

Happily shaping truths out of dismally wasted lives

A collection of
short stories that
makes grim work



PHILIP MARCHAND

‘Cloaca’ is the Latin and English word for sewer or drain, and is also used to designate a cavity that encompasses the intestinal, genital and urinary tracts in birds and other “primitive mammals.” This is the meaning of the word as it occurs to a character in a story entitled “I’m Sorry and Thank You,” from *The Cloaca*, a collection by Halifax-based Andrew Hood. In this story, a hippie mother cleans her baby on a total stranger’s front lawn, and when he appears, she hands him a bag of the baby’s excrement. The householder doesn’t seem so much perturbed at this action as bothered by the fact he can’t remember a word suggested by the action. “It’s frustrating, huh?” he says to the hippie mother. “When you can’t think of a word you know. It’s like having one of those sneezes where you can’t sneeze.”

Finally it comes to him. The word is “cloaca.” The sneeze is sneezed.

This linguistic episode is important on different levels. It signifies the consolations of accurate language. It hints at further strange behaviour by

primitive mammals — the two-legged variety. It encapsulates the motif of excrement, not infrequently found in the speech and metaphors of Hood’s characters. As one such character, in a story entitled “Manning,” puts it, “In life you’re rarely lucky enough to know just where the s---t has come from that gets cut up and thrown by the blades of your fan.” This excremental motif is one way of expressing what Hood, in his acknowledgements page, calls “the horror of being alive.”

Readers should not be put off. Hood is joining the ranks of such satirists as Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, whose view of human culture and behaviour always acknowledged the underside of waste and excrement. Not quite so disgusting, but analogous, is Hood’s treatment of filth and grease. Case in point is a fast food restaurant featured in the story entitled “The Thing About Things.” The protagonist informs us that one could spend a week cleaning this restaurant and it would still be filthy. “From the meat sizzling on the grill and fries popping in the fryer this skin of grease has settled on every surface,” he says. Even a house inhabited by another character, Erma, a chain smoker, suffers from the same syndrome. “The walls in Erma’s house are a dull buttery brown, but not one solid colour,” the protagonist comments. “Probably these walls were once pristine white, or maybe some cheerier yellow, or at any rate

some colour clean and new and they’ve been gradually painted over by years of smoking. Filth gathers so gradually you don’t even notice.”

There is a spiritual form of waste explored in these stories — the form of wasted lives. This condition is memorably depicted in the story entitled “Beginners,” about a woman, Frances, who is approaching middle age and who is a perpetual beginner. “One time, all Frances wanted to do was be awesome at karate,” the story commences. “Karate would be her thing.” Unfortunately the instructor turns out to be a creep and Frances drops the course. “Another time, in the messy wake of a seven-month fling with a Woman’s Studies major who liked to be strangled, Frances got fixed on becoming this amazing accordion player,” Hood writes. “Using squirreled tip money she had been saving for a possible third stab at school, Frances bought an accordion, only it never occurred to her that she would have to learn how to play the thing.”

Countless other enthusiasms come and go. “There were boyfriends and girlfriends, and university degrees,” Hood writes. “There were trades and travel plans. And there was quitting the same café job over and over.” Symbolic of this spate of false starts is her growing collection of overdue library books.

For 13 years on and off she has been working at a café

