. “Parapraxis” came from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*—though I’d only read its long introduction. I was grasping at straws. The earth spins, hemispheres rotate, clouds are just vapour procured by oceans, no more. I’m sorry it’s nothing bigger.

THE LAWN WHERE I sat while on the cloud-watching job was part of a property belonging to Alex. Since we were only days past the end of high school and not yet eighteen, the accurate way of stating this was that the property where I sat while on the cloud job belonged to Alex’s mother, a lady with money. The money she had took her far from us—I figured spots like Italy, because of her new life partner, and his business, or a stock he’d invested in that’d done well, and maybe children of his who needed more tending to than self-sufficient Alex. These ideas were just pulled from movies showing rich-people preoccupations. She may have been staying with a friend or sister in town, only a forty-minute drive away, even working a nine-to-five job—we didn’t know; we could be so myopic. Perhaps Alex’s mother was an ordinary person.