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Book*hug Press, 2026

FIRST EDITION
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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Dead peasant / Lisa Baldissera.
Names: Baldissera, Lisa, 1966- author.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20260201731 | Canadiana (ebook) 20260207152
ISBN 9781771669986 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771669993 (EPUB)
Subjects: LCGFT: Short stories.
Classification: LCC PS8603.A5275 D43 2026 | 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.

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 Anishinaabe, 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.

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Weepers I/Curator

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THE WEEPING STARTED AT CONFERENCES. WHEN I was asked to speak about my work, my eyes began to water. I thought about the unpaid wages. I thought about the free labour. I thought about what it had been like to be an unfunded doctoral student for six years. The terrorization of poverty. Three people had been killed on the street in front of my student apartment on Hackney Road. The buses had driven around their bodies in large arcs; people were impatient with the obstruction.

The dead are a strange and obstinate work crew. They labour silently to tell us what we should prioritize as the living. They remind us that punishment awaits those who get it wrong. You could be dead, they say, you could be dead, so do what's right to stay alive. We don't listen too closely to their admonishments—we know the dead's stories are puppet shows we animate, and this is why the dead are so frightening. We feel their longings, the things they left undone and unsaid. We want to believe the dead now understand what it is to be free, but they press at our windows, whispering their regrets. The dead chide us, and we strain to hear their reproaches—that there are some things capitalism cannot extract. We are rushing. We don't have time to sit and wait for the words to become clearer. Capitalism is unable to exhume the body's desire, they say, for instance. It's only materiality—something mitochondrial, for example—that they can conjure a patent for, they say. We might ask what they mean by desire then, or what desire might will into being, but who has time to decipher their answers?

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On my way to Yorkshire to Charlotte Brontë's house—to see the long wooden table in the living room in front of the fire where she and her sisters wrote seven novels—I had been surprised when my journey was rerouted due to a "person on the tracks," a transit euphemism for bodies, for the dead. These bodies embroidered rail lines with their refusals and sadness, their pre-track thoughts and grey messages, like the ghosts of World War II fighter pilots, young German soldiers who, losing their will to fight, might discharge bombs or bullets along a long country road in Devon. The modern dead are unlike our own. Our dead have failed to stay alive, but their ghosts have been made into heroes, marching unflinchingly into their destinies, decided by others. They are not entrepreneurs. These dead still had the capacity to elicit awe.

Had the German bombers seen the lone boy—my father—beneath them, late for school? The boy had run along the road to a nearby farm for refuge, the farmer's wife kindly enough to open the door. She was an anachronistic trauma counsellor in disguise as a country wife, with dirt enfolded into the creases of her neck, the cotton at the inside of her elbows wrinkled into an accordion of days. Their shared poverty was enough training for this wartime game of endurance. Such a child as this one, dodging bullets in 1940, would be given a short reprieve—perhaps a cup of tea, a quick pat on his shoulder, before being sent back onto the road to continue his journey.

The weeping started at conferences. I had graduated and secured my first position as an academic curator for a small liberal arts college. We organized presentations about art in neo-liberal times. In one paper, I described the stool at the gallery where I worked reception as a doctoral student

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for £7.50 an hour. The too-tall stool was an expression of repressive design: the dangling compressed my hamstrings and made my back sore at night. I had used the silent time to read. I realized privately that I had not felt tears in those instances. I did not tell them that it seemed to be the speaking that provoked the crying now. After this happened in public a few times, I began to ignore it and continued to read my papers with full eyes, without pause or stop. I read on and on. Each time I read about the osteoporotic economics of art, the tears came. This leaching of our bones as art workers and academics, of the supports that are the architecture of our bodies and our lives, comes through many forms of violence: the extended periods of sitting or standing, the regulation of the body down to the second—either as self-regulation toward a desired productivity, or as adaptive behaviour driven by the new smart-academies that now download data at every gesture and betray us by logging our pauses, our daydreaming, our necessary breathing-madness, or the spaces between thinking and action that had, since the Sumerians, been considered a form of productivity. Before this violence, to dream was to deepen knowledge—to know, rather than to work without knowing—to know the constellation to which our work and our dreaming belonged. More worrying now, my tears, filled with calcium, seemed to leach my bones further.

I hired a wiper. She was a retired page-turner who had once specialized in page-turning for French-horn players during performances of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. She was discreet and deftly wiped my cheeks at regular intervals, pacing the gesture with the turning of a page. She could find no work since the smaller orchestras, having lost their funding, began to shy away from large orchestral works. She liked the modesty of my

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project. These tears were just enough to keep her in practice.

Sometimes she brought scented pink tissues balmed with moisture cream. If she was in a hurry, it might be a small packet sitting on the table in front of the microphone, or perhaps wet wipes, which left my cheeks glistening. She began to carry a card, since people started to ask for her contact information. The crying had become more commonplace at conferences, and it was difficult to find good help, difficult to find someone who understood the professionalism of invisibility.

Several months into this new career, the Wiper was asked to give a performance as part of the conference opening. The performance involved attending to the keynote speaker, whose face was magnified on a large video screen, so that the audience could spot the eyes welling, the moment just before the spillage, when the Wiper's expert hands—tanned, veiny, and sensibly unmanicured—would intervene. The piece was later played in slow motion throughout the conference, her hands appearing at regular, mesmerizing intervals. People discussed the flick of her wrist, the strength in her fingers, the quiet sensuality of the gesture. They wondered if the gesture could be truly considered empathic if she had in fact been paid. What was the relationship between compensation and care? Was there a place for unpaid internships in this new industry of Wipers?

New conferences were established to discuss these issues. The Wipers, now a unionized fleet known for their sensible hands, came to these. The industry flourished and branched out, as some came to hold the hands of speakers who were unable to cry, and, in some cases, also attend to the audience

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members who were moved by the speakers. Tear-capture became another important sub-speciality, predicted by artist Mika Rottenberg, who became a cult celebrity figure among the Wipers. Mika wrote an opera for Wipers, which the first Wiper dismissed on grounds that it was a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, its totalizing facade a form of authoritarianism. The spectacle had overtaken the gesture of care once again, she said.

Wiper retreats were held, most often in Italy or the South of France, and sometimes in Cyprus, where one could become a citizen simply by buying a house. Since they worked primarily for conference speakers, who were often academics, museum workers, and artists, their wages remained low. In response, they formed collectives: their new houses were organized as neo-nunneries, with service, meditation, gardening, and collectively undertaken care at the core of convent life. An optional residency master's program was developed, and the original Wiper was again invited to offer wisdom, her specialization having evolved into the Intuition of the Wiper. The industry depended on tears the way pipelines depend on fossil fuels. Renewable industrial Wiper practices were discussed and smaller breakout groups formed to resist weeping as an economic mainstay. This was after Cyprus reported that its weeping industry was singlehandedly responsible for a rising percentage of the country's GNP. The Cypriot economy reported growth and jobs, but it did not report their wages or the number of these low-paid workers required to buoy up the dragnet of its national debt.

When I read out my research at the last conference, I was at first celebrated. The Adam Smith Institute had published a paper, I said. The oversupply of labour, the Institute maintained, could

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potentially bring down labour costs for these jobs even further, I reported. For these were jobs everyone wanted. Pay is determined by how much people want to do a job and whether they have the skills to do it. Working less improves productivity, I argued, and thus four-day workweeks are more productive. It would be necessary for the government to legislate a Universal Basic Income.

Outside the windows of the conference room, the dry hot air was carrying sand from North Africa to Southern Europe, distributing its dust over migrant boats. The breeze that day left us parched. Many of us drank coral- and purple-coloured juices during breaks, which stained our teeth.

The Wipers' hands paused after I had spoken. Then they arose gracefully, in the kind of collective unison the neo-nunneries had engendered, and left our stages. We watched them, weeping. Our oversupply of tears was the crux of the matter, they told us. If we could just stop weeping, we realized, even for a few days each week, we might save our saviours. Their work would not be so expendable, ubiquitous, and poorly paid. If we could legislate our weeping and recover ourselves, they might reconsider. And so, this is how hope returned to us after all.

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