Canada 2019

Random House

This is the kind of sentence that you should find interesting, if you plan to read Ian Williams' *Reproduction*.

"If two people travel in a straight line in a hospital room, is that a vertex or an intersection?"

(You should also be comfortable with parenthetical remarks and ruminations. [You also might want to pause to look up the word 'vertex'.])

The two people in this vertex, or intersection, are Felicia and Edgar. "Both of their mothers were dying in the background." That's the first chapter, from the XX point-of-view. "Both of their mothers were still alive in the background." That's the first chapter, from the XY point-of-view.

If a writer and a story travelling in a straight line meet in a book, is that a vertex or an intersection?

"The only thing he knows to be as sure as death is that he must water his vert*ex* twice a day for the rest of his life"

P

Vert(ex)

"If two people travelling in a straight line meet in a hospital room, is that a vertex or an intersection? Why can't two lines be friends or form a shape of some sort? Good word, vertex. Vert*ex*."

R

There are two first chapters. A reproduction, but not a copy. (There will be more about reproduction later. [Also, more about copies.])

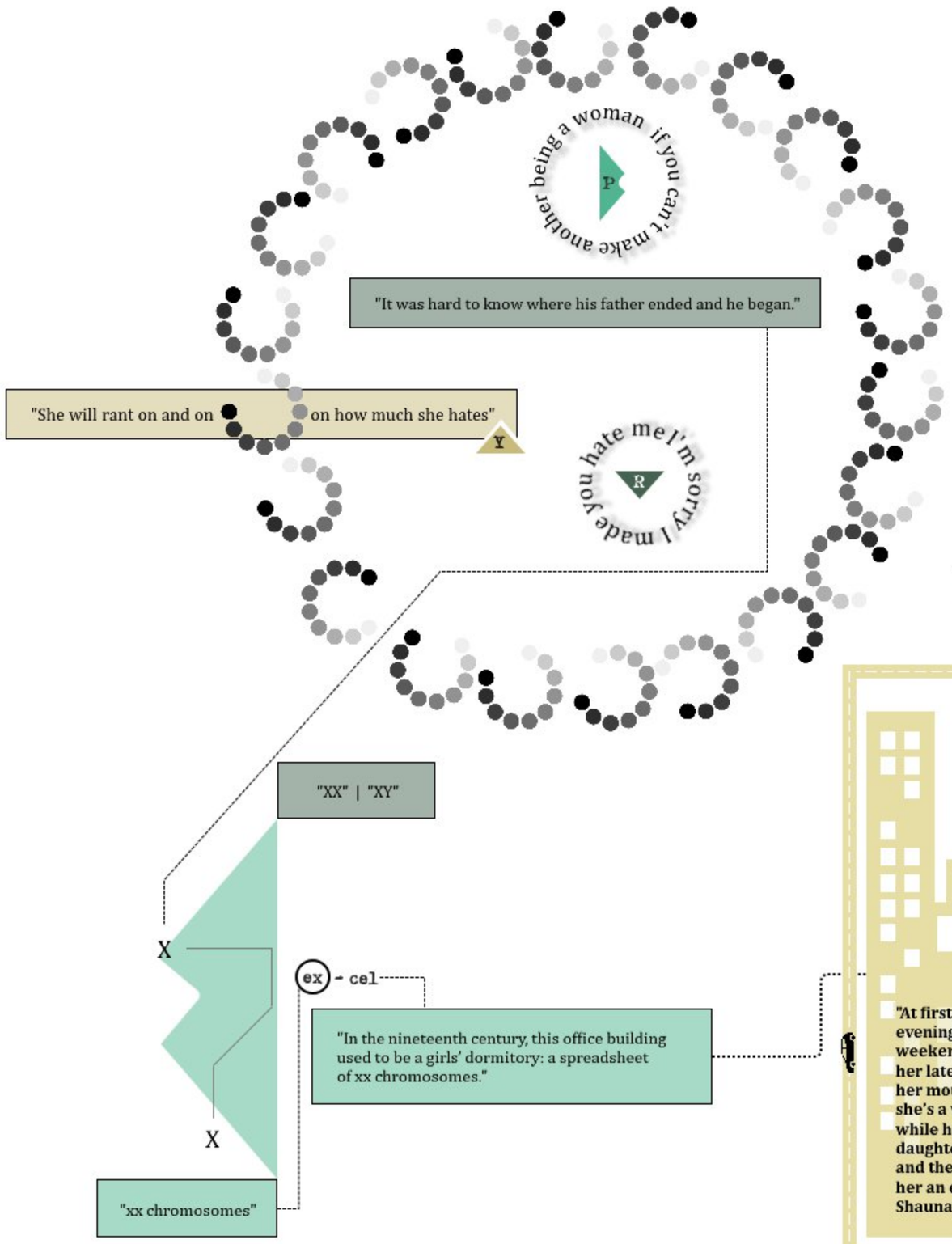
So *Reproduction* begins with the story of a woman and a man. Later, there is a child. Still later, there is another woman, another man, and eventually, another child. Also: other women, other men and other children. (Other things reproduce too: rhythms and melodies, pathologies and bad habits, disappointments and resilience.)

Readers who have followed Ian Williams' work on the page will recognize that themes and motifs also reproduce across his books: *You Know Who You Are* (poetry, Wolsak & Wynn, 2010), *Not Anyone's Anything* (short fiction, Freehand Books, 2011) and *Personals* (poetry, Freehand Books, 2012).

Vertices and divorces, chromosomes and formulae, strikeouts and asides, musical notation and an extraordinary reliance on words beginning with 'ex', with other quiet nods to absence and invisibility: a familiarity with Ian Williams' oeuvre will enrich readers' experiences of *Reproduction*. It's not essential, but useful. In the same way that it's not necessary to know a child's ancestors, but you'll probably be more patient, if the child breaks a tchotchke on your coffee table, if you understand what came before.

(The word 'tchotchke' does not appear in his poetry or prose, but look out for verbs like 'yellow-gloving' and 'draculing'. Also, beware of words with unexpected gaps.

Like sudden death. And be prepared for ambitious 'fontnessing'. ['Fontnessing' is my invention, but if Ian Williams wants to use it, he can: his 'goodsonning' is now a permanent part of my vocabulary.])



ex

"Question. What happens to the man she does not choose? He goes *ex*tinct, he says."

- tinct

"And he spits a language that only grows (*ex*plosive) and grows (*ex*tinct)."

EX - plo - sion

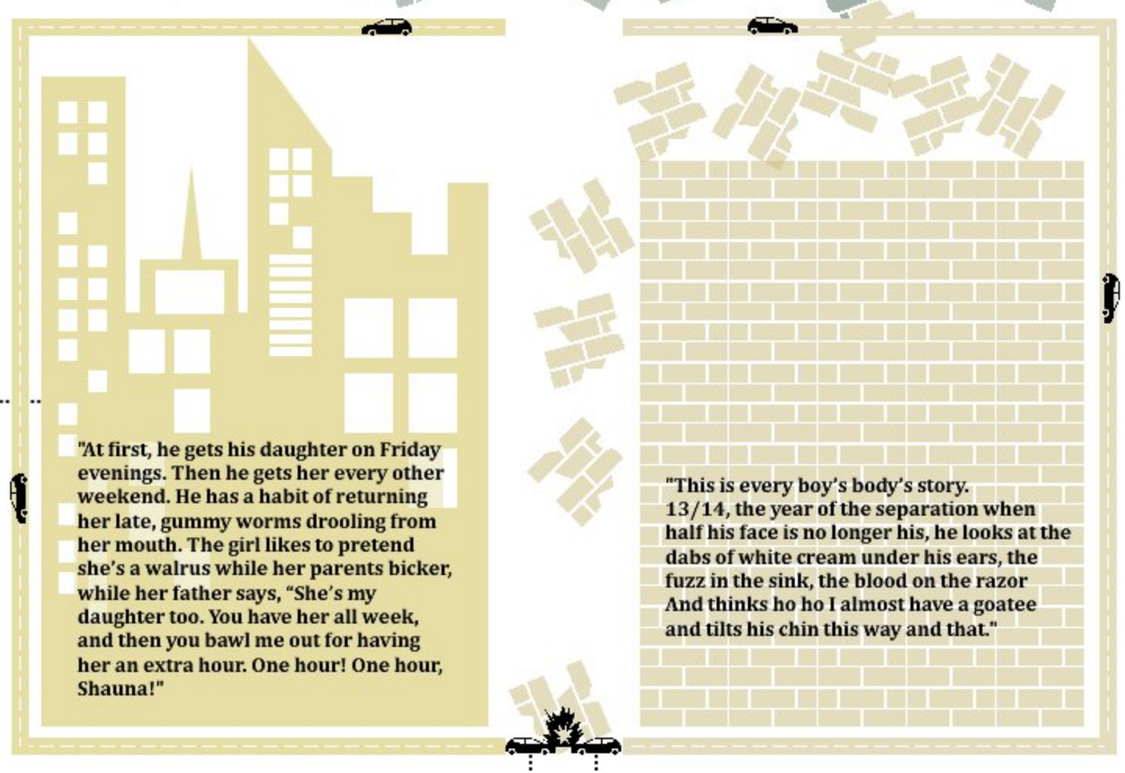
"There's a bomb under his shirt, strapped across his chest. There are two bombs actually: one under his shirt – Miriam hears that one ticking -

N

- and another around his waist"

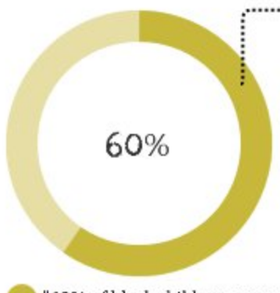
"He took Army's shoulders and slammed him against an unstable wall of divorce rubble for punctuation."

R U B B L E



"At first, he gets his daughter on Friday evenings. Then he gets her every other weekend. He has a habit of returning her late, gummy worms drooling from her mouth. The girl likes to pretend she's a walrus while her parents bicker, while her father says, "She's my daughter too. You have her all week, and then you bawl me out for having her an extra hour. One hour! One hour, Shauna!"

"This is every boy's body's story. 13/14, the year of the separation when half his face is no longer his, he looks at the dabs of white cream under his ears, the fuzz in the sink, the blood on the razor And thinks ho ho I almost have a goatee and tilts his chin this way and that."



"60% of black children grow up without a father"

"Don't think about my father, who is definitely not a statistic, and what will be a long, shifty-eyed conversation in an Indian restaurant about the seventeen plus years since we last saw each other because there are other things to think about such as not looking like a mama's boy, which is how he must remember me, small-boned, sickly, like my pants could be let down at the hem an inch."

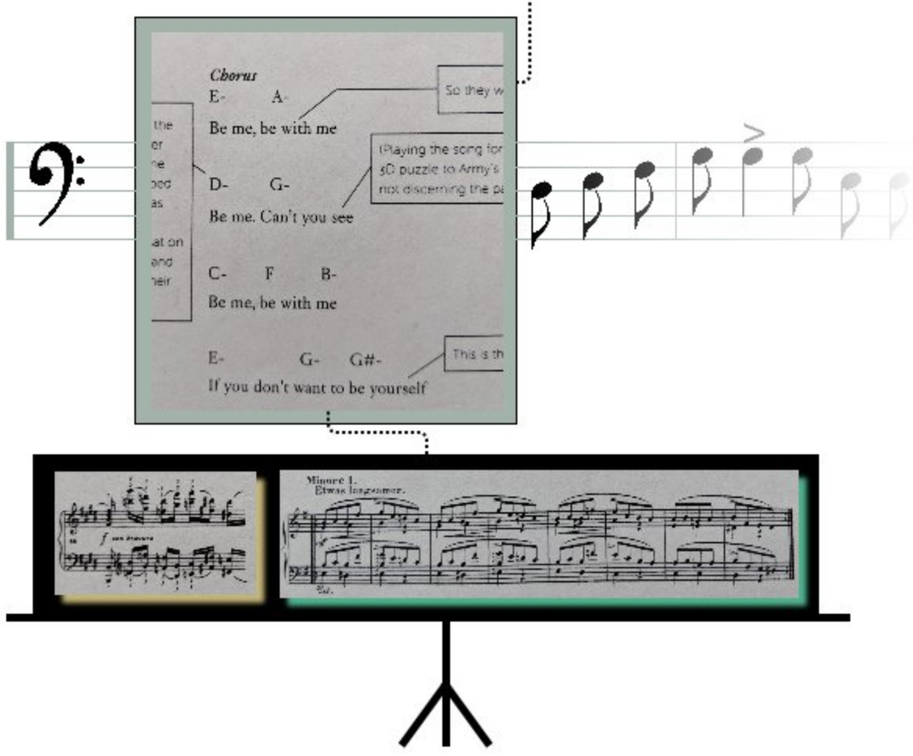
$f(x)$

"[Whoever gets the **kids** wins, right?]" X

"You women end up with the **kids**, the **house**, the **money**, everybody's **pity**." X

"No one really wins."

"But it [getting married] was just the next step, the next line in a math problem. You know, like when you have to show your work step-by-step"



| 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

"A whole floor of bedrooms and her children gone."

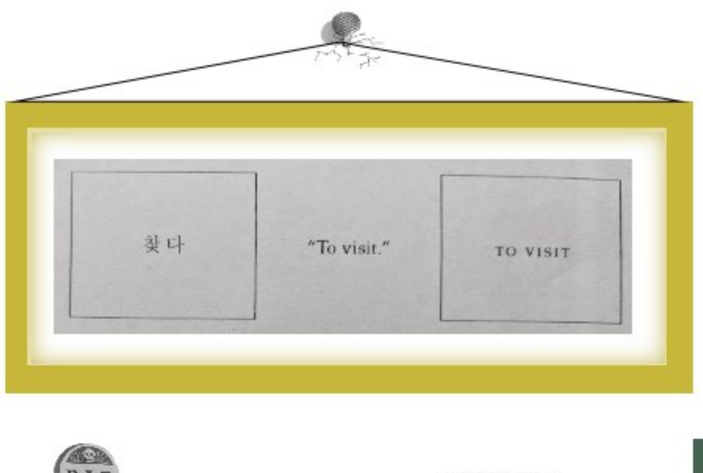
GONE

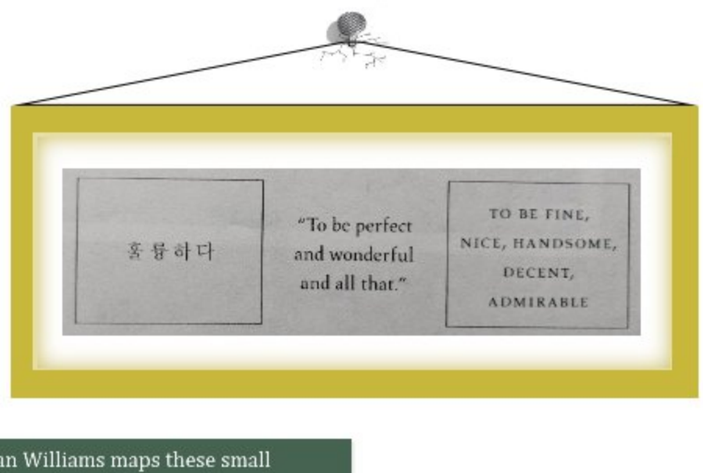
go on one

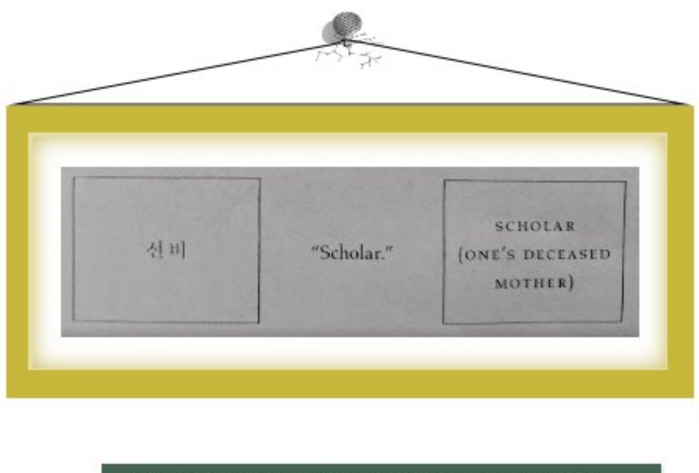
"Copy. Who knows what.
Copy. I read everything. Copy. I read everything. Copy.
Copy. Copy."

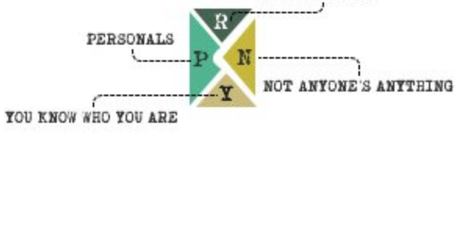
"'Too heavy,' Mr Wakowski says. 'Start again.'"
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6

"Bye, she said.
Bye, he didn't so much reply as repeat."
Bye
Bye
Bye
Bye









Ian Williams maps these small places: in text boxes and on staves, mostly in English but occasionally Korean, and quoting biblical verses and lyrics from pop songs. And if you read enough books about small places, they converge in a single vertex which permanently marks the spot, on the page (also, on readers).

Which really, really matters. Because, as Eleanor Roosevelt addressed the United Nations in 1958, "Where, after all, do human universal rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world."

This is an uncomfortable read. Because Felicia and Edgar are credible characters. Not always likeable, but credible. Sometimes, in a parenthesis, you will find yourself wanting to shake *Reproduction*'s characters by the shoulders. They withhold information, they dart towards and away from intimacy, and they muddle up matters of absence and presence. And the people closest to them repeat these patterns.