

Francine Cunningham

Francine Cunningham is an award-winning Indigenous writer, artist and educator. Her debut book of poems, *On/Me* (Caitlin Press, 2019), was nominated for 2020 BC and Yukon Book Prize, a 2020 Indigenous Voices Award and The Vancouver Book Award. She is a winner of the Indigenous Voices Award in 2019 (Unpublished Prose Category) and of the Hnatyshyn Foundation's REVEAL Indigenous Art Award. Her fiction has appeared in *The Best Canadian Short Stories 2021*, in *Grain Magazine* as the 2018 Short Prose Award winner, on *The Malahat Review's* Far Horizon's Prose shortlist, in *Joyland Magazine*, *The Puritan Magazine* and more. Her debut book of short stories *God Isn't Here Today* is out now with Invisible Publishing and is a book of Indigenous speculative fiction and horror.

On Grief

/ Hospital Visits

my mother never had a chance to be white passing
she was always known by the brown in her skin,
the Cree in her features,
what strangers thought she was,
never known for the unseen qualities, the details
her faith, her garden lush in summer, her laughter that burst through spaces
what was seen was beyond her control
people's perceptions
what they thought they knew

when i was a teenager we moved to small town in the north
it was during the oka crisis
protests strung along the country
my mom, scared to go outside
these people will think i'm one of them, the bad indians, the protesting indians
she was afraid see,
of getting insults hurled at her, beaten up
in a new place with faces that didn't know her details
that only knew the passing colour of her skin

when she got sick, really really sick
she went to the hospital
and they didn't see the details then either
so used to fixing up the problem brown people
they didn't see the details of her
so they sent her away
and so she went back

again
and again
and again
and they always sent her away
pneumonia
that's what they called her lung cancer until she couldn't breath anymore
until it was stage four and in her back and brain
because by then they couldn't deny her anymore
they couldn't see her as a drunk indian, someone to be forgotten
because they knew then
it was the tumor in her brain, not her skin colour
that was the problem
but even then, when they knew,
they wouldn't give her morphine for the pain
still convinced she was her skin and their perception
she had to fight for relief
she had to fight for them to see the details
nevermind my mom never drank,
didn't smoke, didn't do drugs, hardly ever swore, was a christian
none of those details mattered
and after the first stirrings of pain in her chest twelve months before
she was gone

"On Grief / Hospital Visits" from On/Me

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