

# Perfecting

a novel

Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer



Copyright © 2009 by Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer.

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). To contact Access Copyright, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call 1-800-893-5777.

Edited by Bethany Gibson.

Cover photograph: "His Hands" © 2004 by Polly Chandler,  
[www.pollychandler.com](http://www.pollychandler.com).

Cover and interior page design by Julie Scriver.

Printed in Canada on 100% PCW paper.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Kuitenbrouwer, Kathryn, 1965-  
Perfecting / Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer.

ISBN 978-0-86492-515-2

I. Title.

PS8571.U4P47 2009      C813'.6      C2008-907191-3

Goose Lane Editions acknowledges the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and the New Brunswick Department of Wellness, Culture, and Sport for its publishing activities.

Goose Lane Editions  
Suite 330, 500 Beaverbrook Court  
Fredericton, New Brunswick  
CANADA E3B 5X4  
[www.gooselane.com](http://www.gooselane.com)

To all my boys



# One

NEW MEXICO, USA, 2004. Martha walked the Pecos River determined, skirting the prickly pear, grabbing weeping willow boughs here and there for stability. Thirty years had passed by and the last six were droughted. The river was but a thin, wet meander cleaving desiccated banks. The land around was a red-skinned beauty with hips to make a man cry or dare to touch.

Martha was a beauty, had on handmade ropers people in these parts could not afford: black horse-leather boots that would make anyone look cowboy. She had sweet hips too, hair cut straight, a bob, no bangs, and dyed black. Hips to dare touch. Black jeans, black eyelet shirt. The river was down to a trickle in most places, and where it ran strong, it still couldn't be called a river much. But they called it that, holding on to hope, while north and south, good neighbours squabbled over who got what water.

There was chatter in Martha's mind that wouldn't shut up — the last weeks coming back at her — but she was quiet, watching for snakes. She thought of Curtis. What would Curtis do? What had Curtis done? And tried to stop herself from such thoughts. She bent down, dipped her hand in that cleave, and it came out silted red and mud-stained; she touched the banks, ran her fingers through the scrubgrass and the deadweed that was waiting for fire to scourge it. It was hot out.

The sky was clear, just wispy rose clouds coming in, light was pale blue going to grey; the scrub cut its shape from the sky. Martha was heading roughly south, deep down to the river's edge, then shallow out of it, so that she could see, now and again, the arroyos angling farther up, wind-cut clay sculptures showing dried-out runnels. The sun was low, day ending. Martha would have to surface soon and look for lodging, and few around here would put her up; few had that kind of trust or space or interest.

She looked like she had walked the whole way from home, from Ontario, Canada, following some map she'd memorized, some hell map of bad places; she was bushed. It was dry hot, she thought. She sweated under her arms, and the cloth of her shirt was damp in a lozenge along her spine. The ridges of her vertebrae undulated as she moved, right down to where the cotton tucked into her jeans. She wasn't young any more. She was nearly through her forties.

The river was drying, farmers and hydro sucking back the water like cold beer and gossip together. Mesquite and greasewood had taken root in the riverbed, and there were snakes in little holes, rattlers; the poison moved along and blackened the skin. Martha had seen a rattler skin mounted in a museum, and the sight never left her. She'd also seen a movie once, a long time before, with a swollen leg in it, and the poison seeping in slow, faster, and she got the boots as a precaution.

She bought the most expensive boots she could against death. She bought them because they were beautiful, like her, and beauty protects. She looked up. Her eyes were green against the sky, and her eyelashes were thick, and it was very hard not to fall in love with her. Her lips were wide and smiling, her body thin. She had good cheekbones, like a movie star, and she meant well. Oh, God yes, how she meant well. She looked up

and she smiled nervously. She was alone. She thought, Nobody goes down here.

Martha was clutching a coarse brown leather bag — there was a handgun in there, and she was not used to handguns. The bag was tooled all over with acanthus leaf designs, hippie-style. She wore silver jewellery, bangles, earrings, and two rings — one with amber, which is from pine trees, and one with turquoise, which grew in the ground, she knew, everywhere along the Pecos. She was walking, and there was chatter in her mind, some of it direct and angry, some of it scared and prayerful, some of it just wanting the chatter to go away. But it wouldn't; their flow established, the words moved along.

She'd left Curtis in eastern Ontario, she did not know how many days ago, left the utopia he'd named Soltane, and the only real family she'd known, left disillusioned, after thirty years or so of faith, love having brought her there in the first instance. She had been thinking these days how love did cling to a person, even when it didn't make sense any more. Soltane was a commune of sorts, and a religious association of sorts, and now, looking at it from this distance, it seemed to her a sad and grasping experiment at perfection. It might have worked. It might have. If her prayers had taken, or if she could have tried harder. Was there no respite from this line of thought?

The mesquite and the wayside plants bent under her boots, the clay dusted the boot polish and settled on it. There were rattlers in their little holes. Nobody would find her if she died, she thought. The red clay would cradle her body, fingers trailing the water prettily, skin falling away, the flies and vultures reclaiming that energy. Bones. Bones, and mesquite and the rattler. *What happened here, what brutal end? A body was found down by the Pecos. This is bad. Bones. And it'd been there a helluva long time.* The earth seemed to whisper. She quickened her pace.



Walking north was Hattie McCann, hacking at the scrub-grass with her cane. Every day, she walked that riverbed for pastime. She was old, a thick woman, wearing calico-print dresses — that she sewed herself — stretching over her backside and rising up at her knees. A solid woman, Hattie McCann. Lived along the Pecos since she was young, heading back sixty years, a mistress she was and always had been. She was down there searching out long-lost fishing lures, the minnow lures that were flung off decades ago by fishers casting out, tugging hard, getting the little silver baits caught in debris or river plants. The river stole them, and the trout stole them, too, sometimes, when there was trout, where there was river. She thought how the years of drying did take a lot of water with it.

Hattie had found one lure that day caught in the mouth of a fish skeleton, the bones of which were tangled in a thicket creeper. It was a big one, a decoy more, hollowed out and filled with pebbles like a rattle, must have been a hundred years old; there hadn't been any decoy fishing in living memory. She held the lure up to the sun, shook it, and smiled, pleased with the soft whirr the stones made inside it. Then she tucked it in the pocket of her apron. Sure had a lovely heft.

Hattie poked at the mesquite with her walking stick looking for reminders of the river, reminders of something. She put the lures up in her kitchen on a display board Aubie'd made for her out of bottle corks and hooks, painted white. There were photographs there too, of Colm and poor Edgar, of Hollis when he wasn't yet fully bad, and of Aubie looking like he owned the whole world and like the world was loving it.

Hattie's calico dress didn't protect her much from the weed and shrub, nor the snakes, but she didn't worry. Nobody went down there. Bones? Not finding anything was evidence of