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Wandermust

Micaela Muldoon
University of Windsor

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Wandermust

By

Micaela Muldoon

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Wandermust

by

Micaela Muldoon

APPROVED BY:

L. Buchanan

Department of Psychology

S. Holbrook

Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing

N. Markotić, Advisor

Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing

April 23rd, 2018

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ABSTRACT

“Wandermust” is a collection of prose poems that uses both poetic descriptive language and narrative to portray the persona’s experiences in her hometown and abroad. The collection makes use of nonce words as a compositional strategy to facilitate a more visceral reading experience and to develop the persona’s character, since existing words in the English lexicon do not always suffice in conveying the persona’s concept of a sensory experience. Just as the nonce words aid the persona in exploring and expressing her surroundings and her identity, they foster an experience in which the reader can explore and experience the nuances of the English language. By reading new words, the reader travels through and tours the English language; they read words yoked together that may never have been compounded before, process word hybridizations for new and existing ideas, view nouns and adjectives from the angles of verbs, and imagine written sound in new ways. The more intricately descriptive aspects of the poetry also function to breathe life into the settings in which the persona finds herself, turning settings into characters with which she interacts. Some of these prose poems read as flash fictions, whereas others read as run-on sentences or fragmented sentences in a stream-of-consciousness poetic style that reflects the persona’s processing of and curiosity about her surroundings. Both the content of the poems and their fluctuating formats mirror the persona’s restlessness as they portray her continual search for belonging, identity, and fulfillment – a journey that, by the end of the manuscript, she is still undertaking.

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Blue Heron Pond

I walk beside quartz-scarred rockpile gorges, snaking borders along crunching gravel paths, muddy foot craters trodding uphill. View from the top: coinshiny St. Clair lake, pyramidal roofs, roads twinkling with streetlights like unclasped diamond bracelets fallen in the sun, Lego block apartments, and Ambassador bridge silver-lashed wink.

Downhill, pebble-speckled path perimeters a pond freckled with lilyplates and chunky sunbright blossoms. Gunky algae sways in six-inch murk. Human-made objects around the pond: birdshit benches, engraved plaques, storm drains breaded with beige concrete to sit and foot-dangle, paint-chipped fences, bridge arching blue paint and rust-blemished beams linked with spider webs, and a holographic NO FISHING sign.

A kid wheels up a dangling, flapping fish by an invisible thread. He takes it off the hook, turns it over in his hands, and drops it fifteen feet back into the pond. It floats just beneath the surface of the water for a moment before ambling out of sight, dazed. He does the same thing with another fish. And another. All the same type of fish. This kid looks about twelve. I want to yell “Hey, dipstick!” and knock on the NO FISHING sign. Not sure why I don’t. Maybe because he analyzes each fish he pulls up, genuine interest rather than bullying.

A mossy turtle shell crests the water’s surface, sun gleaming on slime, and scaly webbed hands slice air into water. Its beak protrudes, red paint smears beneath its eyes. Swishy fish undulate, opalesque scales patched with tangerine, bridal veil fins gauzy shushing through murk, taut bobbled mouths.

Birds around the pond: White-chokered, teal-headed, spear-tailed pheasant struts grassy aisles through the foothills; spreadwinged heron lands one foot in pond, taller than toddlers, triangulates its legs, musket-beak pointed diagonal to the water; Canada geese V-veer and slidesplash waterwalls and wakes of rippled bubbles; linen swans cruise,

paddling oarfeet, nibbling lettuce I threw and grunting in disappointment. I would grunt, too – not enough carbs.

A couple of seven-ish girls and their grandpa stop beside me to feed the ducks, swans, and geese. They rip white bread to smithereens and throw it all in at once. The waterfowl cawcawphonize, flap-slap each other, beaks darting for the bread and each other's faces. The kids squeal and clap.

“More bread, Grandpa, please!”

He turns his pockets inside out. “None left!”

“Here.” I hand the girls my head of lettuce, nod to their grandpa, and continue on my walk. I don't want to see how disappointed they'll get when the ducks and company don't go crazy over the health food like they did the bread.

Vegetation around the pond: brambles, blood-velvet rosettes, thorn trees scritchng, blonde-tufted reeds emerging from silky jade leaves, stubbly cattails, pussywillows with escalating fuzzbuds, twigthreaddentalfloss nests at branch epicentres, mini maples, weeping willow switches like snatched hair in a breeze.

Beachin'

CoraSadieEmmaMaeI drag bags stuffed with towels and coolers full of peanut butter and jam sandwiches, fruit, and water to the beach where the sun seethes skin and the wind whisks wings, gulls *kreeing*.

I set our ball beside the net pole to claim the next game. Then SadieEmmaI rush down to the water. I don't wear sunscreen – it washes off anyway. Emma and Sadie baby step in, water up to their knees.

Emma: “O-o-oh my god” – her teeth chatter – “OH MY GOD.”

Sadie, to me: “Even colder than your Nonno and Nonna's pool.”

I submerge entirely, proud of my polar-bear status within the group – makes me feel like a badass, really durable. Right now, I say the same thing I say to them at Nonno and Nonna's: “I'll help you get used to the water.”

I swim back to splash them and latch onto their shoulders, pulling them in. Sadie shoves algae into my mouth. I reach underwater, grab a handful of sand, and throw the wet clump at her. Emma backs away.

Cora and Mae wave us over: “We have the net!” We split up, Emma and Cora on one side, and MaeSadieI on the other. Every time we hit the ball, we either stumble over nothing and end up on our hands and knees in the sand, laughing without breathing in enough air to compensate, or we send it out of bounds into the fenced-in beach grass marked SENSITIVE AREA – not even *ENVIRONMENTALLY* SENSITIVE AREA or PROTECTED ECOSYSTEM. Just SENSITIVE AREA, like it's the ticklish armpits of the beach. The lifeguard gives us a sunglasses glare, so we decide to hit the ball with height instead of distance.

I serve so high that I miss a seagull by a literal inch. I revert to distance serving – better to hit sensitive grass than birds. Next time, I hit the lifeguard in the head. He whirls around, and my traitor friends all point to me, granules of sand blowing into their teeth as they laugh. I run over to the lifeguard “I’m sorry are you okay?” Absolutely not laughing, he grunts and tosses the ball just one literal inch short of SENSITIVE AREA.

We get too hot leaping and falling and laughing, so CoraSadieEmmaMaeI all race down to the water and walk as far as we can to find out where we can’t touch the bottom anymore. The water raises me up, slow dances me farther out. If I can’t touch or see the bottom, I feel like something will grab me and suck me down or like the water will swallow me up. A man swims way farther out than the rest of us, and my muscles relax a bit. Then Cora gasps and for a moment I think the current got her or something bit her feet. I whip around, but she grabs me and pulls aside my bathing suit strap to compare my untouched skin to my new sunburn. She shrieks to the rest to “*Look* at this!” and takes a picture through the waterproof case of her phone. She shows me – I look like a main course at Red Lobster. The unsalted water laps at my raw redness.

Carnivalism

Tent(acles) beer reaching to grasp potbellies and baseball caps and scrubbly stubble dim lighting and faint stains spills on asphalt in sandals and laughing mouths

warping mirror thins fat and fats short and biggers heads tenfold than the brains inside giant feet squid eyes clouded clotted and giggles lost in the glass

spinning circles from sky to ground stuck in a box like toddlers in grocery carts in the frozen food section, a guy offers a girl his zip-up hoodie three or four times too big, the ferriss wheel between the cities next to the strip of water up and down round and round glowing, a small boy grapples with the clear bag of water holding his new goldfish

goldfish siblings line a square tent booth a stuffed jungle menagerie hanging above but the trickle of messy-haired under-niners prefer live orange fish to a gorilla that cannot grab things with its feet and an elephant with a static trunk, glass bottles wait in a pyramid to get adorned with plastic necklaces by dads

the ground splattered with vomit corndogs, mustardy giant pretzels, limp pizza, and cotton candy, teenage slushie mongers and slurpers tip flasks of vodka into the lemony half-ice

swinging boat of a pharaoh golden glinting from nearby neon the passengers scream as the boat hangs perpendicular and bodies parallel the ground brave arms up and mouths always open

tiny train track painted like a formula one racecar or some tweeny nail polish sparkles, sparsely populated seats only reach fifteen feet high and forty kilometres per hour, knee-knocking “oh my god”-ing riders belted in tight until the ride ends

expensive temporary tattoo on my shoulder hair pulled back twentysomething guy scrawls on my skin brown writing soft handsides caressing cool breath a break from the bayou-esque night air cool breath becoming hot I shiver tiny hairs

I meet Emma, Cora, and her tank top-wearing biceptual boyfriend, Ethan, at the Ring of Fire, we take our seats in our four-person cart and pull the keep-in bars down to our

waists the ride shoots us to the top of the circle, we dangle upside down Emma squeezes her eyes shut and recites the “Hail Mary” Ethan screams not one long “AAAHHHHH” but repeated “AAHH! AAHH!”s Cora and I laugh so hard our tears drip onto people in the lineup

Space Drop ride has us strapped in so we can’t even hold hands elevating us like terrorists threatening hostages I can’t look up or down so I open my mouth to “Hail Mary” Emma and Ethan but break into a wild howl as we plummet and hit the ground before we can take another breath

by midnight I’ve spent my tickets, money, and lungs.

Prep by primp

Just before the job interview I skim through Google:

The Telegraph: “More than two thirds of employers admit they would be less likely to employ a female job applicant if she did not wear makeup to the job interview.”

Forbes: “A study in the American Economic Review said women who wear makeup can earn more than 30 percent more in pay than non makeup wearing workers.”

The New York Times: “... increases people’s perceptions of a woman’s likability, her competence and (provided she does not overdo it) her trustworthiness.”

Takes me ten minutes to apply and another ten to take it off before I go to sleep, which means twenty minutes per day, at least an hour and a half per week, which adds up 86.6 hours a year, which means I’ll waste more than three days a year making myself up.

I rip open my makeup bag of powders and brushes and goop tubes.

I have marks all over my face: some zits, some former zits, some faded freckles, all of which I try to sweep under ivory foundation that supposedly never expires because it’s mineral, but my pores – those holes in my face that let my skin breathe that we’re apparently not supposed to see – yeah, those get filled in and I look powdery but more likeable than zitty freckles.

Then I take a stubby brush, graze it against a light pink and spread it across my cheekbones into my hairline. My actual blush doesn’t look docile and rosy, but blotchy and takes up my whole face.

Then I scrub a paintbrushy brush across a medium earth tone and spread it from my lashes to my brows, and then I scrub the brush against a light earth tone and underline my

brows with it, and then I scrub it against a dark earth tone and bury that in the crease of my eyelid and expand a little upward and downward until there's a triangle at the corner of each eye.

Eyebrows! A dark brown pencil fills in the gaps between my eyebrow hairs and my eyebrows look more like fraternal than identical twins, so here I've got uneven, too-dark boomerangs at the top of my face. I rub away excess liner with a Q-tip so it looks more cough cough *natural*.

Like so many others around the world, I'm still waiting on my Hogwarts acceptance letter so the only wand I wield right now is the mascara one as my lashes magically grow, change colour, get thicker, gather clumps and – FUCK MY EYE! I just poked myself. Now I have a black river running down one side of my face as I blink it all out, I spit on a Kleenex and wipe away the mascara trail and the eye-blinking residue mascara. My upper eyelids still have sand grains of mascara where the tips of my lashes touched.

Last but not least lips, because if I smile my lips will stretch and the blood will rush away from them, making it look like I don't actually have lips. No obnoxious colours like purple or orange; I try to stick to my natural lip colour. I dab my lips, press them together, dab, press, dab, press, smear the colour around with my pinky, and it'll probably disappear when I have a sandwich in two hours. Still better than a viscous lip gloss – those always attract hurricane-force winds that shove my hair onto my mouth to remain cemented there.

Theatrical

CoworkercoworkercoworkerI enter a huge black cube, shoes squicking on the floor, and I jog Christmas-light stairs to the projector window, piercing white light reaching out to dancing dust motes. I step in front, mouth open, so credits roll on my tongue, teeth, and tonsils, my eyes safe behind 3D glasses.

Candy the theatre sells: half-eaten pack of Twizzlers in a cupholder, row nine, only the top halves eaten, hollows gaping, stunned mouths; peanut M&Ms yellow wrapper wedged in folding seat, row thirteen, the chocolate made a break for it strewn on the floor – literally made a break, all stomped on crushed four layers: colour, crunch, chocolate, nut.

Candy it doesn't sell: Caramilk, ooogy caramel string dangling over the armrest row fifteen, a clean break – no one bit it, probably no germs; Swedish Fish, row seven (the fuck even eats those anymore?) don't even flop around in search of water, they just lie on the blue-grey cement, dead already unless we can mop them up in time.

We don't sell puke either, but in row four, hiding under napkins...

“Mother *fuck!*”

“Not it!”

“NOT IT!”

“Get the mop.”

I've already got the broom-broom-pow and dustpan, so I herd the rampant popcorn, fluffy white and gold misguided sheep, literally not guided properly into movie watchers' mouths. The broom shepherds them into dustpen baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.

“You say something?”

“Nope!”

A plastic Chris Hemsworth in scaly armour and crimson cape cup, row five: Thor's hammer on the lid, what's its name, Mew-Mew, Myalstick, Marcus, Monsterhammer?

My hand crescents around the cup, arm taut, my other hand comes around to complete circle, all my arm muscles straining, lips pulled down, teeth gritted.

The guy who thinks he's a supervisor barks, "Stop goofing off!"

"Can't ... lift... not ... worthy."

He stomps up, braces his hands around the cup, lifts it with too much force – it's completely empty. The backs of his knees bang into and bend over the seatback, he falls into row four, cup still in hands, his hips smash the seat, uniform cap twistwirling off his head, which doesn't hit the ground, but his back does, cushioned by vomitnapkin-maché. The hammer lid comes off, unleashing Coke saliva dribble remnant.

Mjollnir! The hammer's named Mjollnir.

The Blind Dog

Mae and I squeeze between other people into the warehouse bar's black-painted bathroom, graffitied with whiteout scratched by red pen, scrawling stalls with couplings, hearts, indecipherable phone numbers, "fuck you," "olivia is a cunt," etc., but no penises. The house lights mix muted blue and traffic red. Some of our high school classmates have gigged here, but Mae and I play too mellow, soft, and acoustic for the Blind Dog.

Mae and I line up at the front of the stage while the nineteen-and-older crowd surrounds the bar and the frowny, bulky guy with the fedora, nose piercing, and goatee flips glasses. I tug my jean shorts up by the belt loops and my tank top straps fall off my shoulders as I squeeze between sweaty, skinny guys wearing unlaundered shirts for bands not performing here tonight.

The lesser-known opening bands – even though all bands were lesser-known opening bands at one point – sound like applesauce or mashed peas, all the instruments blending together so I can't distinguish one guitar from the next, the bass, the singer, the drums.

In the gap between the opening bands leaving and All Time Low, the headline band, taking the stage, pre-recorded music blares from the speakers and fills the whole place. The alcoholated audience turns into mosh pit mush, hurling their bodies against each other, the ripple effect carrying to the people on the edges, all thrashing like wind-whipped reeds.

One guy cannons into me, knocking my skull against Mae's. She cries out and her hand flies to her head. The cannon guy has the scent of Bud on his breath as he guffaws, no apology. I don't care if someone else shoved him. I body-slam his back, but he only stutters forward a few inches. His buddy shoves him again, but this time I stick my elbow out. He wheezes as it meets his solar plexus, then Mae pulls me by that elbow into a gap closer to the stage.

The rest of the crowd repeatedly slams Mae and me against the railing barring the audience from the stage, our ribs and forearms bruising, until Jack, the lead guitarist of All Time Low, comes onstage and yells, “Calm down, we’re not playing fucking Pokemon here!” A collective scream rises, all contact sport forgotten, and good riddance because no matter how hard these people try to mosh, they’re not hardcore at a pop-punk concert. My skin heats and prickles that I participated for even two seconds, and Mae didn’t.

The audience’s scream continues as the drummer and bassist take the stage, and crescendos when the lead singer/rhythm guitarist, Alex, fills out the lineup. The band slams into their earliest material, drums sharp and precise, bass rumbling, rhythm and lead guitar harmonizing, and Alex’s strident, melodic shout.

Around me, every audience member jumps and whoops, so I do, too. I don’t like screaming and whooping – hurts my throat, makes me self-conscious about my voice. Clapping numbs my hands after a while, and I can’t do that piercing, fingers-in-mouth whistle. Jumping makes my pants fall down and feels like a workout. I wish I could just close my eyes, listen to the music, tap my feet, and bob my head – just breathe it in and bask in it, but that would make me look like less of a fan. I think to myself, if I can’t jump and whoop and scream for All Time Low as they bounce around on stage playing song after song with lights blaring in their eyes and melting their skin, then maybe I’m actually not a real fan. I suck it up and jump while hanging onto my pants with one hand. I guess I’m performing, too.

Bras arc through the air toward Jack, and between songs he collects them and mouths the count, hangs them off his microphone in ROYGBIV order.

Some people lift other people over their heads, then launch them toward the stage without cueing anyone up front, so flying, flailing bodies either drop out of view straight to the ground to get dancepeded on, or they knock down five more people. Jack should tell

these assholes this isn't a bowling alley, either. Proper etiquette: passing surfers from hand to hand, audience like an ocean. Crowd *surfing*, not crowd ploughing.

Halfway through the set, every musician, bouncer, bartender, and audience member in the building bathes in our collective sweat, skin steaming the place into a sauna, each breath in someone else's breath out. Alex shucks off his shirt and the blue lights shine on his lickably slicked skin, the muscles in his chest, arms, back, and shoulders rippling as he slips the guitar strap back over his head.

The audience sings every word, occasionally singing "uhhh... yeah" with newer stuff, and we all sing the swear words especially loud. A few girls stick their ringed, braceleted hands in the air and sway them, smokers move lighters back and forth so quickly they keep snuffing out, others hold up cell phones and wave them so absently the screens keep timing and blacking out.

At the end comes a drum roll and roll and roll and roll, with a bass freestyle, the only one that poor bassist ever gets, while Alex finishes singing his final note and Jack leaps to the front of the stage to toss guitar picks into the crowd. The tips of his bangs drip on us. I reach up to catch a guitar pick, miss.

Mae leans toward my ear and yells, "He dripped on me!"

"What?!"

"His sweat – I caught it!"

"Ew! You should've caught me a guitar pick instead."

"I almost caught one." She pushes out her bottom lip. "Sorry."

"You can make it up to me by throwing your technicolour bra next time," I shout. "He won't know what to do with it."

The drumming ends with a crash and the drummer throws a stick that bounces from one set of fingers to the next until it lands in my open hands. It's so well-used: notches for each slam against the snare, the cymbals, the high-hat, band logo wearing away, and –

blood? He actually played until he bled, fingers scraping against the rough wood, lacquer stripped from playing. Having it almost feels like stealing, like only his biggest fan should have it, someone who would cry over it. Or better yet, the drummer should have it. He should have a wall of bloody drumsticks to show how hard he works. Although I suppose he could make an entire apartment building out of them, with the number of shows he plays.

As most of the crowd either moves back to the bar or leaves, Mae and I scan the ground for guitar picks. None whatsoever. We've each got a thin sheen of sweat over every inch of exposed skin. My hair starts to frizz and Mae's twists into waves. We decide to exit from the back door of the warehouse, the fastest way to reach fresh air.

We halt right outside the door. All Time Low stands there, arms around a couple of young women while another guy clicks a picture with one phone, then another. The girls each check their phones, thank the band, and then saunter off with the guy, squealing, blonde hair darkened with sweat. Another set of fans line up for pictures.

I've unconsciously taken a few steps back, but again, Mae grabs my weapon-elbow. "I know you get shy, but we might never get this chance again, come on, pleeeeeease!"

"You go right on ahead," I say.

"Pointless if I can't have my best friend with me!" I let her drag me into the short lineup.

"Ask if Jack has any extra guitar picks," she says.

"What? No! I already have a drumstick. I don't want to seem greedy." I even feel guilty lining up for pictures. No more than ten seconds, I tell myself. I want the band to know that Mae and I are the kind of fans that realize they're actually people. People who need to get back in the tour van to do the exact same thing tomorrow. People who need to sleep.

"Then maybe you can offer him a trade – your bra for a guitar pick." She gives me an exaggerated wink.

Our turn, Mae and I hand our phones to one of the previous picture-takers. The band groups us together into the centre of the photo, winding their sleeve-tattooed arms around our shoulders and grinning big. First my phone flashes, and then Mae's, and I really hope I didn't blink; we'd have to keep retaking the photo and the band might start to hate us. Mae takes her phone, looks at the picture, nods, thanks the woman who took it. I thank her, too, and slip my phone straight back into my pocket, still clutching the drumstick in my other hand.

"Hey, um, Jack, do you have any more guitar picks?" Mae asks, just as I'm about to thank them for the picture. "My friend plays guitar, and neither of us caught one." I start, "Oh, no, that's okay..."

"I think so," he says, instead of telling us to get lost. He digs through his pockets and his hand emerges with a pick. He wipes the lint off it and holds it out to me. "To go with your drumstick."

"Actually, it's his." I flick my eyes to the drummer with a polite, closed-lip smile.

Jack laughs. "Not anymore." He tucks the guitar pick into my hand.

"Thank youuuuuu!" Mae's voice drowns out my own murmured "Thanks" as she hooks her hand in the crook of my weapon-elbow and pulls me away to let the next fans take their pictures.

"See? All you have to do is ask," Mae chimes, linking her arm with mine as we turn the corner.

I open the hand with the pick. The pick's not one of the thin, band logo ones that Jack confettied from the stage. Instead, it's chunkier and tortoiseshell patterned. One of his personal picks.

I show it to Mae. "I feel like I just stole something."

Bruce Peninsula National Park

Red squirrels skittering dainty and short-tailed, unlike the cat-sized, plumetailed, black and grey ones in Windsor. The red ones lead me over the mulchy path splitting the forest of cookie-cutter pines, yellow ballerina slipper orchids, and giants' kneecaps to the beach where shoreline extends stony fingers for the jewel-carved lake to lick.

I settle on a slab of rock laced up in Christ-old cedars along the bay, but a field trip tramps through the quiet, and twelve-year-olds hurl themselves into the water. If they can do it, I can, too. I step rather than jump, and my toes feel like I stubbed them, my calves eaten alive by ice, the spot where the air ends and the water begins a line of teeth.

I retreat several times before pushing myself all the way into the deceitfully dazzling brochure water bruising and needling me. I put on goggles only for algae-wrapped rock and an indiscernible blue murk beyond.

I swim to a shallow pool too slick to stand up in as college guys jump from blocky rocks, nature's game of Jenga, into the cobalt shade away from the stone, but close to the current. I wish I had those guts. My skin burns with the cold, fresh like mint breath, until my toes go numb.

I haul myself out and dry in the partly sunny day, then leap rock by rock to the grotto where photographers gather. I can't find the entrance, so I peer through the hole in the top, rim of a giant well.

I take the long way back to the car, through a beach of white, fist-sized stones, along with an expanse of flattish, dark-grey rock, chaotic whorls gusting across it as if shaped by a raven's talons and inspired by Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, etching a history of Great Lakes storms.

Skyscrapers, dozens of city buses, and hundreds of cars I need to manoeuvre my car through, but first thing that really grabs my attention? Five brown creatures burrowing in the grass along the highway. I swipe my finger out the window: “Look! Furry thingies!” Sadie cranes over my shoulder. “I don’t see anything.” Mae says, “You’re imagining them.” (I Google them later – groundhogs.)

MaeSadieEmmaCoraI get to our rental loft. Only a curtain separates the toilet from the kitchenette, but the living room has a poster of Audrey Hepburn from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.

I lay down some ground rules: “No one uses the kitchen while someone’s using the bathroom and vice versa. Also, when one person’s in the bathroom, we all need to yell or play music so we don’t, you know, hear anything.” Mae: “I second that.” Sadie, Emma, and Cora agree.

When we go out, we squeeze through Byward busker crowds and Beavertail lines to get a view of the sparkly brown Rideau and trans-provincial bridge to Gatineau, whose name makes me think of cake, maybe because it’s Canada’s birthday weekend (but also “gâteau.”)

I quack at canal ducks and they drift toward me. I pretend they understand my dialect (duckalect?): “I have webbed feet, too!” “I don’t believe you, human.”

On July 1st, we tattoo ourselves with sparkly maple leaves and moose, and I slip a poncho made of two Canadian flags sewn together over my head. We squelch through the rain with two umbrellas, one newly unfurled maple leaf the other already broken and apartmented with cobwebs. Dollarama’s sold out of umbrellas and ponchos, so Emma and Sadie buy dress bags and we cut holes for limbs and heads.

We line up, no, we queue because we're Canadian, eh? The whole thing snakes from the streets to Parliament Hill, people blow horns and start rounds of "O Canada" and sing happy birthday "Dear Canadaaaaaa," but we miss the anthem with all the violins and the Prime Minister and shit. Our section of the line never makes it that far, and tall heads obscure the jumbotrons that show off Parliament Hill.

I think of one of my ESL students at the library back home.

"Who works in Ottawa?" I asked.

He furrowed his brows. "No one."

I giggled then, and I giggle now, even though he meant, "No one we know personally."

On the walk back to the loft to change our sopping clothes, I latch onto a streetlight pole: "Just living that flag life." Cora films it on Snapchat while Emma choreographs me: "Unfurl in the breeze! And sway, and sway. And ripple, and ripple."

From the loft, we go to dinner and eat at the bar, the only seating left. A drunk guy leans over my shoulder, repeatedly buying drinks to pick up the woman on my other side. She apologizes to me seven times – how patriotic.

A family from Moncton sits next to us after the woman leaves (without the pickup artist). The Monctonians took ten hours to drive here, same as us even though they came from the Maritimes and we came from Windsor. But I guess if I think about it, they only had to drive across the skinny part of Québec and we had to drive from Ontario's big toe to its hip. Plus, we hit two hours' worth of Toronto traffic when my turn signal light busted. I kept sticking my arm out the window to signal and pulling it back in so that a 401 car wouldn't hack it off. Barely any regard for the laws of physics on the 401, let alone traffic laws.

A few drinks later, I'm pissed drunk and pissed off at my friends sitting in a chain along the bar while I sit broken off at the corner. They don't talk to me, so I open Facebook on

my phone, notice a status: “Just a polite reminder that we stole this country from the people already living here.”

My dad’s side of the family came because of the Irish potato famine. And my mom’s side, the deteriorating Italian economy post-WWII. And what did I steal? “Canadian” legally from the moment of my birth. “Canadian” inked on my passport. “Canadian” barring me from living and working in either Italy or Ireland. I certainly didn’t choose Canada. Canada the “nice” country, Canada of WWII internment camps, that gave Trans-Canada railway workers fatal tasks, that took First Nations children from their families, their cultures, their homes, their selves to mould them Anglo-Franco and abuse them in every way, Canada who has an arms deal with Saudi Arabia while they attack Yemen, Canada who thinks itself so morally superior to all the other countries.

But here I sit, covered back and front in red, white, and maple leaf. In the English-and-French designated capital. Here for the birthday party everyone from Victoria to St. John’s was invited to. And I accepted the invitation. I did choose Canada. Another round of “O Canada” starts up from the back of the restaurant, but I don’t bother filming it this time.

After paying the bill, CoraEmmaSadieMaeI walk to the closed-off roads for the fireworks. They won’t make room for me on their dress bags to sit down comfortably. My flags will get soggy and dirty from sitting on the bare rained-on road barrier. First they don’t talk to me at the bar, now this?

I say, “Don’t you guys know the flag’s never supposed to touch the ground?”

“No actual ground, just cement,” says Mae, patting the spot next to her.

“It’s not supposed to get sat on,” I insist.

“You’ve already sat on it.”

“Why do I have to be the only one with a wet ass?!”

I run away as the fireworks start and they blossom into showers of copper mist. Sadie runs after me and smacks my forearm. “You can’t be in Ottawa by yourself at night.” She stands with me and links her arm in mine while the rest of the pyrotechnics play out. ’Bout the same fan-fare as the Windsor-Detroit fireworks each year.

Cedar Point

Cobalt blue bars snaking camel humps against summer haze, dullshine railings pop open into sticky sun-butt-heated black seat, flatrope buckle ends click together in lap, yellow bar swoops down across middle, green t-shirt thumbs up, lurch jerk glide forward and up click click click click click click, sunpath on grey lake and muted greenery shrinking, riders forced to lean backward, gravity doesn't like riders escaping its fist tugging straining, stalwart yellow bar holds steady, horizon at three hundred feet on hillcrest, in a nanosecond DROP stomach plummet soar ninety mph, a chorus of daggered shrieks the soundtrack, upside down when I can't see the track my excite-dread burbles a fizzy pop in my chest, here comes another DROP every organ vaults up a storey except the brain (but it tries anyway), coaster slithers through dark tunnel with fluorescent flash, bar pops up, I unclasp the seat belt and step onto concrete

I take off my shoes hoist myself in and pull down shoulder foam seat belt, ride rises up a few feet and then sways higher than a man, sways higher than a pizza booth, swings higher than a two-storey building, swings higher than the 1960s roller coaster of rickety rotting wood, swooshes swoops to ground and swings back to deal the sky an uppercut, ding dong like the clapper of a giant church bell chiming "OH MY GOD," then descending lower and lower, a hypnotist's somnolescent pendulum: you are getting sleepy you are getting sleeeeeeepy, I wait until only a breath of movement left of the ride before unbuckling and reclaiming my shoes

the line zigzags an hour to the caution-yellow railings for the next train to run the four-hundred-foot high bobbypin-shaped track at a hundred and twenty mph, I clamber into a seat, is the bar across the lap really enough? coaster supervisor: "Don't put your hands in the air until after the ride starts you'll break your wrists with the force of it," wait light ambers like at a traffic stop amber amber amber GREEN, coaster rockets forward, I slam into the seatback, swirl to the clouds, at the pinnacle the whole park below like a virtual reality airplane game, pools to puddles people to pinpricks rollercoasters to threads,

BOOM back down twirling bigger and the ground rushing to meet me, coaster jolts parallel to the ground again, all in eighteen seconds.

Times Square

In the movies, it's always two walls and a pillar of flashing, ever-changing rainbows and pixelated promises towering to a neck-aching height, sleek cars and people weaving around the bottom of the frame, night glitzy and glamorous.

Here, it's smaller and drowsier. On my first visit, already easier to navigate than Toronto. Gridlike streets with simple names like Third and Fourth or famous ones like Broadway and Wall. Not as much bustle as I'd expect, but after two decades' worth of NYC rom-coms, it feels like I could run into my TV-friends or let myself into an apartment. Like the city holds my hand.

Clumps of people stroll or linger to take pictures with Winnie the Pooh, Shrek, Captain Jack Sparrow, and any other trademarked character. Spider-Man approaches Sadie and me and says to me, "You're pretty, can I have a hug?" I tell him I won't pay him for the hug, but he just wants one. I wrap one arm around him and the other around my purse. He holds on for too long, won't let go when I try to step back.

Sadie grabs my wrist and pulls me away, past a doomsday preacher shouting and giving out pamphlets on the street corner right next to a homeless man holding out a paper cup. The homeless man gets up to find somewhere else, and the preacher pushes a pamphlet into his cup.

Sadie and I jump every time we hear sirens. Earlier, we heard a news report about a shooting at a concert in Paris – New York's sister city. On behalf of the municipal government, the reporter warned of possible mirror attacks. Miles away, strong and faceted as a diamond, One World Trade Center lights up its antenna with the colours of the French flag. Also the American flag.

Finally, we reach the relative safety of a tiny, blend-into-everything theatre where we've got tickets to see *Kinky Boots*. On the way back to the hotel, clutching our playbills and

singing “Soul of a Man,” we pass through Times Square again. Spider-Man blocks our way and asks for another hug. Dad talks in my head: “You don’t owe a guy anything.” But I feel guilty refusing Spider-Man a hug, with his pleading tone and arms open and waiting, perhaps never got hugs from his parents, so for a split-second I give him a hug. Then I grab Sadie’s wrist and we dash.

The next day we search downtown for a place to eat that won’t charge us ten dollars for half a bagel; even tiny places with crumbling stone façades and rotting floorboards get pricey as shit. Sadie also wants a store where she can buy more crop tops, and I want a used bookstore and just a glimpse of Penguin-Random House, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, or another one of the biggies. If I can’t work at a Big Five publisher in NYC, I at least I can drool on their doorsteps or run around in their revolving doors.

Before we can find any place we want to go, Sadie looks over her shoulder and says, “Here comes your boyfriend.”

“Huh?” I turn to Spider-Man, bouncing toward us on a pogo stick.

Bayou

Dad and I board the floating platform boat with a roof and a fence. Good for air circulation, but if the gators really wanted to, pretty sure they could hoist themselves up for an ankle snack. The back wall has Doritos, Lays, and trail mix hanging from hooks. In case of a gatormergency, I can throw some of those at its mouth.

The water smoother than freshly-zambonied ice rinks and more hazel than my eyes, trees lean over the water to drink with leaftips rather than roots, a wooden sign grows among the watergrass: YOU ARE NOW ENTERING GATOR COUNTRY. A four-foot-long gator rises a few millimetres above the water.

“I know these guys, they know me,” the guide-captain says as he tears open a bag of fist-sized marshmallows and tosses one into the water. The gator swishes up to it, opens its mouth, lets the marshmallow slide onto its tongue, and clamps shut. “Only a few months old, that Sallygator.” Dad snaps five zillion pictures then tells me, “Get in there!” I share the frame with Sally, grin and point to her. Too bad I can’t shake her hand.

The boat drifts toward a wooden shack with a metal roof, fractal holes in the walls, a lopsided wooden plank for a deck, two side-nudged poles holding up another wooden board for shade, and a sign chain-dangling from it: NUTRIA PELTS FOR SALE.

“Does someone live there?” I ask the guide and a small part of me hopes, yes, someone will come out strumming a banjo, but –

“No, never did, part of a movie set from the 80s.”

“What’s a nutria?” Dad asks as he clicks pictures of the shack.

“Vermin – swamp rat,” says the guide.

I Google “nutria” on my phone because the name sounds too much like a granola bar, but sure enough, it’s a rodent – hey, it looks kinda like a beaver! Ew, but with cheddar-coloured teeth. As we drift past the house, I spy a metal bucket and fully open windows

paned with darkness. I envision venomous snakes and gators and nutrias in there playing poker.

Two more alligators swim a ways from the boat, and the tour guide pitches more marshmallows into the swamp. The gators cut through the water to engulf them. “That there’s Bill Gator and his daughter, Allie.”

The boat sidles into the shallows where seven-foot gator with a black mace back bellies on a bed of reeds. “If she were nesting, she’d hiss at us right now,” says the guide, and I ask if I can throw her a dried banana slice from my trail mix – gotta be healthier than the marshmallows. The guide says, “Sure, but can’t promise she’ll find it.”

The chip lands right near her snout, and after the boat retreats, she snaps for the banana but misses, snaps and misses, snaps and it slides between the gaps in her teeth. The whole time Dad films it, gator paparazzo.

The more gators I spot, the more banana chips I throw, but none of the chips catch their slit-pupil-eyes. The guide rains marshmallows through the bayou, and the eager gators paddle to snap them up.

“But why marshmallows?” I ask.

“Because,” says the guide, “they live in the *marsh*.”

I gesture to the neon drinks in the mini-fridge below the Doritos. “Then do they also like... *Gatorade*?”

He chortles as he cuts the motor at a field of vibrant green grasses rooted in the water – a swampmeadow. “You could walk through these fields and take a boat from here all the way up to New York.” Dad bounds out of his seat for a quadrillion more pics.

After the guide wheels the boat back, he reaches beyond passenger vision and pulls out a squirming footlong gator, just like a sub, its itty-bitty snout taped shut – poor guy!

The guide passes the gator to two teen girls to his right, and they take ten minutes' worth of duck-faced selfies before passing the gator to the youngest daughter in a family of four. The gator occasionally relaxes, its tail slumping, its legs going still. Then it starts walking on air again, tail swishing.

Some passengers hold it by its neck, cradle it against their chests, flip it upside down. Finally it comes to Dad, and he holds one hand under its chest, one under the base of its tail, like the guide showed us. Dad directs me to take a bajillion pics, then passes the gator to me and scrolls through his phone to decide which gator pic to upload to Facebook.

The gator squirms in my hands. He doesn't feel like leather or slime or even ridges of scale but linen-soft and plasma-screen smooth. What skin products does he use?

Dad takes eleventeen pictures of me with his camera and another eleventy with my own. His phone beeps from Facebook, his brother's comment on his new profile pic of him holding a gator: "I see you're dating again... good on ya!"

Dad spots a prop alligator head on the wall, asks the guide if he can see it for just a moment and scoops it from the wall. I cover gator buddy's eyes, then Dad flips the gator head's teeth around to his neck, crushes his eyes closed, and grates his teeth so I can take a kajillion pics.

Dolomiti

Family I (seven plus luggage, two mega-suitcases for Aunt Lucy) climb into a silver nine-seat van we name Bess, and Bess takes us across Windsor-esque flat landscape and temperate plants.

A nap later, Bess skirts mountains, not high and sharp like incisors, but low and jagged molars shadowing a grey sky and cloaked in fog and pine. Northern, mountainous Italy. Nonno and Nonna's origins.

Uncle Charlie maneuvers Bess along bobbypin roads in the mountainsides overlooking hundredsfeet drops onto pointed pinetops. Aunt Lucy covers her watery eyes with her palms, she can't look, she *can't look*. I lean over her because I can.

In Fiera di Primiero, the ground slants no matter where we stand, buildings inverse to North American ones, light façades with dark frames and shutters, balconies overflowing with pink, red, and purple petunias, steep chalet roofs.

The lines on the maps fall away, the commonality of the Alps the only thing that matters, clearly, because I find so many things from Germanic folklore:

A *wolpertinger* (rabbit with antlers) head mounted on the wall of a shop we enter.

Another shop's entrance guarded by a statue of a smiling man with a potbelly, white hair, a long, fleshy nose, and a walking stick – "*Uno gnomo,*" says Nonna.

A tree stump squats by the river, carved to the face of a bearded man smirking and squinting – a green man. Aunt Lucy herds me and my cousins Caleb and Leo together for pictures before we venture over a roofed bridge. Should we expect a troll?

A cross sticks out atop a mountain ridge over the valley. Because always, the cross must rise above all else. At least it's a plain, simple one – humble rather than Vatican-showy.

At night, AuntUncleCousins in one hotel room, and NonnoNonnaI in the other. Soon enough, it's two in the morning in Italy, but eight in the evening in Windsor. I draw the drapes together to quench all light. Two minutes later, Nonno starts singing "London Bridge," and Nonna and I turn it into a round. We don't fall asleep until four.

Next morning still overcast, but the cable car box takes us up over low mountains. The box swings back and forth, and Leo clenches his fists, groans, and buries his face in the seat. Caleb asks him, "Do you know how many people have farted there?"

At the top, Sass Pordoi, a panorama of horizon-spanning cylindrical mountains with funnelled tops piercing rolling clouds. Layers of rock sheathed with snow. Zero vegetation, zero wildlife except for a rodent-thingy I want to identify, so I ask Nonno what cute, furry mammals live in these parts.

"*Stambecco?*" he answers.

"No, Nonno, definitely not an ibex – I said *cute – carina*, you know?"

He says, "Nothing cute lives way up here."

At the lookout deck, my cousins and I discover a broad dirt platform just below the railing, only visible to someone standing exactly where we stand. Leo and Caleb whisper a plan to the family and then pretend to push each other over the edge to their deaths. Aunt Lucy takes pictures of her "problems getting rid of themselves," but one unsuspecting Italian screams "*ATTENZIONE!*" several times before realizing the sham. I don't know what feels worse from laughing – my conscience or my stomach muscles.

Leaning Tower of

It peekaboos from behind a church: “Take a picture with meeee!” LeoCalebI put our hands forward and puuuush, we lean back with folded arms and grins, we body-builder clasp hands and throw some shoulder into it, keeping the deadweight tower from fainting. Nonna keeps taking pictures from the wrong angle – we shove air, we elbow the window of the nearby church. Nonno and Aunt Lucy snap a few perfect pics, though. Behind and in front of us, myriad tourists strike the same poses for their own pictures. *But no one else* has a picture like the one with Leo, Caleb, and me: the tower leaning into my hands while Caleb pushes at my back and Leo pushes at his back.

Two backpackers sit on a bench. The chatty one reading a guidebook says to the other: “Know what happened? They built a bit and said ‘Hey look it’s leaning’ ‘Huh. Oh well. Keep going.’ They built each new storey with one side taller than the other so it wouldn’t topple, so now it’s curved. Talk about overcompensating.”

Sentinel arches ring layer upon layer up the cylindrical tower, so wedding-cake-esque, but with carvings: a bear bites the tail of a corkscrew dragon with bird wings and a beard; a cow snorts a laugh; two ships meet in the ocean on either side of a tower (meta!); men with tails and jugs, hands in mouths, held captive by a griffin with their chains in its beak; broad leaves, flowers, and faces gardening up from the top of a column – more green men. The carvings don’t cover every inch of the tower; they happen at random, no symmetrical matching or reason, as if carved in secret, a game of “Can you spot it?” They look the way a whisper sounds.

Ascending the tower from the inside, white stone steps worn to bowls in the middle, too smooth to walk with shoes. Toeprints grip the marble, spiraling flight after flight, height after height. On the balcony at the top, nets mix with flimsy-looking railings. I love heights, but I hate balconies. I could slip on these smooth stones, slide right under the railing, and fall eight storeys.

Rusted rungs like loose staples prompt tourists higher. Only half go, the rest of us stay in the circle of bronze bells engraved with Latin. Chatty Backpacker says, "I heard it leans more every year." I feel it, micrometrizing like a hunching back, the slide of the earth's single-finger beckoning pull. I sit on the steps and scoot all the way around to the exit, transportation by butt.

Orvieto

Bess cruises through Tuscany on the way to Rome. I notice a town high on a hill. Sometimes, detours become the best part of a trip, so Uncle Charlie winds Bess toward it.

Backdropped by a pastel sky and fish filet clouds, with few people, the cobblestone alleys worn shiny, meandering and draped in shade from three-storey buildings with rough, dusty fronts.

Two huge cathedrals on the same block – one carved and painted with intricate saints in rich blues, reds, and golds, the other with gothic towers spiking five storeys, a simple black cross peaking the steeple. Both bells gonging noon. I just got out of Catholic school for the summer – with its guilt-tripping morning prayers and meditations, sanctimonious religion teachers, and priests and nuns appearing around the corners in the hallways – only for this. Nonno and Nonna want to go inside the pretty, painted one, but I stay out in the sun. I'd rather not peruse gory Biblical scenes and saints' lives in the form of paintings and stained glass.

I play scavenger hunt with myself – find less judgmental symbols from bygone belief systems:

Another green man, vegetation archetype and fertility deity, with vines wreathing his face and water flowing from his mouth.

A winged man with a curly fishtail and a horn in his hands atop a clock tower bell. My eyes measure its perch still lower than the church crosses.

A clay sun with a smirk like the tree stump green man's, and jewellery pierced into its rays.

A former temple of Minerva, a plaque on the steps tells me. A cross hangs over its door. It sits squashed between two far taller and more modern buildings, reminds me of a woman trying to speak at a party, boisterous men crowding her, telling her what she should think. Every time a guy leans over short, pretty Sadie, making her step back.

Every time I have a thought to finish at dinner and Nonno interrupts. Right now, Nonno clicks pictures of the temple-turned-church with his Nikon.

We eventually reach Orvieto's claim to fame: *Il Pozzo di San Patrizio*, the largest well in the world at thirteen metres wide and eleven storeys deep, AuntUncleCousinsI descend the damp, coiling stairs, with large windows carved throughout the well, few bulbs emitting brassy light. When we reach the bottom, only a greenish pond with a smattering of dulled coins. The light of day at the top equals the size of a dulled, single Euro.

Colosseo

Sun spears down into ancient arena, olive-skinned arches shaping glowing patches of sky like a hundred eyes panorama-ing Rome. TourguideFamilyI loop its balconies, crumbling catacombs, dark-streak-stained with screams and sweat. We pass the rusty iron cross dedicated to Christian martyrs. In Catholic grade school, the teachers told us that the Romans, still believing in Jupiter and Juno and the other gods they'd worshipped for centuries, caught Christians and threw them into the arena with hungry lions. Bonus show, right after gladiatorial combat. I don't imagine they served snacks in the stands. Now, the Colosseum's the starting point for Easter processions with the Pope.

We shelter in shade for photos so no squint. But wait – where's Nonno?

Nonno, who walks with his Nikon and bag of lenses, making sure his family walks ahead of him so he can see us all at the same time, a shepherd herding us no more than two feet apart from each other, telling LeoCalebI to hold hands. It only leads to them squeezing each other's hands purple, teeth clenched until Leo eventually yells, "Mercy!"

The tour guide and Nonna stay put while AuntUncleCousinsI circle the levels for Nonno's red, potbellied t-shirt; slow gait; mostly-salt hair. Now's the chance to prove to Nonno we can handle ourselves. But by the time I've gone around the second storey and passed all the family clusters that don't belong to me, he's back with the stay-putters, camera reclining in his hands.

When the tour guide walks ahead and we form a train behind her, Nonno nudges me and digs into his pocket to pull out a chunk of rock with part of a serified letter chiseled into it. Signs above all the domelike entrances into the Colosseum have similar etchings and similar colours breaking under the weight of millennia. Nonno takes my hand, places the stone on my palm and curls my fingers around it. He points to Nonna and puts a finger to his lips. I should feel guilty, but I'm half Italian, my ancestors maybe worked construction at the Colosseum. I take this decimal point of it home as my inheritance.

Eiffel Tower

CoraMaeEmmaSadieI already stamped off our whirlwind Paris bingo:

The Moulin Rouge – Not the inside but a windblown selfie in front of it.

Sacre Cœur – Mostly keeping our backs to the church and taking in the hilltop view of the city.

Notre Dame – Counting gargoyles.

Champs-Élysées – Walking the length of the street, feeling like trespassers for poking our heads into the shops of purses, perfumes, and jewels we can't afford just to say that we went in.

The Paris Opera – Didn't get to meet the Phantom.

The Louvre – The tour guide told us not to get lost. We got lost looking for a bathroom.

The Palace of Versailles – My blood flaring when the guide says the gates, statues, candelabras, balconies, anything gold-looking – all real gold. The Palace website invites readers to become patrons. Didn't Haiti have to pay France for its release as a slave colony? My insides squirming as I marvel at the gold, marble, curlicued, lit-up palace. Continuing to marvel anyway.

Arc de Triomphe – Standing in the centre of the eight-rayed star. All roads lead to the arch, the tomb, the memorial monument. View includes the financial district, Sacre Cœur, and the Eiffel Tower. We curl our hands into hearts around it. The most exciting part. The *pièce de résistance*.

On our way, pinch it between our fingers, cup it in the palms of our hands, stand on tiptoes to touch the top, and soon we actually we will, but the lineups for the elevator snake from four different points, a contorted compass rose on concrete.

The elevators close in one hour. We'll never make it.

"We could take the stairs to the second level," Cora suggests.

Emma blows out a shaky breath as she cranes her neck to take in the tower. "I get scared at twenty feet up, no way can I do –" she flips through her guidebook "– 377."

And let's face it, we just ate a buttload of crème and crêpes – we wouldn't make it to that deck and back in an hour anyway.

A tour of the Seine before sunset: we pass under the Pont de l'Archevêché, chainmailed in padlocks with paperclip-scratched and nailpolish-painted initials (another bingo stamp), then under Pont Marie, where the tour guide says we're supposed to kiss the person sitting next to us and make a wish (and another stamp). We photobomb each other's fake kisses, the grand finale of the ride while Parisians and tourists onshore wave at the boat. A guy turns around drops his pants and moons us. I use that for the *Gratuit* spot in the centre of the imaginary bingo card.

We sit by a merry-go-round near the tower, all pastels edged in golden baroque patterns with marquis lights and ponies. At twilight, the tower lights up marigold yellow, floor after floor, triangle after triangle.

We take selfies with French cops on bikes until the tower flashes all brilliant pinpricks of white light. I didn't know the day ended on a lightshow! We duck underneath to take pictures with it, cameras way down low to capture the top of the tower. The camera flashes make us squint, show great views up our nostrils and the struggle to squeeze everyone into the frame, Mae and Emma half-faces only.

We're tuckered out after a long day, so we can't summon disappointment about not ascending the Eiffel Tower. Especially since we already got a view of Paris from the arch, got to spend all this time gawking at the tower itself, and got a surprise lightshow.

But on the way back to the hotel, when we pass through Notre Dame's front yard, I see a bronze star inlaid in the concrete. I recall our tour guide's words: "It measures distances from all points of France to Paris. Legend has it if you step on it, you will return to Paris."

I scurry to the side, step on it, and dart back into the group. I still want to climb that tower one day.

Pompeii

My tour group wends through maze of roofless, ribbed columns; stacked, stabbed, chipped cylindrical stones; and scrolls curling into sunburnt brick arches. The path we tread has pentagonal stones etched with minimalist penises. The tour guide says before Mt. Vesuvius erupted and destroyed the city, they pointed the way to the brothel.

That's right, boys, just stroll from one literal, rock-hard erection to the next. For a good time, follow. No shame in sex work, but did any of those women choose to become prostitutes? At what age did men claim them? Under what circumstances? Orphans, peasants, slaves – all for noblemen? Any better than the sex trade of the present day? I imagine myself smashing the stone penises with a pickaxe. Only a few inches away from the trail, a doorway with a floor mosaic depicting a growling, red-leashed, one-headed Cerberus. It reads *Cave Canem* – Beware of Dog. I hope the dog bit brothel patron penises.

An oven gapes in a wall, an ancient roasted pizza pit. The southern Italian air bakes us – might as well get in the oven. Dusty stone chafes sweated skin. The group ventures into a house, and I scan frescoed Dionysians on the tomato-red background of a room – nude, sashed, draped, draping, winged, lounging, reclining, sobbing, spear-keeping, dancing, weaving, cloaking.

My tour group encircles a glass coffin for a cinderwhite, ash-plastered body, its arms raised, elbows bent, knees petrified in a sprint, teeth gatekeeping a centuries-old scream, volcano packed down its throat. Most of the other tourists click pictures, but to me it feels kind of like taking pictures of an open casket at a funeral home. Even though this body lies in a room with dozens of shelves of archaeologist-recovered pottery. An artifact. Not a person.

My group moves on, passing statues: also frozen in a run, a bearded mouth agape, eyeless copper Faun marking a former aristocratic house; slick-legged, laurel-crowned, smooth-faced Apollo; and Jupiter's greying ringlet beard bust, staired and weary.

Parched, I race down a grass-lined, dust cloud path to lemons dangling from a drink shack blending ice and pink, red, orange, and yellow into granulated sweetness and breathable condensation. The young man behind counter hands me a straw as I wait.

"You American?" he says.

"Canadian."

He nods. Hesitates. "Is beautiful, you."

He kind of looks like a boy I had a crush on back home. "Th-thank you." I lay a bill on the counter and dash off to the tour bus.

Blacksanded, smoky Vesuvius shadowlurks against a blue and whitefeathered sky.

Capri

Crevasse cliffs crowned with creamy-stoned archways and freckled with tree clusters abruptly to slick Tyrrhenian that strains and soaks dragon-scratched stone like snarling, dark doglip.

The motor cuts with a gurgle. SadieCoraMaeEmmaI scramble over the port that dips to the water and pops back up, shiny wet plastic – I slip! My arms flail to catch myself on the railings. We pile through hazy air into row boats, wooden clanks with footlandings. “Five to a boat, rower doesn’t count.”

The paddle cuts and bends as the sea sucks it down and it flies back up, circling. We reach a hole in the rockface. I say, “Pretty sure that’s where Jerry usually escapes Tom.” The rower instructs us to lie down, and we lean back until the wooden seats meet our heads. The rower ducks. Overhead, cratered rock slides by as we enter the cavern. A suntouch sets twinkles in the ceiling like millions of mischievous eyes. The water in the grotto glows the electric-est of blues.

Sadie: “Quick, what does the water look like? GO.”

Cora: “Atlantica in *The Little Mermaid*.”

Emma: “A life-potion Merlin brewed.”

Mae: “Liquid lightning.”

I: “Gatorade with a heartbeat.”

Rower, singing: “*Ma n’atu sole cchiù bello, oi ne/o sole mio sta nfronte a te!*” He belts to rival Pavarotti, rich, deep, thrumming voice bouncing off the stone.

Mae nudges me. “I wish we could have a jam session in here. The acoustics!”

I flash my teeth like the twinkles in the ceiling. “Even better than the stairwell at school.”

Tendrils of shadow creep in along the waves until we re-emerge into the flashbomb of sunlight, yelp, and clap our hands over our eyes. The rower laughs, a deep thrum like his singing voice. We tip him extra for the concert.

Patras

Reedy rooftops overhang the open-air restaurant, empty but for bumbling fruit flies. Dirt paths slope to beaches of flat stones, every one easy to pick up and skip arcs across the water. Mounds of island rise in the distance, the maybe of a sea serpent's back edging out of the water for a subtle bask in the sunlight, stubbled with tree and shrub.

SadieEmmaCoraMaeI line our flip flops along the concrete dock and dive into pure teal clear enough to see boulders more than twenty feet below. Sunshimmer on water and wet shoulders, sopping ponytails and spiky hair. We each put one leg in to form a circle, dip back, spin around, legs rotating, glinting. The restaurant owner grabs a mandolin to strum and her husband claps in time to our legs.

"They kinda remind me of your Nonno and Nonna," Cora says.

"Yeah, I feel like we're swimming in your Nonno and Nonna's pool right now," Mae adds. "Except without the freezing water and bees."

We pounce on each other and shove each other underwater like we do in the pool at home, but bee-free, until we get hungry and our fingers and toes prune up. The dock starts too high for us to hoist ourselves back up to our shoes, so we have to swim into the shallows.

Lo and behold, the bees of the Mediterranean: sea urchins. They cling onto all the rocks lining the sea floor, looking like black tufts of fuzz through the warping water. In reality: spikes needling out every which way, mini porcupines. The five of us can only swim so far before we have to start walking through the rocky shallows onto the beach. I tread water on the spot. Each step I take, I can graze a spike of an urchin hiding under the rock, or displace a rock so it shifts the sea urchin into my feet. I scan the underwater stones leading up to dry land. Each time my eyes re-run over a spot, more urchins than before, on top of, under, and between the rocks. Targeting me.

"Emma!" I yell – somehow she's made it out of the water unscathed. "Get our flip flops!"

“Oh, here we go,” says Sadie as she emerges, also unharmed, and sure enough, MaeCoral all hover in the shallows, too scared to risk stepping on urchins – the same people who run screaming and diving underwater away from bees.

Sadie and Emma toss our flip flops, and we slip them on. The water wavers in the space between my feet and my foam flip flops as I drag my shins through the water. What if the sea urchins’ spikes poke right through my shoes and spear my feet? Holy crap, that’s like fifty bee stings! I trot through the rocks, never letting my feet linger too long in one spot. Cora leaps out right behind me, but Mae remains in the water. “Now that you guys got out, maybe the four of you can muscle me up onto the dock?”

Delphi

Rugged creviced hills of Parnassus glazed in fog and dew, sunrise breathing pale gold down the valleys, scrubby shrubs and soft spearhead trees, whiskery flowers and round leaves, patchy pines, fingernail brick walls melding with clumpy dry grass mounds. I sneeze and blow my nose three Kleenex's worth. I gulp from my litre-bottle of water.

Abounding Maus meow, crying grey slabs read ΘΨΔΣΦ, discs of stone pile one atop the next, notched pillars the colour of coffee-stained teeth leading to the oracular centre. With our tour group, MaeSadieEmmaCoraI trudge up to it in the 8 a.m. already sweltering air. I lift the bottle to my mouth again when a girl behind me taps my shoulder. "Can I have some of that?"

"Only if you want some of this." I cough violently into my elbow, unable to help it. The girl moves a few steps back.

The tour guide stops us at the ring of stairs. She says, "The Oracle of Delphi served Apollo, god of prophecy, the arts, and the sun." The sun, indeed. I can feel Apollo staring down this site pretty hard right now. She continues, "The Oracle made many vague but accurate predictions. My personal favourite concerns Croesus, king of the Lydians in modern day Turkey. He wanted to go to war with the Persians, at the time a small empire. He came to the Oracle of Delphi to ask if he should. Her reply? 'If you attack Persia, you will destroy a great empire.' That satisfied him. He led his troops into battle with Persia, and he lost. The great empire he destroyed was his own."

Reminds me of a story Grandma told me, of her own mother, Bridget, a hobbyist fortune teller. Irish custom passes down divination methods to the eldest daughter of each family – tarot cards and tea leaves and such. Bridget read her friends' tea leaves. *You'll get a letter from your son at war next week* or *Your husband will surprise you tonight*, and so on. One night, she couldn't read her neighbour Louise's tea leaves. "I'm sorry," Bridget told her. "I can't find anything in your cup." Louise left the house grumbling, thinking

Bridget simply didn't want to bother reading her tea leaves after a tiff they had the previous week. The next day, Bridget called her to apologize. Louise's husband answered. Louise had died in her sleep. Nothing to find in the tea leaves – vague, but accurate.

Cora raises her hand now, and the tour guide nods at her. I wipe my nose instead of blowing, not wanting to interrupt. Cora asks, "But why here? Couldn't the Oracle predict stuff anywhere?"

The tour guide chuckles. "Thank you for asking. In fact, the special quality of this place comes from the methane gases seeping up from the earth below this site. When the Ancient Greeks first discovered it, the mountain goats bounded through the hills in a way they had never seen before. They took this as a sign of holiness. That's why they set up the Oracle here. Then the young woman chosen for Oracle would inhale the methane herself and go into a frenzy. This supposedly meant that the spirit of Apollo had possessed her, making her ready to prophesize."

"So drugs, basically," Sadie mutters as the tour guide leads us further uphill, tawny clouds following footfalls. I hack a cough, drink, blow my nose again.

"Greenhouse gas," Emma notes.

Cora wafts the air into her face.

"Trying to collect the dust for a souvenir?" I ask.

"Nope." She grins. "Trying to get high."

I laugh and shove her. "You'll only get my cold germs doing that."

The tour guide stops our group again at a conical boulder. "This is called the *omphalos*, which means 'belly button.' The Greeks have two stories of how it gained its significance. The first is that Zeus wanted to determine where the centre of the world lay, so he set two eagles flying from opposite ends of the globe. They met where this stone sits – the belly button of the world. The second is that when the titan Kronos wanted to devour infant Zeus, his mother, Rhea, swaddled this stone like a baby and tricked Kronos

into eating it. Zeus grew up to lead the other gods to war against the titans, and they won.”

“Which story do you believe? Vote now on your phones!” Cora chimes.

“Both.” I blow my nose. “The stone symbolizes Zeus’ victory, he thinks he’s the centre of the universe, he rigged the eagles to cross where the stone landed. Bah-dah-bing.”

Sadie nods. “Sounds legit.”

Emma barks a laugh and points to the *omphalos*. “Look!”

One of the dozens of Egyptian Mau cats sits in the shade of the stone, one leg up in the air, cleaning itself. We all bust up laughing, and I laugh so hard I make a snot bubble. My friends wheeze with laughter as I blow my nose. The cat still cleans away, totally unaware.

“To Zeus,” I say. “With love, from Bast – Egyptian goddess of cats.”

Acropolis

Rib-edged stalwart stones, pillars pile to crumbling roof, the collapsed weary brow of a sage marred by scaffolding and cranes – the modern shoulders upon which the ancient stone erodes its arms. Of course the Parthenon has to get work done when we come to visit. After the fly-by tour of Paris where the tour website told us we'd have plenty of time to go into the major landmarks, and we only got to explore half, this doesn't come as a surprise. The pattern holds.

But more stories abound here. Tucked in the corner of the Parthenon grows an olive tree, representing the one that Athena planted to win Athens in a contest against Poseidon. Showboat Poseidon struck the ground to bring forth a salt spring – I can picture him getting all cocky, brandishing his trident, digging it into the soil, and poof! Yet another undrinkable water source for a nation surrounded by undrinkable water. Not much use for transportation, either, just a spring. Athena planted oblong seeds in the ground to take root and provided oil for lamps and an empire of olives – crucial to the Athenian economy at the time. And tasty. A win for the goddess of wisdom, battle strategy, and economics. Brains over brawn.

Minerva's temple may have gotten rebranded in Orvieto, but here, as Athena, she has dominion. A capital the people named for her and will never rename.

Behind the Parthenon stands the Erechtheion, a temple to both Athena and Poseidon because boo-hoo, even though he controls seventy percent of the Earth's surface, he needs a consolation prize. Six statue women with sweeping, folding togas balance a stone outcropping on their heads at the building's back porch. They have no arms and they could do this all day, all century, have been for the past two millenia. They don't have individual names, but at least they have clothes, unlike so many other statue women.

Athens reclines from the bottom of the hill, the air seethes with dust and the summer haze of Mediterranean sky, buildings lie across the ground the colour of unburied bones like the skeleton of an ancient hero on display.

Touch Tank

Starfish with five limbs, four limbs, twelve limbs, four-and-a-quarter limbs, three limbs with two others broken off. Some with limbs spiralling inward, some with limbs spread-eagle, some with two limbs squeezed chastely together while the three others loosely point.

Starfish purple and beige and red, skin like permanent goosebumps from their Titanic water. Soft grasses grow from their undersides with suction ends to crawl from sand to rocks slippery with algae savannahs.

Starfish sized to decorate a fingernail, starfish that could suffocate an entire human face while giving the ears saltwater Wet Willies with the tips of their limbs.

Starfish puckered to the sides of the tub, starfish overlapping like throw pillows or an orgy, starfish sucking mussel clusters into their centres to eat and bubbling slurpy sea-drool, starfish hiding under rocks from grabby hands. A blonde girl with a headband tosses one starfish back into the tub like the beanbag game and leaves another starfish on the tub ledge. It would dry out if the attendant didn't nudge it back in the tub. It drifts side-to-side to the bottom.

Two red crabs with grasping legs and reflexes too slow to pinch people with, one crab as grey and barnacled as a tank rock, a few hermit crabs retreating into their shells – so antisocial. Kind of like me, I guess – the only person not here with family or friends.

A brunette pigtailed girl and a buzz-cut boy keep trying to grab the crabs and jerking their hands away every time the crabs move. “Want me to get them for you?” I ask, only because their mom stands right behind them holding a baby, making sure they put the animals back *nicely*.

The kids nod, and I dunk my hand into the liquid ice, pick up a red crab, and hold it out to the girl: “Grab it from behind so it can’t pinch you.” She pinches its body between two fingers and turns it to face her. I dunk my hand again, grab the grey crab, and give it to the boy. He holds it like his sister does and strokes its barnacled back. “Whoa.”

“What do you say?” their mom prompts.

“Thank you!” in unison.

Ballooning sea cucumbers and an anemone that shies its fibre-light body from my fingers, a purple-stained scallop that parents keep grabbing because it’s symmetrical and smooth. A man with a baby holds the scallop close to the baby’s face, and she runs her tiny fingers across it. The man starts talking to his wife, but then the baby leans forward with her mouth open and gums on the scallop. The mom: “Oh, nonononono, sweetie, yucky!” She plucks it from her husband’s hand and returns it to the tank, where it stands vertically and spouts bubble streams.

Gros Morne

Wind-blasted pines, branches bone-bare, blown back to the shelter of eroded Appalachians, sticks like skeletal fingers pointing, abundant twigs woven to latticework, evergreens perpetually salted with death, star flowers speckling the floor.

Layered rocks chipping off in flat blocks in water, slanting seaward, studded with barnacles and black snails ranging from dust speck to quarter. Beach splattered with bulbous kelp, a silver forest of antler driftwood handed over by dusky waves.

Tiny slatted rainbow homes outlined with fresh white paint and mounted with satellite dishes or with window sills lined with fifties knick-knacks and drapes, residents giving up on redecorating. Metres away, boats moored on rickety docks piled with lobster nets like miniature versions of the chicken coops just outside Windsor, and at the end of one dock a wooden frame with a dangling rope like broken gallows.

Daisy-strawberry meadows with rippling grasses, a headlike rock covered in tightly-packed sprig moss – feels like a buzzcut to the touch.

Rusted shipwrecks onshore and a beach of fossils, ghosts locked in stone. The wind runs its sea-dampened fingers through my hair.

In a wooden museum filled with blunt tools, the smell of cod, citizens, tourists, and three musicians – a fiddler, a guitarist, and an accordion player jiggling up lively tunes. All the songs in D major, all demanding a vigorous foot tap at the very least. The 83-year-old man next to me gets up and shuffles into a riverdance song after song. Then the host gets up and sings “Jack the Jolly Tar,” takes her voice through high loops and low thrums. She loses the lyrics one time and the key another time, but not her straight posture, her dancing head, her wistful, closed eyes.

Driving back to the B&B, I veer my car alongside the Tablelands, the exposed mantle of the Earth, a blush in the greenery.

Russet boulders pile in brooks, scatter through the grasses. I stand on one after the next, airplaning my arms, tightening my stomach gripping with my toes to keep my balance as I hop past the lookout area beyond the footpaths.

Snow still patches the top of the rusty cliff. I want to climb up and make snow angels, but the gravelly cliff face dribbles rockslide tongues. Instead, I pocket a Mars rock with a thin crystalline layer of green. It may be a federal offense to take something from a national park, but I'm Canadian so it sort of belongs with me anyway. My Nonno taught me well.

Bona Vista

I drive toward Bona Vista lookout where an iceberg waits, where the John Cabot finger from the statue in Windsor first pointed. I spot a village – a legit village – with little houses perched at all angles over the hills and cliffs, the very definition of quaint. My home streets and buildings stain with roadkill, piss, milkshakes, and oil so I take a little detour.

On this gravel, two-ways-one-lane road, cars could rub up against each other but I keep following the circle thinking the whole road's just a loop. Then I get to the top of a hill and the road becomes a driveway – a fucking driveway – no signs whatsoever.

A forty-ish guy in a hoodie and tattered baseball cap mows the lawn. I don't want to use his main driveway to maneuver my turn-around because that would earn me eye-murder in Ontario. I resolve to reverse to the mini parking lot a ways back.

I shift to R and focus on the rear view camera as I edge back down, but the camera lens blurs and a wheel slides, then another, and I've driven a bit off the shoulder. I shift to D and press on the gas, the car *rrrrrs*, I press harder, all sound no motion, *RDRDRD*, gas gas gas – only sinks me farther into the ditch. The tires just erode gravel.

Lawn-mowing Guy toes his way down the hill toward me, and I roll down my window.

“You all right, m'love?” he says.

“Define ‘all right,’” I reply.

He walks to the other side. “Looks like you're pretty stuck.”

I shift to P and get out and OH MY GOD the car's nose presses into the mud and its ass sticks waaaaay in the air, the front right wheel wedges against a dilapidated wooden fence. Just one fragment of a wooden fence that happened to lie in that exact location.

Lawn-mowing Guy pushes from the front while I sit on the trunk, then we switch spots, but the car doesn't budge and it's got black gobs of mystery grease on it. "I better call a tow truck."

"No, no" – a voice from behind me – "we've got this." A crew of four wearing blue fleece sweaters with whale logos, the employees of the aquarium a hundred feet away. Connie, according to her name tag, says, "This is the most exciting thing that's happened all week! When Ray called us, we thought our favourite ducks had come back."

Ray tells me to get back in the car and directs the other guy and Lawn-mowing Guy to get on either side of him so they can all brace themselves against the hood and shove. Connie grabs the handle of the back passenger side door to pull down on while the other woman sits on the trunk and reclines against the back window like she's sunbathing.

"Now reverse!" Ray shouts at me from outside and I yell back, "But I don't wanna run anyone over!" Connie calls "Don't worry, Sheila is *sitting on the trunk*, you won't run her over." They all caw at me: "Gogogogogogogogogogogogo!" I shift to R and press gently on the gas as the men shove. I push a bit harder and YES I'M OUT OF THE DITCH! They all clap as I reverse into a safe space and scream thank yous.

Ray comes to my window. "That'll be three hundred dollars." We all guffaw together, and Ray continues, "You don't sound French." I remember the Québec license plate and tell him it's a rental. Ray says, "You know, with those plates, people will think you're a stupid frog from Montréal."

My smile freezes but laughter remnants dribble from my mouth because what do I say to a stranger who just got me out of a ditch but also says that?

"I'm from Ontario," I tell him, and he groans, "EVEN WORSE!"

Cape Spear

I want to greet the sunrise at The Easternmost Point in North America, the romantic vision of standing on a cliff with nothing barring me from the pure light of the sun, staking my claim at the threshold of the continent. So I wake up at four and on the drive, a yearling moose munches pine saplings in the ditch at the side of the road. I exhale when it doesn't leap in front of my car like a dozen Newfoundlanders have already warned me.

Of course, when I get to Cape Spear, a bit of a crowd waits at a lookout point with signs arrowing out from a wooden post:

Westernmost Point in Canada Kluane National Park and Reserve 5500 km

Northernmost Point Quttinirpaaq National Park 4000 km

Southernmost Point Pelee National Park 2400 km – a bubble of pride in my Windsor chest

A dog barks and puts his dirty paws on my neon pink leggings. The dog's owner scolds him – "I'm technically not supposed to bring you here!" – and apologizes to me. I tell her, "No problem," even though I'm annoyed, because I want to channel the kind-hearted Newfoundlanders. I walk on past the original lighthouse, a circus tent with its boxy shape and red and white stripes, contrasting the 50s conical one the colour of sea salt.

I aim my steps toward the boulders, past DANGER signs that show ocean waves grabbing stick people from cliffs, but the water just waking up doesn't have the energy to reach me. I crawl to the boulder that punches out the farthest, and no one can go past me to a better spot so when the sun rises through cottonball clouds to light a platinum path from the horizon to my feet, I claim the title of Easternmost Person in North America.

Except for those out in boats.

I tick it off my bucket list, anyway.

Quidi Vidi

First time touring a brewery by myself, but as soon as I trudge up the stairs with the tour group to the tasting room – wood floors, bar, and tables as shiny as the glasses – two mom-ish types ask me to sit with them. I travelled to Newfoundland by myself purposely, but it's still blanket-comfy to have people daughter me.

Beer #1: So light in colour it's almost lemon juice, so light in taste it's almost water, can't remember the name.

Beer #2: "Iceberg Beer," the one everyone comes for, the one everyone buys, and the most expensive. It comes in blue bottles that no one ever returns because they turn them into sparkling blue door wreaths, sea glass, vases for alcoholic flowers, instruments to go along with other traditional Newfoundland ones like the squeeze box and the fiddle. The beer's made with twenty-thousand-year-old glacier water. They've got a professional harvester surfing from iceberg to iceberg pickaxing chunks to sell to whomever thinks that this water surpasses tap water. (I hate to admit it, but I'm one of them.)

Beer #3: "Eric's Red" – red label, formerly "Erik the Red," after the Viking who allegedly visited the fingertip of Newfoundland, made hobbit houses and pike fences. Don't know why they didn't just keep the Viking name because without this story, everyone wonders, "Who the hell's Eric?" The beer itself only amber, not red.

Beer #4: "1892," the label and the beer even redder than the last to represent fire because this one's named after the year a third of St. John's burned down, an "In memory of," a last toast to the old city.

Beer #5: The name swept from my mind, but not our tasting leader's words. "We hired an advertising firm to come up with something, but they just gave us women in bikinis on a boat – not very original and not very true to Newfoundland because that water sits just above freezing all year round." She brings a board from under the table. "Here's what we

came up with instead because it captures the spirit of Newfoundland and this man teaches at MUN.” She spins the board around – sepia shot of a frail, frowning, bespectacled man in boxers and knee-high compression socks. He holds the beer bottle right over his crotch.

Whales & Puffins

Two-storey boat to accommodate so many passengers motors across the bay where a humpback whale throws a swirl, sea droplets wreathing it before it splashes back under.

Every five minutes or so, a whale breaches and serpentines. Sometimes their tails slide out, flashing in the sunlight, the fins tipped sharp to form horned hearts. The tour guide-captain says over the PA system, “Every humpback has a different white pattern on the back of its tail.” Passengers collide as they switch back and forth, upstairs downstairs, for the best view. I stay welded to the prow, a statue on a pirate ship, not giving up *my* front seat.

The boat reaches the ecological island reserve, predator-free, no fresh water, the rocks splattered white with shit, a cawcawphony of neighbourly seabirds: “Lay off my chick!” “What lovely shiny wrappers you’ve woven into your nest and where might I find some for myself?” “Careful, Meryl choked on wrappers last year.” “Damn, Jerry, you’re kickin’ tailfeather today – leave some fish for the rest of us.”

Seagulls ride air currents, wings outspread and legs tucked, rising from water to land while puffins and murrens only fly with wind – can’t fly at all if they eat too much. “As aerodynamic as winged potatoes.” Wings slapping the water faster than a frightened heartbeat, paddlefeet splayed, gaining no altitude. “If a puffin lands on deck, it’s yours forever.”

The boat lists left with passengers darting to one side when the boat nears a ledge of birds looking stoically out across the bay. “These are the singles, they’re looking for mates. For the love of God, don’t make eye contact, especially if you’re wearing orange.” The man next to me asks if I have Tums or Gravol, I open my purse and shake out a couple pills for him. He thanks me and cups them down his throat. The boat lists right and the man’s eyelids flutter as he claps a hand over his mouth. I offer him my prow spot – as much as I

love the spot, I also love not getting puked on – but he just waves that suggestion off, doesn't want to be that close to the ocean.

A group of whales lets the boat join their micropod, the boat comparable in size to a whale. The giddy, animal-lover kid inside me squeals and claps, feeling like the whales initiated us into their secret club, as if they like us as much as we like them. Our tour guide-captain proclaims himself a whaleaholic: “Meetings on Tuesdays.” Two whales swim along one side of the boat. They breach, they dive back under in gold medal synchronicity and there it is! Double tail! Farewell salute.

Bell Island

The *Legionnaire* ferries us into the bay and cars thunkrumble off the ship onto the island in an uphill chain. I park when I see a band with a piano, guitar, accordion, and microphone performing on a petite wooden stage with a roof. Dancers thump and groove with the beat, all bathrobes and bras on top of their shirts, faces covered in doilies, hats holding them in place. One woman has a paper sign with “Summer Mummer” on her back. For the next song they take mops nailed all up and down with bottle caps, knock them against the ground in time with traditional Newfoundland music to add some jangle-rattle percussion – tambourines not poundy enough. A part of me wants to join in – mummering comes from Britain and Ireland, and I haven’t had much chance to participate in traditional Irish activities from my dad’s side (besides, of course, drinking). To join, I could cover my face by holding a Kleenex in place with a bobby pin. But despite my musicianship, I’ve got no rhythm. I don’t want to be the come-from-away who unwaltzes onto the dancefloor with no costume and a Kleenex face. I film the dance instead.

I drive farther inland to an old mine, now a theatre. The man who runs it takes me inside. We use three flashlights to find our way through the meagre seating to the cold end where the carts used to go. He tells me about the Fairy Queen, who can shapeshift into whomever her victims think most beautiful, or a bird, or an acorn. He tells me about the woman during World War II who tried to tell her town about the Germans restocking their supplies from the island. A German soldier chased her, and she cried for help, but people thought it was a fairy trick. The soldier drowned her in Dobbin’s Garden marsh. She still comes out at sundown to paralyze farmers, promenaders, and miners with her stench, growling, “Smell what I smelled, taste what I tasted. No one helped me, and no one will help you.” She leaves her victims unconscious and putrid.

I search for Dobbin’s Garden. “Careful,” the man says, “you could stumble in and drown, and we don’t need another ghost story.” I wend down red roads through pink, purple, yellow, and white meadow flowers to find the marsh behind a fence, all placid waters and

unmoving grasses – the kind of thing that seems *too quiet* in scary movies, but just feels peaceful and lazydaze to me. I suppose that people living on an island off another island might need to make up spooks for company, if not for tourism.

Cows in Cupids

I trek uphill to a couple of stone thingies that look like gigantic pine cones because they're made up of flat rock after flat rock, all stacked on top of each other in circular layers – rocks so flat and huge that a giant could skip them across the Atlantic. I take a picture with the first stone pinecone in the forefront and the other one in the background. The sky's clear close to the horizon, but higher up blue-grey clouds blanket it, and if I get the camera at just the right angle, the stone pine cone in the distance connects the clouds to the land.

From the top of the hill, I see a field of cows below, dozens of them all spread out, some caramel-y, some that typical black and white, some “chocolate milk cows,” and absolutely no humans.

Sadie's in vet school and she says cows are as friendly as dogs. I think to myself “I'm gonna go pet 'em!” Like a dare. But a cute dare. One of those off-the-beaten path, seize-the-moment tourist things. As I start walking down the hill, it becomes pretty clear that this side wasn't meant for hikes because I keep starting mini rockslides and almost going down with them, and apologizing to these sweet little shrubs I keep braking on.

Finally, I make it down to the bottom where the grass grows thigh-high and a fence lines the pasture. I wade through the grass, wondering how I'm going to get over that fence when I just DROP and SPLAT. The ground has devoured my legs up to the knees in water that kind of looks like bad coffee.

I think, “Well, fuck, I didn't go through all this *not* to pet some cows.” So I grab the fence post and pull myself out of the muck, slide in between the two-by-fours.

I walk up to the nearest two cows and DAMMIT they back away from me like I haven't come all this way just to pet their fuzzy heads while they eat. I scan them all for horns (none) but that doesn't mean they can't still hurt me if they charge.

I pick my way between fresh and dried piles of poop until I reach a boulder and plop myself down for a rest. The cows put their heads back down to munch.

Then a how-now-brown-cow strolls up and I hold out my hand. She steps back, but I keep my hand there until she shuffles forward again and sniffs. She bends down to chew on the corner of my sweater, and when I tug that away, she goes for my backpack. Now I have three things to wash – two smothered in cow spit and another drenched in mudwater.

When I pet her, her fur's coarse except around the ears but she pulls away when I touch her there, so I scratch the white star on her forehead instead. She's got long eyelashes and one ear pierced. I spend about ten minutes with her, until I hear a cow in the distance bellowing like mad. I check the field, but it's just the cows and me, so that must mean that some cow is mooing its maw off about me.

What if the cows are livestock *and* a self-defending security system? I give my reluctant friend one last pat on the star, and then I take off as fast as I can without stepping in poop. I really don't need more items to wash. I will never make it back up that hill without falling backwards and somersaulting all the way down to end up headfirst in the gross water. I run the other way, a much more gradual incline. The cows canter out of my path as I run, that one cow's blasting moos following me. I picture some ardent farmer chasing me with a shotgun and firing at me, but then I remember that this is Newfoundland. I don't slow down, because I don't want to be the come-from-away who pets strangers' livestock while her leggings soak mudwater into her legs. At least, I don't want to be the one who gets caught doing that.

My head bobs up and down, alternating between scanning the ground for poop and scanning the fence for a suitable exit. I spot one, a door to the fence hidden in the high grasses. As soon as I reach it, I try the latch. From the inside, it opens, and I scramble down the dirt path that zigzags to the parking lot, the wind lashing the tall grasses against

my skin. When I reach my car, I stop to pant before unlocking the door and falling into my seat, only the bottoms of my pants soaking.

Screeched

Walls covered in teaspoons, sailors knots, bottles, license plates; ceiling hung with hockey sticks, Christmas lights, war helmets, circular tables covered in plastic tablecloths; the bar counter filled with IDs, business cards, handwritten notes – all slid under the glass.

I ask if I can get Screeched in, and the woman at the counter says, “Yes m’ ducky.” Her name’s Ruth, a minister by day, a bartender who says “Jaysus” by night. She goes to get the bar owner, 72-year-old two-time cancer survivor, Linda, who wears a natural permagrין.

Linda: “How old are ya, lovey?”

Me: “24.”

Linda: “So I’ve only got thirty years on ya.”

Ruth: “Jaysus, Linda, that’s not right, good thing I’m cashier, you’re forty years older.”

Linda: “Naw, thirty, trust you me, us business people know our math.”

Ruth: “I’m tellin’ ya, it’s forty.” She pulls out a pen, presses a button on the cash machine, and it ejects paper while I stand there thinking *48 years older*. Should I say that to the people who’ll soon handle the rum I’ll drink?

Ruth, after scribbling on the paper and smacking the pen down: “Jaysus, 48, Linda, closer to fifty years older!”

Linda, permagrinning: “You watch it, you, can’t have my cashier roundin’ up numbers!”

Linda shuffles off and returns, puts a white hat with a mesh trail on me and a sunhat wrapped in a pink feather boa on herself. She holds a big wooden spoon in front of my face and tells me, “For smacking a stunned mainlander.”

She makes me repeat Newfinese phrases:

“Ow she cuttin’ dere b’y?”

“Come day, go day, God send Sunday.”

“I dies at you!”

For every word my tongue stumbles over, she slaps my cheek with the spoon.

Linda: “Long may your big jib draw!”

Me: “Long may your jig bib draw!”

Slap!

Linda: “Stay where you’re to ’til I comes where you’re at.”

Me: “Stay where you’re at ’til I comes where you’re to.”

Slap!

Linda: “We gotta keep the lingo bye’s she’s easy to loose out here.”

Me: “We gotta keep... wait, what?”

Slap!

Then she says, “Do you want to become a Newfoundlander? Say ‘Yes, me old cock, I do!’”

“Yes... me old... cock, I do.”

She feeds me “Newfoundland steak” and I gag on bologna.

“Bless your heart.” She pats my back. “You’re lucky ’cause I usually give people raw halibut.”

She pulls a dead puffin out of the freezer, half its beak broken, dangling by a few beaky fibers. “Now wotcha gotta do is kiss ’is arse, then drink the Screech.” Each feather matted frozen. I try to determine where other lips may have claimed real estate, where the anus might hide, where my lips will even fit. I settle on a patch of snow feathers just under the tip of a wing, then slam back the shot of Screech that dissolves my esophagus on the way down.

Ruth, taking pictures the whole time cheers, and Linda hugs me. She puckers to kiss me, so I offer her my cheek, but she grabs my face and kisses me on the mouth. Ruth cackles.

Honorary Newfoundlander!

Badlands

Not West enough for Nanaimo bars, but layers of dark chocolate brownie, French vanilla, caramel, mocha – Alberta’s pan-flavour birthday cake.

Dad and I get out of the car, refuse Amish corn because we don’t want to carry around bags of corn on our hike (I still feel bad, though). We cross a suspension bridge with locks along its chain-link fence over a shallow green river. I turn them back and forth. Most don’t have initials carved or painted into them like the locks in Paris.

Up close, the hills even more layered, an earth-toned rainbow swooploping, hill faces penned perpendicularly in eons-old sediment stacking and erosion language. The hills breathe out faintly green shrub tufts and short yellow grass. Parched, flat ground beneath cactus sprouts and clawing weeds.

Rocks scabble as I toe from one mound to the next, panting and squeezing my stomach muscles. Dad wheezes behind me, stops more frequently than I do. I can’t decide if this hike presents a much-needed workout for him (and me), or if it might hurt him (and me). The yes-no narrative loops in my head until I reach the top of the hill, my dad not far behind. All the other hikers choose to descend via a slope in the cliff like a staircase with rounded, slippery steps. Dad and I stir up dust down a hairpin path to reach a secluded pond, the spit from a cowboy’s chewing tobacco. We want to walk alongside nature, with as few other people as possible, because they corrupt its purity, tranquility. Hypocritical, I know, because we do, too. At least we don’t litter, I remind myself as I sidestep a condom wrapper.

We round the hill (no more upward hikes) and re-cross the bridge. Dad hands over a bill for a bag of that corn. If we buy corn, we might as well buy homemade cookies, too. Even if/because of our tough hike.

We drive down the road with our corn and cookies, heading for the Hoodoos. We don't have a GPS, figure we can spot them out the window. All the earthy colours blend together, and we can't make the Hoodoos out. What we can make out, though, is smattering of people and parked cars right around where the Hoodoos should stand.

We park and follow the crowd, and sure enough, the natural, wind-shaped pillars rise from the ground. All phallic podiums. Beyond the railings and steps and plaques telling people not to climb on the Hoodoos sprout hundreds of tinier Hoodoos, sedimentary toadstools clustering over dead dinosaurs.

The site acts as a beige playground of dusty smooth hills and holes and inukshuk cities. At the centre, children slide down rockslide paths and duck into mini caves. Adults climb as high as they can to sit on the knees of the landscape. Some visitors read every single plaque. Some take turns snapping pictures for groups of people, letting others run across to avoid the frame. Dad and I never stand more than five metres from another person. Right now, no one jostles each other out of the way, or litters, or rushes around. The savour the landscape, they share it. Feels more like a park, like a little community, than a tourist site.

Lake Louise

A thousand dollars a night to sleep next to this postcard, bright turquoise lake – actually a pond and more like the aquamarine ring that has collected dust in my grandmother’s underwear drawer for fifty years. I exhale with relief that Dad and I get to stay with relatives instead of here, at the Fairmont. The closer I look, the murkier and filmier the water. Dead bugs and browned pine needles float on the surface alongside spittley bubbles – not pretty nature. They make Lake Louise look too much like every chlorine pool I’ve ever swum in, nature’s castoffs rounding the pool only to end up in the filter. I feel guilty for wanting the floating stuff gone when it belongs here more than I do. For wanting a natural experience, but not actual nature – just the luminous, sunstruck commodity from National Geographic and Pinterest. And I want all the other tourists here to leave, so only my Dad and I get to explore, get to take our time and not play dodgeball with people’s arms and shoulders and running kids and excited dogs. Everyone here probably wants all the other people to leave, as well. Well, except the Fairmont and the ice cream vendor.

Three spruce-bedecked mountains funnel around the lake on one side, and a writhing swarm of sweaty, ice cream-sticky bodies jostling for pictures rounds the other side. A man dressed up in First Nations chief attire stands at the midpoint, and middle-aged white folks gather to take pictures with him. In the parking lot, another four buses unload. Each line of people coming from the buses looks like it’ll never end. All together, we tourists crowd like the pine trees dressing the mountains. Dad and I “excuse us” past a group of people who just finished taking pictures, and we sit on jaggy boulders lining the lake, their points digging into the backs of my thighs. Dad takes a picture of me, then I take one of him, then we selfie with both phones. Our faces loom big as mountains in the frame, my hair frizzies wiring out to slip behind Dad’s glasses, making him close one eye.

We got on a late bus because we didn't anticipate the lineups (Hello! Free National Park Year – get with the program!), so we don't have time to do a ski lift or kayaking before the last bus of the day comes to pick us up.

"I have to use the bathroom," Dad tells me.

"Where?" I whip around, searching for a portapotty through the throngs of people. It'll probably reek like the apocalypse after a full day of thousands of people. "You might have to wait until we get back."

"No way." Dad points to the Fairmont.

"Yeah, great, but won't we get arrested if we so much as breathe near it?"

He laughs and strides confidently toward the Fairmont doors.

I run to catch up. "What if they ask us for a room number or a keycard as proof?"

"They won't."

Dad nods at a black-and-white-clad staff member standing near the doors and walks right in, no problem. I imitate his stride and follow. He heads straight into the men's room without looking back, so I split off into the women's.

Spotless. Cool temperature. Loud fans, and tasteful acoustic music over the speakers. No one else in here at all. As I splash cold water on my face, I can't help internally rolling my eyes at myself for liking the bathroom better than the lake.

Moraine Lake

What I wished Lake Louise could promise – incandescent waters bluer than the sky, the living valley surrounded by ten peaks, each incised against the periwinkle haze, the sun basking on the rocks, fluffy pines green enough to taste, tanned beaches with mini inukshuks fenced by driftwood. Harder to access than Lake Louise and therefore much less crowded.

Dad and I rent a canoe and squeeze ourselves into crab-coloured life vests. He never mixes up left and right, so he ends up at the back steering. We paddle forward on the liquid supernova.

Wind pushes up whitecaps. Dad sticks his paddle on my side of the boat and yells, “Push away from the shore, away from the shore!” My arm muscles sear with lactic acid buildup as I fight against the wind. The gust still blows us into the shore’s embrace, and our hull grinds into the sand. When the wind dulls to breath, we stab our paddles into the sand and shove and shove and shove.

My arms, neck, and shoulders still throb and burn. Dad’s sturdy paddling versus my damn-I-need-to-start-lifting-weights paddling on the opposite side sends us in circles. Dad tells me, “Rest while I do the paddling.” I only offer a few strokes every now and then so I don’t feel like a freeloader.

“Do you think we can make it to that waterfall at the far end?” I point.

He checks his watch and throws a glance over his shoulder. “We have forty minutes until the last bus comes.”

I only saw two other canoes make it to that waterfall. It feels like a secret. Off the beaten path, far from most other tourists. “Let’s do it.”

I paddle hard for about fifteen seconds before I have to stop and let Dad take over again the rest of the way.

White felt water pours over a staircase of algae-clad rock descending from the mountains, pines rooted in boulders, springs swerving around them. Dad snaps pictures, makes me turn within a snap of my neck to capture my face dark against the bright background. I dunk a hand in the water and splash it at him. He closes his eyes even though he wears glasses.

We have twenty-five minutes to paddle back, but we still want to climb the rock pile at the other side of the hill to get the representative picture of Moraine Lake and the Valley of the Ten Peaks. It's called the Twenty-Dollar View because the old Canadian twenty used to depict it. We could really use that wind right about now, but none blows by. We still paddle back in decent time, but we overshoot the docks and end up paddling too far. The attendant gestures for us to reverse. We paddle backward – too far. Angle our boat, too far left. My laughter weakens what little paddling capability I have, and I let Dad take the lead again while I get my giggles out. When we get close enough, the attendant reaches out and pulls our boat to the dock. Dad and I shed our life vests and climb out, thank the attendant. With all our scrambling, we don't have enough time to climb the hill and get pictures, but that just means we have to come back again some other year.

Hostels where

The only guy in an all-girl dorm – a six-foot-two snoring lawnmower who leaves his ringer at top volume and changes his pants while I’m still in the room. When I look away tells me, “You don’t have to, I don’t care.”

A just-out-of-high-school Danish workaway couple burns copious amounts of garlic in a frying pan on the communal stove, and TheyHostelOwnersI choke on the steam.

Roommates keep changing, but RoommateRoommateRoomateI don’t click locks shut on our cupboards. Once we know someone’s name, we trust them not to open our suitcases and root through them.

Two kinds of people in the world: those who make their sleeping bags like beds and those who don’t waste their time.

The girl in the bunk below me forgets about the second alarm on her phone while she’s in the bathroom. No one complains, but if we were family: “TURN THAT FUCKING THING OFF!”

The key card stops working at 7:37 a.m. even though checkout is at 11:00 a.m.

I can’t tell if I’m hearing zippers or farts.

I try not to tip the cot-like bunk bed as I climb to the top. It rattles and squeaks and the lacquered ladder rungs dig into the arches of my feet. I plop onto the mattress and the springs squeal. My sleeping bag shushes as I slip into it, and I label myself “one of *those* roommates.” But in the morning when I apologize, my roommates: “I didn’t hear anything.” “Yeah, don’t worry.” “Soooo out you could’ve jumped on me.”

My French-Canadian surgeon roommate tells me she had a dream about giving me a lift and how I had to climb from a moving car to get into hers. She says, “You had skillz.”

I go for a walk under the Milky Way trail with a Portuguese couple and a stalker grey cat that we keep thinking is a bear each time it disappears in the darkness and scuttles through the grass. We jump even though we know it’s the cat because we also trek through black bear territory.

A trio of aunt-types stays across the hall from my room. They leave their door wide open as they make their beds, stumble pyjama-clad and messy-haired into the kitchen. Judy pours too much waffle mix into the waffle maker and – “Oh, shit!” – it overflows. Rhonda brews coffee and all three of them fight over the mug that reads SLUT. I slide the mug towards myself and sip from it. “There, fight’s over, none of you get the mug.” Babs throws a clump of waffle excess at my face. It lands in my coffee and I spoon the caffeinated dough into my mouth.

The fan needs to cool everyone so we stand it on the ground – nope – the night table – nope! One roommate’s lumpy suitcase already sits open there. The top of the locker – nope! The cord doesn’t reach that high. “Do we have a roommate in the loft tonight? No? Staircase then!” “Oscillate! Make it oscillate!”

RoommateRoommateRoommateI all jerk or bolt upright, none of us sleeping – something scratches against the window outside. “Let’s play moose, squirrel, or vampire.” None of us want to lift the blinds to check.

I have something in common with everyone – journeying, adventure, escape from the everyday. Momentary connections and day-long friendships. Kindred spirits.

Banff-Jasper

I only have three days left Out West, and I want to hit major landmarks and find “hidden gems,” as travel blog posts always call lesser-known sites and activities – for this, I only have one day. So I start my no-Dad, connect-the-dots drive from one national park to the next:

Herbert Lake just after sunrise has no colour, mirrors soft pine forest, the bite of mountains against a pale, hazy sky. Few people. Fresh. My favourite part, though I don't know it yet.

Bow Lake has no visible bow shape, like a tied ribbon or an archer's weapon. The teal cousin of Moraine and Louise, lightly wind-ruffled.

Neverending Ridge, an unbroken wall of rock, no dips deep enough to indicate separate mountains, one long smooth slanting face and serrated top cutting clouds, accompanying me for dozens of kilometres.

Columbia Icefields boast clusters of thousands-of-years-old ice, a well-used tobogganing racetrack trenched and browned with pebbly rubble and gushing runoff, stripey squirrels that look like chipmunks in the parking lot. Hundreds of tourists bus up the mountain face.

Athabasca Falls, a grey river thrashing down through the valleys of towering tongues of rock, crashing cracks into them. Boards warning DON'T CLIMB OVER FENCE and listing deaths.

Valley of the Five Lakes, with limbal rings and shallow bottoms, swaying underlake plants.

Maligne Lake, the jewel of Jasper, teal smogged over. The canoers disappear after a couple hundred feet when they should be visible at the opposite shore like in postcards. Makes no geographic sense that the smoke from Kootenay smogs Jasper more than Banff.

Too bad the Rocky Mountains have no star to step on, like Paris does, to guarantee my return. I rushed, and I want to see everything in more detail. Still, I managed to design my own tour in such a way that I explored more in one day in the Rockies than I did in three days in Paris with a guided tour. And something about my rushing gave me a bubbly feeling in my chest. Uniqueness. A blitz-tour. I bet no one else has ever done the exact same thing.

Boring as Windsor can get, I still feel glad that I don't live in the mountains. The Rockies have so much beauty, it squishes my heart against my lungs and makes my breathing hurt. But they still make me feel a bit claustrophobic, sequestering me on either side, patching sunlight in the valleys like Toronto skyscrapers do with its streets. I think I need a horizon with details that stretch beyond my vision. Possibility. The option of connecting with the rest of the world.

I wait until evening to begin the three-hour drive back to my hostel in Banff because I want the stars to overwhelm me on the night drive in the mountains, no lights from towns – only the canopy of the galaxy.

Instead I get more smoke from hundreds of kilometres away until I can't tell ground from trees from mountains from sky, my brights and half a grapefruit moon the only things keeping me from driving into oblivion.

I pull to the side of the road, flick on the inside lights, open the door, and get out. I count three barely-stars, way less than even Windsor's factory-breath sky gives me.

I dump myself back in the car, flick off the lights, and accidentally turn the engine off – no dashboard kilometrage or fuel gauge or radio telling me the artist or lights in the sky, the trees, on the road OH MY GOD THERE IS NO LIGHT ANYWHERE
WHATSOEVER NOTHING EXISTS EXCEPT MY CONSCIOUSNESS I jerk the keys forward and the car growls and illuminates the outside world again on my drive to Banff.

Takakkaw Falls

The air shudders as water erupts over the edge of a Rocky Mountain, gasping
watersmoke that hangs just above a ghost-coloured river.

Water beads on my clothes and slicks the rocks and pines. I use one black slab after
another as stepping stones, scattering grubbly gravel beneath my feet and sliding back
down a half step each time I take a full step.

My clothes damper and damper the higher I climb, higher than anyone else. I keep
turning, other people keep getting smaller, no one climbing as high as I do. Closer to
nature than everyone else here comes. Closer to nature than to people.

“Oi! Are you crazy? Get down from there!”

I lift my legs over saplings and dodge my hips away from pointy edges. The sun flashes
rocks Gold-Rush-shiny. My blood thrills up with what might happen if I slip on them.
More daring than everyone else here.

At the waterfall I can drink its breath, touch the galloping clouds, streak rainbows across
my skin, lean against the rockwall and tiptoe under its thrumming curtain.

“Wanderlust”: Persona development and literary sensuality through nonce words

Introduction

Nonce words are words created for only one occasion, or for the “nonce.” While some of these words never join the lexicon, such as “runcible” from “The Owl and the Pussy-Cat” by children’s poet Edward Lear, many others do. For example, Shakespeare coined over a hundred words that remain in use today, including “gnarled” in *Measure for Measure*, “lackluster” in *As You Like It*, and “laughable” in the *Merchant of Venice* (Mabillard).

Recent erasure poetry, which “sculpts itself out of another larger text” by “redacting words until a poem is formed” (Brewer) sometimes creates nonce words through the omission and yoking of letters. For example, Gregory Betts’s *The Others Raised in Me* forms poems out of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 150,” following the existing order of its letters. Within *The Others Raised in Me*, the poem “Bacchus and Arquebus” (70) contains the nonce word “revelutionary” which combines “revelry” and “revolutionary.” Bacchus is the Roman god of wine and parties, or revelry, and arquebus is a type of early gun, which also sounds like a word of Roman origin. In creating “revelutionary,” Betts foregrounds the nature of revolutions: they most often involve guns and violence, but their emotionally-charged, frenzied nature resembles revelry, particularly when celebratory revelry follows a revolution. The poem “Vows,” from *The Others Raised in Me*, also has a nonce word: “we (i/you)/ see the edge of/ forevermorrow” (215). “Forevermorrow” goes beyond the vague, overused words “forever” and “forevermore,” often used to refer to how long a married couple will stay together. “Forevermorrow” gets more time-specific, the “morrow” adding the reminder that the

couple will spend each new tomorrow with each other. I also see “Forevermorrow” as a blending of all the days the couple have together in their future into one stretch of time, just as with their vows, the two people symbolically become one in the eyes of the law, and sometimes within their religious affiliation.

While Edward Lear’s “runcible” may sound similar to existing English words, it is an *ex nihilo* word creation, meaning that it came purely from the author’s imagination. Shakespeare’s and Betts’s words are examples of root-motivated word creations, meaning they have some basis in existing words. In my poetry, I largely use the latter type of nonce word to portray existing concepts in different, and often more exact, ways. Sometimes, when I attempt to present an original idea or outline a tricky problem, existing words in the English lexicon do not suffice. Often, in conversations, I use gestures, noise mimicry, photographs, and videos to show other people a particular item, setting, or event. While the above methods may provide people with visuals and audio, they still cannot always capture the way that I, in particular, perceive them. A frequently appearing conversation phrase, “I don’t know how to describe it,” demonstrates an individual’s search for the exact right word. Such a phrase indicates that the exact right words to express a very particular incident or individual experience often do not exist, at least not in English. Other languages have phrases that do not have precise English translations (or translations into other languages), yet often describe very common experiences. For example, the Buli language of Ghana has the word “pelinti,” which refers to someone moving too-hot food around in their mouth to diffuse some of the heat and avoid burning the tongue (“Pelinti”). When words like this don’t exist in a language, sometimes in order to create a visceral and accurate rendering of a sight, sound, smell,

taste, or physical feeling, an author creates new words. For instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined “scathing,” “selfless,” and “soulmate,” among other words (McKusick). These examples show that it can be helpful, and sometimes necessary, to modify existing words in a language to fully portray a sensation or idea.

In English, some coinings can emerge from compounding one noun with another, or, for instance, shifting a word from its grammatical role as noun to that of a verb. Coining can also mean using the suffixes of one part of speech (e.g. the -ing ending of gerund verbs) with a root word of a different part of speech, such as an adjective. For example, the adjective “shy” dates back to Old English but was first used as a verb in 1650 (Barber), and English speakers now use the term “shying away” in similar meaning to “avoiding” or “backing away from.” The well-known adjective describing someone who is reluctant to engage in social interactions or step out of their comfort zone brings with it all the necessary context when shifting to verb form. This grammatical shifting is convenient root-motivated word creation that gives personality to the action and saves English speakers from going to the trouble of creating an *ex nihilo* word. For a pop culture example, another shift from adjective to verb appears in Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” with the lyric “You keep samin’ when you oughta be a’changin,’” in which “same” becomes a verb (in the song). Songwriter Lee Hazelwood creates “samin’” for creative purposes – the words “doing the same thing” contain too many syllables for that line. Furthermore, “samin’” matches up with the persona Nancy Sinatra oozes as she sings this song. The woman takes charge of syntax and tosses out the rules of grammar like she takes charge of her relationship with her cheating lover and tosses out the 1960s social norms of “free love” and female subordination in a

relationship. Furthermore, “samin” has a cool, snappy, musical sound and half-rhymes with its opposite, “changin’,” which best fits the form of the pop song. According to Katherine Barber, longtime Dictionaries editor for Oxford University Press, functional shifts like these are “one of the great efficiencies of English... [W]e don’t have to bother about different endings for nouns, verbs, and adjectives, as other languages do.” Thus, English speakers can be creative and efficient with language in a way that other English speakers can appreciate without any loss of comprehension.

These “nonce words” (though, as my examples attest, many quickly join the English lexicon) do not confuse fluent English speakers or readers because those familiar with English grammar already understand the individual meaning of each word and suffix, as well as how torquing particular words does not seriously destroy the grammar. Linguistics professors Mark Aronoff and Kirsten Fudeman state that exploiting English speakers’ knowledge of the language by breaking the rules is a good way to attract their attention and is a common practice in verbal art (4). Furthermore, they say that “[a]ll human beings have [the] capacity for generating and understanding novel words” (5). This means poets can create new words and can use their audience’s capacity to understand these words in order to express their and thoughts and feelings toward a subject, as well as their own unique experiences. Not only do these words not inhibit the audience’s understanding of the content, but they also stand out to the audience, giving them cause to further consider both the words and the work in which they appear. When two words and/or suffixes are put together in a way that has not been used before, the new word presents the reader with a familiar yet novel concept.

My poetry thesis, “Wandermust,” presents nonce words alongside traditional descriptive language to portray the inexplicable and enigmatic aspects of landscapes and events, as well as their minutia, as perceived by my manuscript’s persona, to facilitate a unique and more visceral reading experience. Furthermore, just as the nonce words aid the persona in exploring and expressing her surroundings and her identity, they foster an experience in which the reader can explore and experience the nuances of the English language. By reading new words, the reader travels through and tours the English language; they read words yoked together that may never have been compounded before, process word hybridizations for new and existing ideas, view nouns and adjectives from the angles of verbs, and imagine written sound in new ways. Thus, as the persona travels and the reader travels vicariously through her, the act of reading the collection of prose poems also becomes an act of exploration of the written word, a form of linguistic tourism.

Compounds

As Archie Burnett (494) notes, “Germanic languages have a tendency to form new words by joining existing words together.” In my manuscript, I combine words in order to either create a certain ambiance that would not entirely come through with the use of an existing English word, or to show that an object can have two functions at the same time. For example, in the poem “Takakkaw Falls” (76), I describe an immense waterfall and the misty water that drifts from it. For me, the word “mist” connotes the fog on an English moor or the water that fills the bathroom and condenses on the mirror after a shower; I found the word “mist” too broad for that poetic passage. The word “vapour”

sounds too scientific to me, and feels out of place in that piece. Thus, I chose to combine two words to make up “watersmoke.” This nonce word takes the accuracy of water and the image of smoke, and conveys what English speakers associate with words such as “mist” and “vapour” but offers a more dreamlike personality. The “smoke” aspect of the word also ties the Takakkaw Falls, which are located in Yoho National Park in British Columbia, to the smoke from the forest fires in the neighbouring Kootenay National Park, which affected all the Rocky Mountain parks that summer. As well, connecting smoke and water in one word fastens other classical elements into the description – fire, which burns earth (or solid items) to create the smoke, which is carried by air.

“Watersmoke” also operates alongside the term “ghost-coloured river,” over which the “watersmoke” floats. By invoking the supernatural alongside the impossibility and visual accuracy of “watersmoke,” I convey the persona’s sense of awe in her experience with the waterfall. The persona’s thoughts and feelings regarding her travels and events are integral to the manuscript because they show her attempt to find her ever-morphing place within each of her different surroundings.

In a similar way, in the poem “Pompeii,” I create the nonce word “shadowlurks” (38). “Lurking in the shadows” is a common phrase – a Google search of this term brings up the title of a horror novel, a section of the popular video game Skyrim, a song by a rap artist, and a slew of quotations grouped into BrainyQuote.com. The idea is that someone or something is nearby and has bad intentions: “lurk” means “[t]o hide oneself; to lie in ambush; to remain furtively or unobserved about one spot” (OED). But what if the shadow itself is the thing that lurks? This is how I wanted to portray Mount Vesuvius – it is dark grey in colour, like a shadow, and shadows, too have a negative connotation:

beyond obscuring light, shadow is also associated with “gloom” and “unhappiness,” and as “something that obscures the lustre of a reputation” (OED). Mount Vesuvius also sits close to Pompeii, which means that Pompeii sits “in the shadow of” Vesuvius. Also, Vesuvius has already destroyed Pompeii once, and is still an active volcano. Thus, the “shadow” can also refer to “the shadow of death,” which marks the “horror of approaching dissolution” (OED). The ongoing threat of eruption makes Vesuvius ominous and lines up with the “ambush” aspect of “lurk,” in addition to the “shadow of death.” Thus, I write “shadowlurks” to link these elements of Mount Vesuvius together and to convey foreboding in the poem. In doing so, I foreground the persona’s discomfort in her excursion to Pompeii, alongside her anger over the phallic brothel pointers, her nervousness around the local boy, and her guilty feelings toward turning dead bodies into spectacles within the site.

Blends

One of my most frequent coinings of new words is to blend existing ones together. Blends are also known as portmanteau words. The latter term itself was coined by Lewis Carroll, who stated that these words were like a portmanteau bag, which has two opening compartments (McArthur). Carroll created many of these kinds of words himself. For example, the word “chortle” (a blend of “chuckle” and “snort”), from the poem “Jabberwocky,” is now a part of the English lexicon. On the other hand, Lewis’s word “slithy” (a blend of “slimy” and “lithe”) did not stick. Both these blends began their lives as nonce words, and one of them has retained nonce status. Given their rather limited use in poetry, most portmanteau coinages tend to stick when coming from

corporations (in the form of brand names such as Pepto-mint and Dictaphone) or from journalists and publicists (words such as “smog” from “smoke” and “fog” or “motel” from “motor” and “hotel”) whose words reach a broader population through more widely consumed media than poetry books (Nunberg 86). Adrienne Lehrer, professor emerita of linguistics at the University of Arizona, has pointed out that,

[s]ince we are surrounded by visual and auditory stimuli from the world of media... all competing for our attention, a neologism, especially a blend, is one device. Advertisers and politicians want their words – product names, slogans, and catchy phrases to be remembered. Therefore, from their standpoint it is desirable for the response not to be automatic. When we automatically and normally process language, we focus on the meaning, and after recoding the input, we remember the gist but usually forget the actual words in the original message. Since clever neologisms require effort to figure out and process, we are more likely to remember the form. (380)

I aim to use this particular phenomenon to make not only my prose poetry itself more memorable, but the persona who “speaks” those blend words, as well. I do not aim for my poetry to come off as series of potential brand names, which is why I blend words sporadically, but for it to meet the “aesthetic goal of providing pleasure, amusement, and entertainment as well as meaning” in the way that other literary devices, such as metaphor, do (Lehrer 380). For me, having the persona use her own blends is a form of character development, as it is a distinct way of communicating. Some examples of my blends include “duckalect” (17), “dancepeded” (12), and “dustpen” (9). I use “duckalect” in the poem “Ottawa 150” (17-20) as a cross between “duck” and “dialect” to suggest in

jest (sujest?) that ducks may have regional speech patterns, just as humans do.

“Dancepeded” comes from “The Blind Dog” (11-15) and refers to a stampede created by aggressive dancing rather than just charging forward in a collective run. “Dustpen” from “Theatricality” (9-10) is based on a fanciful notion that fluffy pieces of popcorn dropped on the floor visually resemble sheep. In sweeping them into the dust pan, in my persona’s imagination, the dustpan is a “pen” for any popcorn swept up. According to Lehrer, neologisms

involve word play, such as puns and allusions, as well as the puzzle of novelty.

Therefore, when the hearer figures out the intended meaning, he or she is amused and perhaps feels clever for having ‘gotten’ the point. As a result, the hearer has a positive attitude toward the speech event and possibly toward the speaker and the referent of the neologism... This perlocutionary intent and effect can be loosely related to Malinowski’s concept of phatic communion (1923), where the purpose of speech is to create a social bond. (370-371)

In using blends, I not only develop my persona’s character, but also attempt to endear her to the reader and make them feel like they share an inside joke with the persona. Unlike phatic communion, the sole purpose of which is to create and maintain social bonds rather than communicate information, my blends often do communicate information in the form of an image. The term “duckalect” provides little information, given the presence of the word “dialect” before it, and is mostly just a joke to bring the persona to life; similarly, “dustpen” showcases the persona’s boredom and her need to use her imagination to get through a shift at the movie theatre. “Dancepeded,” however, is not just a pun – it is a concise verb that imparts a specific image of the people’s actions in the

warehouse bar. Thus, the persona attempts to connect with the reader on a personal level at the same time that she describes her setting to the reader for image creation purposes. Through the blend words, the reader gets to know the persona and her surroundings, and can form a connection with her.

Functional Shifts

In many instances, I shift the grammatical role of a word to create nonce words. One way I do this is by adding the suffix *-ed* to a noun, which can change the noun to a past-tense verb and/or an adjective. Past participles of verbs can hold an “attributive position like an adjective, but only if the participle indicates some sort of permanent characteristic” (McArthur). Take, for example, the nonce word “stairtopped” (38) in my poem “Pompeii.” It refers to a bust of Zeus sitting at the top of a staircase in the ruins. Someone had to have placed the bust there, and so “stairtopped” is their past-tense action; however, “stairtopped” also refers to the state of being, as in the location, of the bust itself, and so fits as an adjective for the bust. I prefer the bust of Zeus being “stairtopped” to the bust of Zeus “sitting at the top of the stairs” because this nonce word takes the action away from the statue and places it with an unknown person, which is a further reminder that life once existed in the ruined town of Pompeii. These people’s identities no longer rest with their individuality; instead, their identities are tied to the spectacle of the site. The volcanic eruption consumed the people of Pompeii, an action mimicked by the organizations and tourists that, through displaying and viewing, turn the citizens’ bodies into consumable items. The “stairtopped” bust of Zeus returns some power to

these citizens – to determine the place of a god at a time when gods determined the fate of human beings.

In “Ottawa 150,” I write about an umbrella that is “apartmented with cobwebs” (17). I shift the noun “apartment” into a past participle to convey several things: in the verbal sense, the act of spiders constructing dwellings within the umbrella and, in the adjectival sense, the appearance of the umbrella as a result of the sheer number of cobwebs in close proximity to each other, making the umbrella resemble an apartment building with cobwebs for individual windows or rooms. By using “apartmented,” I add to the city atmosphere that already accompanies the description of Ottawa as a large city. The implied ability to create apartments also personifies the spiders. This personification further adds to the crowdedness the persona and her friends feel when walking through Ottawa on Canada Day, surrounded by large crowds.

In addition, I frequently shift nouns into verbs via the -ing suffix. This practice of “verbing” makes a message “shorter and snappier” and “gives a more dynamic sense to ideas” (Hird), and according to linguist Steven Pinker “is one of the processes that makes English English” (qtd. in Hird). In “Leaning Tower of,” I write “micrometring” (31). This is a call back to the noun-turned-verb “inching.” Both words indicate the increments at which something travels, but “micrometring” conveys a much slower movement, as it derives from a much smaller unit. I use it to portray the subtle but persistent and inevitable demise of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, which leans closer to the ground each year. For me, “inching” connotes the natural movement of caterpillars and worms, or the cautious approaching motion of a human or animal. Since “micrometring” is a near-impossible type of movement for a living thing, it fits the movement of the tower as

imposed by gravity. The “micrometring” process of the tower approaching the ground also calls back to other extremely slow, nature-imposed processes, such as the separation of Pangaea and the erosion of mountains. This sensation enhances the persona’s already uneasy feeling when she sits at the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa; not only does she dislike balconies, but she lacks control while she is up there – she can feel the force of something far stronger than she is exerting itself on her and her location, which affects how secure she feels and in turn influences her actions. Normally, this character would go all the way up to the highest point of the tower, just to have the full experience and the best view. However, her fear of the “micrometring” and its influence on the structural integrity of the tower eclipses this desire.

I shift an adjective into a verb in “Capri” (39), by changing “abrupt” to “abrupting.” This change indicates a quick cutting-off point from trees on cliffs to the straight drop down to the Tyrrhenian sea from the edge, which adds motion to the stillness of the landscape. Thus, “abrupting” works in tandem with the animal-related descriptors of the cliff (“dragon-scratched” and “snarling, dark doglip”) to give the landscape more life, and especially to give it a distinct, dangerous personality. The life added to the cliffside through these descriptions matches the life given to the other natural formations in the poem: the ceiling of the cave, which looks like it has eyes that watch the persona and her friends, and the water in the grotto itself, which radiates such energy that it reminds the persona and her friends of different life-charged things – a heartbeat, an underwater kingdom, a potion brewed by a powerful wizard, and lightning. In adding life to the setting, I further the persona’s awe with her surroundings and

highlight the feeling she gets of the landscape coming alive and interacting with her and her friends, just as they attempt to interact with it.

Sound words

I create many words to indicate specific sounds. Some expressions of sound remain almost the same across language families. For example, the sounds of cats, cows, and sneezing are all mimicked and transcribed in the same way from Indo-European languages to East Asian languages. On the other hand, the noises for dogs, pigs, and snoring all sound very different from language to language; the bark of a dog is represented in French as “wouf,” in Spanish as “guau,” and in Romanian as “ham” – three very different words, even though all three languages are Romance. Although there is no concrete evidence of why many of these sounds vary from language to language, “[i]t has something to do with the alchemy of humans in different times and places striving to mimic noises in the world around them, and to incorporate this mimicry into distinct linguistic systems and cultural contexts” (Friedman). These sound words are commonly known as onomatopoeias, but can also be considered echoisms, as human beings cannot vocally – or in writing – accurately produce sounds other organisms and objects make. The point of echoism is to portray a recognizable idea of sound. For example, to convey the sound of a leaking tap, English writers use “drip drop,” French writers use “plic ploc,” and German writers use “plitsch platsch.” All three languages use the plosive, as “for the most part as the ‘P’ conveys the sound of the water hitting the surface” (“Onomatopoeia in Different Languages”). Some further English examples of

echoisms include “splash”: “echoing a liquid striking something or something striking liquid” and “crunch”: “suggesting something brittle breaking into pieces” (McArthur).

An example of my own echoism is “squick,” in “Theatrical” (9) to imply the sound that a rubber shoe sole makes when rubbing against a shiny surface – something between a squish and a squeak. “Squick” is an example of a word that “resembl[es] one or more pre-existing forms... By retaining the consonants and varying the vowel, a word like *splash* can be adapted to splish, splosh, sploosh, splush” (McArthur). Phonaesthesia is also at play here, as the *sq* and *k* sounds I choose suggest similar meanings to words that have the same sequence of letters: “consonant cluster[s feature] in a series of words with similar meanings: *sl-* in sleaze, slide, slime, slip, slope, sludge, slump, slurp, slurry, suggesting downward movement and a rushing, sucking sound; *-sh* in bash, dash, crash, flash, gush, hush, rush, splash, whoosh, suggesting swift or strong movement” (McArthur). As “squick” shares similar structure with both “squish” and “squeak,” it can evoke both. I chose to create “squick” because shoes squeaking across the floor has become a clichéd expression. Also, “squick” gives more auditory accuracy to the sound of shoes across the floor – “squeak” symbolizes something higher-pitched than a shoe on the floor, such as a mouse’s voice. Furthermore, I wanted to convey the action that causes the shoe to make the noise – the sole of it being squished and dragged between the foot and the ground. By using a nonce word to convey further sensory accuracy, both auditory and physical, I aim to immerse the reader in the persona’s experience and provide sensory immediacy – something that cannot be achieved as well through worn-out, recycled phrases like “shoes squeaking across the floor.”

Conclusion

According to T.S. Eliot, each attempt to express oneself “is a wholly new start... each venture is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate” (qtd. in Hirtle 64). My own raid on the inarticulate involves creating new words as a way to remove my poetry from the constraints imposed by existing words. Through root-motivated word creation, I use existing words to try to bridge the gap between my mind and the reader’s, to portray my persona’s perceptions of the world around her, and to offer the fullest possible sensory experience within my prose poetry. Thus my nonce words, even if they only ever serve a purpose “for the nonce,” provide me with a linguistic freedom that conventional language would not afford me.

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VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: Micaela Muldoon

PLACE OF BIRTH: Windsor, ON

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1993

EDUCATION: Holy Names High School, Windsor, ON, 2011

University of Windsor, B.A.(H), Windsor, ON, 2015

(Candidate) University of Windsor, M.A., Windsor,
ON, 2018