

SEDLEY

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By

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SUPERVISORY AND EXAMINING COMMITTEE

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ABSTRACT

“Sedley” is a collection of original regionalist poetry set in a contemporary Saskatchewan town of the same name. It focuses on the people who reside in the community, the landscape that surrounds it, and the speaker’s interactions with both. The speaker grew up in the town, and has an ambivalent relationship with it: she loves aspects of the place—the Prairies, for instance— but she also wants to leave and seek out new experiences. The community itself is changing. It is evolving from a rural farming community to a commuter town. These are poems that mourn Sedley, and celebrate it.

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I am happy that versions of these poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Antigonish Review*, *Arc*, *CV2*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Echolocation*, *Grain*, *Qwerty* and *Spring*.

For my family & Ken

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
DEDICATION	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
I. Cinnamon, smoke, the sulphur spark of a match	27
A Plain Run	28
First Day Back	29
The full moon glows like a yard light	31
Ms. Douglas	32
The Divide	33
Sestina For The Party	35
The Near-Death Drive	37
Nineteen	38
The Drive Home	39
Her Own Fading Light	40
The Sky is Red	41
II. Hush of snow sending sleep	43
In Morning	44
Home	45
The Second Fall	47
For My Mother	48
We Knew	49
III. The rain fell cold and slow	51
Although That Town	52
Seventeenth Spring	53
One Way to Die in Saskatchewan	54
Only three years	56
The Garden	57
The Pearl	58
Jordan, 1975—1994	60
Graduation	61
Last Party	63
You Taught Me	64
Not A Farm	65
Rural Hangover	66
Flatlander	67

IV. Where everything reflects the electric sun	68
Sedley	69
Your Hometown	70
Ball Diamond at Midnight	71
Cat's Eye	72
That Summer	73
The First Light and The Last	74
Death, Take Me Home	75
Homecoming	76
Ms. Williams	77
Breath in August	80
Late-Night Tulip	81
1988	82
Small Town, Saskatchewan: After Farmers Spray For Grasshoppers	83
The Way Home	84
The Summer Before Grade Twelve: Stretch of Recklessness	86
Lucky	87
Sedley/2	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY	89

Introduction

I first discovered poetry—in a way that excited me, in a way that encouraged me to lay my own words on paper—as an undergraduate a few years ago at the University of Regina. Since then, almost all of my poems have dealt with my hometown, Sedley, Saskatchewan, a village of about 300 people southeast of Regina. My consuming fascination with Sedley concerned me at one point, so much so that I walked into an instructor’s office and said: “I’m worried I don’t have enough material. I feel like I’m writing the same poem over and over again.” And he said: “It’s okay, Chelsea. We all are.” I’m still writing about Sedley—its streets, its residents, the landscape that surrounds it.

Why does Sedley haunt me? I think it has to do with history—my personal history, of course, and my family’s history. In the 1890s, my great-grandfather left his father’s home, a large and beautiful stone house with a wraparound porch just outside of Montreal, and headed west with his wife to Saskatchewan to build his own home, eventually settling on a farm near Sedley. My grandfather, after a stint flying planes in WW II, also settled in Sedley. My father grew up in Sedley, in a white two-storey house on Main Street beside the local convenience store. He shared a bedroom (and a bed) with his two older brothers. His three sisters shared a bedroom (and a bed) in a room across the hall. At 16, a farmer already, he bought his first piece of land. My grandfather co-signed the loan. My father later met my mother, a schoolteacher who’d landed her first permanent, full-time teaching job at the local high school. They married and eventually had children. My brother and I are the fourth generation to know,

intimately, a town, plain and small, in southeastern Saskatchewan. And we'll likely be the last. We've moved away. All my cousins and aunts and uncles have left. My parents, too. My dad still farms in the area, but he sleeps in Regina. If I don't write a collection of poems about Sedley, I don't think anyone will.

Home

This home place is a complex one. I hope I've portrayed it as a complicated place, at once beautiful and ugly, vast and suffocating. A place the speaker loves and hates. An ambivalent place. A place full of fond memories, and painful ones, of old friends and family members, a place of first loves. It is a place that the speaker both wishes to return to and wishes never to visit again. She longs for this place. And she loathes it. This ambivalence characterizes the collection. The speaker voices these poems, not as she lived them, not as a high school student, but in retrospect, in looking back on her experiences, and from this position, tension arises. In her essay, "Locality in the Long Poem," Smaro Kamboureli suggests, in referring to Robert Kroetsch's "The Ledger" and "Seed Catalogue," that "the tension that generates the desire for place occurs when the poet no longer inhabits his place of origins" (106). This applies here, to "Sedley," too. An ambivalence is present that arises from the wealth of experiences gathered by the speaker. And now that the speaker no longer resides in her hometown, she is able to fully explore the place—what happened to her there, and how the town evolved, as she too, changed and grew older. This distance creates a gap, a certain amount of tension, worth exploring. I want the home place in this collection to be not unlike the home place in Lorna Crozier's collection, *Inventing The Hawk*—full of tension

and ambivalence.

While Crozier's collection focuses largely on the relationships within the family home, mine focuses more on what unfolds outside the home, in the community. Crozier's speaker's home life is somewhat troubled. She was raised by unhappily married parents. Her father drank too much. Her mother felt stifled in a traditional homemaker role. In her book, *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature*, Deborah Keahey writes that Crozier is "writing home from within it" (76). She also comments on the fact that many of the characters in the poems are relegated to traditional gender roles: "...women are represented as the primary home-makers, and it seems to be mainly women who suffer the cruelties of men at home—neglect, betrayal and physical abuse. Her 'home' appears as a tragic hero of sorts, attractive and appealing, yet carrying within itself the seeds of its own destruction" (84). In my own work, the majority of the tension exists beyond the relatively quiet, comfortable home base of the speaker. It arises from the characters the speaker discovers in the community—her classmates and teachers, her neighbours and boyfriend. These are people she feels deeply connected to. After all, she's shared all of her childhood and adolescent experiences with them. However, she also feels disconnected from them. She realizes that some people want to stay and build a life in the community, while she wants to move away. At times, she feels that her values differ from those of the people she spends time with. She values education and adventure over marriage and children. Still, she recognizes that the community members are complex, multifaceted. Someone can hunt and fish, and still care for animals. Someone can farm, and still acknowledge

the impact it has on the environment. And while traditional gender stereotypes exist in rural Saskatchewan communities, including Sedley—as they do elsewhere—I do not want such roles to be laid out rigidly, or explicitly, in my own work. Traditional gender roles appear in my collection, but I have tried to portray them in subtle, complex ways. It is, after all, the 2000s that the speaker is reflecting on, not the 1950s, and attitudes by that point have shifted.

The speaker in this collection feels trapped by the home place—she wants to experience more than what she has experienced in rural Saskatchewan. This is not a new concept; many female speakers and protagonists have felt this way. (I think of Del in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*). However, a layer of complexity is added to this collection through the speaker's partner. While he loves the rural lifestyle, he does not mistreat the speaker, nor is he afraid to engage in domestic duties, or carry out traditionally female roles. In "The Divide," he delivers her breakfast in bed. In "The Second Fall," the speaker recalls times when he French braided her hair, or made homemade pancake syrup. (In other poems, he goes fishing and drinks and drives tractors, so is a multifaceted persona in the collection, one that defies the traditional gender stereotypes that could dominate a collection about small-town Saskatchewan).

And while the speaker longs to experience something outside of the town, this doesn't stop her from fully experiencing childhood and adolescence in Sedley. She is close friends with her classmates. She attends social functions. She is romantically involved with someone. She appreciates what she observes and the people she interacts with—even if she knows that ultimately, this won't be the community where

she lives out the rest of her life.

Identity and Regionalism

Why regionalism? I don't think I could write an introduction to "Sedley," a collection of poetry named after a particular Saskatchewan village and ignore it. Later in the introduction, I will discuss some of the particulars that seem to show up repeatedly in criticism written about that specific bit of regionalism: Prairie literature, or even more particular, Prairie poetry. But for now, I will grapple with the wider concern: regionalism.

Regionalism is a term that is difficult to pin down (as is, I would say, terms like "Prairie writing" or "Prairie Poetry)." Who is a regionalist writer? If tomorrow, I throw away my "Sedley" collection and begin writing poems about baseball or budgies or Buddhism, am I still a regionalist writer? A Prairie writer? What is it that matters—the writer's origins? The writer's current location? The writer's subject matter?

In my own mind—it's the work's content, undeniably. Mathew Henderson, whom I cite as one of the poetic influences on the collection, is from the Maritimes and currently lives in Toronto. He, however, published a collection about working on the oil rigs in Saskatchewan and Alberta. It explores the landscape, and the people who inhabit it. Marjorie Pryse begins her essay, "Writing Out of the Gap: Regionalism, Resistance, and Relational Reading," by defining regionalism: "Regionalism connotes the local, not the national—and by no means claims to represent the 'universal.' What we can begin by agreeing on, however, is that regionalism is not a subgenre of nature writing, although in studying regionalism, we recognize that landscape is at least as much

affected by human projection and representations as some people are affected by the landscape. As a preliminary definition, we might agree that regionalism represents the deep structure of local knowledge, where geographical and literary landscape become imbued and interwoven with features of culture” (19). This definition is useful because it acknowledges the importance of place and landscape to regional writing, but reminds us that regionalist writing is not nature writing. It is a mix of everything that creates place—the natural world, the weather, the residents and their local languages.

In in his essay, “Identity Through Metaphor: An Approach to the Question of Regionalism in Canadian Literature,” Arthur Adamson emphasizes the importance of time and subjectivity to regionalism: “Regionalism is, of course, a nexus of place, time and culture. Geographical implications cannot be isolated from historical and cultural realities. Man’s habitat is subject to a moment in the flow of time we call history and to the inherited cultural subjectivity of the observer who may be a half-breed or a Ukrainian immigrant. A sense of identity is, largely, what is derived from the confluence of these things that add to regionalism. It is the feeling of one’s place in that confluence.” The speaker of “Sedley” spends her childhood and adolescence in one particular place for eighteen consecutive years. She is a grain farmer’s daughter, a descendent of Western Europeans who immigrated to Canada more than a hundred years ago. Her history and her hometown, and the experiences she has within that hometown, inevitably shape her point of view, and her sense of identity. And these identity-shaping experiences form the core of the collection.

Some critics argue that regionalism tends to describe localities in broad strokes, that it emphasizes what is common, rather than what is individual and unique. And in doing so, voices that are not part of the community's common thread are silenced. And other issues—issues of gender, race, or ethnicity—are not as thoroughly addressed, because the issue of place, or locality, has taken precedence. Frank Davey, in his essay, "Toward the Ends of Regionalism," writes, "(Janine) Brodie argues, and I would strongly agree, that both region and regionalism are social creations, the first constituting a territorial definition of geographic space based on a selection of possible differentiating criteria—a territorial definition that can change as national political policies change, and the second constituting an interpretation of social interests that gives geographic location priority over such other possible interests as gender, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and race" (2). Later in the essay, he reiterates that he doesn't agree with what regionalist literature suggests, that the landscape affects its residents more than "other possible grounds of identity" (5). I don't agree with his arguments—that we should be more focused on other creators of identity, or on ideologies, rather than geographic indicators. Region, or even the hyper-local, say a particular community—whether it's "Sedley" or Daphne Marlatt's notorious *Steveston*—are significant factors in the construction of identity. Of course, it's fine for writers, or characters, to acknowledge what else has shaped their identities, but I would argue that on an individual level, our ideologies and our identities are largely affected by *specific* experiences in *particular* places. It is in these places that we learn about and discover, as Davey points out, class, gender, sexual orientation and race. All of it is experienced in

the context of a particular space, and if that particular space is one that deeply affects the writer, or the speaker, then it is an appropriate setting, or even, an appropriate additional presence or character. If the setting is a place that inspires the writer, or the speaker, then it too is a shaper of identity and ideology. The Saskatchewan Prairies, the Rocky Mountains, the Maritime Seas, the West Coast. For some writers, these are not backgrounds. They are foundations. Or platforms. Places that inform identity and shape ideology.

The opposing viewpoint suggests that regionalist literature tends to focus on what is idiosyncratic about a particular place, and will never be writing that is of true importance. E.K. Brown writes, in his book, *On Canadian Poetry* that “regionalist art will fail because it stresses the superficial and peculiar at the expense, at least, if not to the exclusion, of the fundamental or universal” (25). Although these lines were first published more than 70 years ago, it’s worth noting that Marjorie Pryse’s definition, which I cited above, includes a mention that regionalist writing claims in no way to be universal. Of course regionalist writing focuses on the particularities of a certain place, but this does not come “at the expense of” universality. “Sedley,” I would argue, explores a variety of universal themes: birth and death, love, sex and desire, hope and despair. It’s also a “coming-of-age” collection that explores the stress and shame, and the thrill, of being young, of growing up, of being a teenager, caught in between childhood and full-fledged adulthood. It is a time of life that is “universal,” I would say, among middle-class, modern-day North Americans. It is, almost all at once, exciting and boring and devastating.

So, why regionalism? The speaker in “Sedley” feels her identity has been shaped, more than anything else, by her first eighteen years spent in that small Saskatchewan village. It is where she first stumbled on those “adult” concerns: money, sex and death. Where she learned about hate and homophobia, sexism and racism. And where she learned that there is beauty in a blank landscape.

It’s also a place that, like hundreds of other Prairie towns, will eventually fade into obscurity, and one way to preserve some small part of it, is to write about it. I don’t believe that anyone is writing about Sedley. And while “Sedley” unfolds in the past, it is the much more recent past, which is perhaps what distinguishes it from other Prairie writing. It is not 1935, or 1955, or 1965 in these poems. It’s more like 2005. People can easily leave the community to pursue post-secondary degrees, to pursue careers in distant cities. Men don’t always take over the family farm. Women don’t always marry young. In 2005, the community’s young people recognize that they can take advantage of opportunities that might not have been present for their grandparents, or maybe even their parents. They can forge new futures for themselves. They can leave Sedley.

“Sedley” is also a collection that I hope will excite other readers from southeastern Saskatchewan. I want them to see themselves, and their homes, and their experiences, through the speaker. Growing up, I read *Anne of Green Gables* but didn’t realize that literature could be set right at home in small-town Saskatchewan. In university, I discovered that poetry collections could be written about places that looked and smelled and felt like the one that I grew up in. And that excited me. The places and people I read about were familiar to me, but they were also exotic and

brand new. They were described in ways I'd never imagined, which pushed me to write about my own hometown, my own particular place on the Prairies.

But why this voice? Do I need to add another collection of Prairie poetry to the wide array of Canadian regionalist texts already available? I say, yes. The speaker's voice is an observant voice, and that is perhaps the most important aspect of any collection. And although she loves her home community, she does not look at it with only wistful nostalgia, or longing. She remembers that while she resided there, she longed to leave. She hasn't forgotten its flaws.

The Prairie: Its People and Landscapes

These poems gather images and portray scenes that permeate rural Saskatchewan life. All around there is evidence of how residents earn their living: through grain—wheat, flax, lentils and canola—and through cattle. There are tractors, combines and pick-up trucks, gravel roads, bottles of beer and cigarettes, barns with haylofts, pastures—this is starting to sound like a bad country song—cattle, horses, deer, snakes, fish, owls, rabbits, crickets and frogs. And perhaps these images and phrases are so common in music and Prairie literature, that they're clichéd. The challenge, then, is to write about them in an engaging way. Because they need to be acknowledged. A collection set in rural Saskatchewan can't ignore them. The human sphere and the natural world continually intersect in these places, these poems.

Still, I worry that these images, these scenes, have been written about 10,000 times in Prairie literature, and perhaps don't need to be written about again. In her essay, "Reassessing Prairie Realism," Alison Calder lists the characteristics of Prairie

fiction:

The land and climate are everything. The prairies exist in a permanent, drought-produced dust storm, the tedium of which is broken only by the occasional blizzard. It is always circa 1935. There are no colours and no animals, unless you count domestic livestock that freeze or smother. Human beings die natural deaths only in that their deaths are caused by nature: they freeze, suffocate, drown, burn, or are driven to suicide. There are no urban centres; the ones that do exist are immeasurably far away from the isolated farm houses where the works are set. Even where there is a town, no one speaks to another; no one has any friends. There are vicious rivalries but no politics. Sex, when it occurs, is frequently adulterous, and usually followed by death ... All of this is not to trivialize the stories themselves, which contain considerable more of interest than such a sketch allows ... However, the majority of critical articles written about these and other works of prairie realism fail to recognize both that these writings present fictionalized, not photographic, landscapes, and that the empirical conditions of life represented in those fictions no longer necessarily exist. (55)

While my collection is not circa 1935, it does, of course, mention the land and climate, the livestock, the “natural” deaths. What Calder may not acknowledge is that “the empirical conditions of life represented” do still exist. The land and climate are still everything. If a farmer fails to produce significant crop yields for one year, he’s nervous. If a farmer fails to produce significant crop yields for three years in a row, he’s likely bankrupt. What affects crop yields? It is still, above all else, the weather. Crops fail when it’s too dry. And crops fail when it’s too wet. Hail storms and unexpected frosts—these kill crops, too. And human beings still drown in grain bins and grain trucks, still drown in their vehicles, still freeze to death. It’s not common, but in rural Saskatchewan, it still happens. The land and the climate are still a significant aspect of life on the Prairies, particularly for a farming community like Sedley. This is the reason

that the landscape and the climate of the place exist so prominently in these poems; it's also why the collection is divided the way it is, into four separate sections. These sections loosely resemble the four distinct seasons of Saskatchewan. The seasons are inexorable. The temperature, the weather, the quality of the light—it's all affected by the seasons. The seasons are important to farmers. Their schedules are dictated by the seasons, and by the weather that comes with them. They're important to high school students, too. Fall means back-to-school, while summer means freedom and desire. Although summer is often the "shortest" season in Saskatchewan, it's the longest section of the collection, reflective of its significance. The profitability of the harvest depends on the summer growing season. And it's a transitional season for high school students: the gap between one grade and the next, a period of time that could mark the end of high school and the start of adulthood. It's a season that results in growth, hope and reflection in small-town, Saskatchewan. Everything is more alive in the summertime.

The seasons are omnipresent, and so is the natural world. You can ride your bike or go for a run and in seconds be out on a gravel road, alone, fully surrounded by prairie and sky. You can stand on the back deck of your childhood home and watch a summer storm roll in, or listen to a coyote's howl, or watch a flock of Canadian geese, noisily honking, land in a farmer's field for a rest after the long trip south. Still, it is not always a pristine landscape. The fields of flax and canola, though they may seem like they fit seamlessly in to the natural prairie, are methodically planted and cared for—often with chemicals that kill pests—and then eventually harvested for profit. The cattle and

horses are not wild animals. Even at night, and even far outside of town, farm lights punctuate the night. In “Small Town, Saskatchewan: After Farmers Spray for Grasshoppers,” the speaker acknowledges this tension that exists in Sedley and the surrounding area. The town is surrounded by the natural world, but not all of that world is, in fact, “natural.” The air can smell “like a body in hospital” (1) after the farmers spray insecticide. And genetically engineered crops like canola are in no way native, or a “natural” part of the landscape.

The weather, of course, is one of the elements that surrounds the community. And it can certainly be harsh, and unpredictable, even deadly, as it sways between drought, heat and thunderstorms, and the far-below freezing temperatures and blizzards of the winter months. The prairie landscape is a unique space that has captivated writers for decades. In his introduction to the book, *Writers of the Prairies*, Donald Stephens discusses this fixation with landscape:

It is a landscape that is never merely tolerated; it is loved and hated with equal intensities. People hate the bitter, piercing cold of the winter, but praise the clear blue skies and the dazzling sun on the purple-tinged banks of snow. They dislike the blowing dust and bleak landscape of August but luxuriate in the neverending sunsets and the rippled seas of grain. The pure physicality of the landscape is always with the people on the prairies, and its writers consciously and unconsciously reflect this world. (1)

Stephens suggests that the extreme weather, accentuated by a landscape that often wavers between beautiful and ugly, stirs strong, conflicting emotions in people, and that these ambivalent feelings spur prairie writers to evoke the landscape. On the other hand, Laurence Ricou, in his book *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*, argued a generation

ago that it is the land's starkness and the contrast between that which is flat, or horizontal, and that which is vertical, that transfixes prairie writers and potentially *inhibits* their writing: a man standing upright in a vast, empty landscape, perfectly at odds with his world (ix). Whatever it is that fascinates prairie writers, fascinates me, too. Nature—or some form of man-manipulated nature—and the landscape, is always right here. And of course, many rural residents—whether they be grain farmers or cattle ranchers or potash miners or oil workers—make their living, in one way or another, from the prairie. It doesn't just surround us, it sustains us.

The landscape lives in these poems, but so do the people, and their voices. There are a couple of essays by Dennis Cooley that I kept in mind as I set out to write a collection of prairie poetry: "The Eye and the Ear in Saskatchewan Poetry" and "The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry." In the first essay, Cooley splits Saskatchewan poets into two groups: the eye and the ear, the imagistic and the vernacular, "high" poetry and "low" poetry, poets who concern themselves with transcendental images, metaphors, sophisticated language, and the poets who write about the people they meet in bars, who try to capture the way people speak. At this point, I think this is a somewhat simplistic way of viewing Saskatchewan poetry. I don't think my own collection fits neatly into either category—the eye or the ear. On the one hand, I have tried to push the language, to discover new metaphors and fresh phrases. Sometimes, I pay close attention to sound and other times I try to craft clear images. On the other hand, I have also written about people I threw up next to on the way home from high school parties. Sometimes I try to articulate these people's manner of speaking. As a

Saskatchewan poet writing about a specific small town, I could not ignore the oral tradition that permeates a great deal of prairie writing. Robert Kroetsch argues that the oral tradition is one of the defining characteristics of prairie literature:

The great sub-text of prairie literature is our oral tradition. In the face of books, magazines, films and TV programs that are so often someone else, we talk to each other by, literally, talking. The visit is the great prairie cultural event. People go visiting, or they go to other events in order to visit. This accounts for the predominance of the beer parlour and the church in prairie fiction. ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" 6).

Cooley writes, in "The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry," that some may perceive dramatic transcriptions of the vernacular as a lesser form of writing: "It must be difficult, even for the curious, not to perceive vernacular poetry as a failure of imagination or intelligence. It hardly offers, it seems, the shock of metaphor or the challenge of interpretation, many of us have come to expect in 'good' poetry" (171). Including the vernacular in poetry does not make it aesthetically inferior poetry. That being said, I try to use it sparingly. A part of me—and a pretty big part, at that—*does* believe it is more engaging, more skillful and difficult, in some ways, to keep the language innovative on a descriptive front, the images startling and the metaphors spot-on, than it is to recreate patterns of speech. Patterns of speech are often "right there," so easily available to us, while fresh metaphors and images seem to require a deeper level of reflection, or concentration. The collection certainly acknowledges the prairie tradition of incorporating the vernacular, but it doesn't dwell on it.

Post-Prairie

When it comes to more recent discussions of prairie poetry, some critics say

that traditional prairie poetry, that which concerns itself with the rural home place, the rural landscape, is disappearing. In their introduction to *Post-Prairie: An Anthology of New Poetry*, Jon Paul Fiorentino and Robert Kroetsch argue that contemporary prairie poets are inhabiting more urban landscapes, that many of them no longer dwell on sky, wind and crops: “Increasingly urban, the post-prairie poem is both an aesthetic response to the homesteads of the past and a socio-economic reality which reflects the death of the family farm and the establishment of a more cosmopolitan landscape. Now there exists pothole-ridden streets, urban tenements, and images of gentrified homes” (11). I reject the idea that contemporary poets are shifting away from the rural home place. Yes, there are contemporary poets—who hail from the Prairies—who are unconcerned with capturing modern prairie life, but I would not characterize them as Prairie poets. As I mentioned earlier, Prairie poetry has more to do with the writing itself than with a poet’s birthplace. And while the traditional rural Prairie farm is not the home place for all contemporary Prairie poets, it is still the home place for some like myself—and others, Sheri Benning, for instance.

I, too, am a contemporary poet and I intend to keep the poems firmly set in southeastern rural Saskatchewan. Still, I want to capture a modern prairie place, a place in transition. I do not want to create an archetypal place, or flat characters. The traditional prairie landscape exists in these poems because Sedley is a rural community, so yes, there are gravel roads, fields and big skies. And I believe the speaker in this town is coming-of-age at a time when something—not just her own adolescence—is coming to an end. And that’s worth capturing. The town is coming to a certain sort of end. It is

a town on the brink of a drastic shift: a shift from a rural farming community to a commuter town. It is the last time dozens of farming families will live in the town. Smaller farmers are just about to sell out to larger ones. Young people are planning to leave to pursue opportunities elsewhere. The high school is about to close down.

Elegy

Many of the poems in this collection obsess over death. In “One Way to Die in Saskatchewan,” the speaker imagines drowning inside her submerged vehicle. In “Death, Take Me Home,” the speaker imagines her own death, and hopes that if she is living elsewhere when she dies, that her remains are returned to Sedley’s soil. And in “We Knew,” the speaker discusses her own (and her classmates’) awareness of death, even as teenagers, at an age when people are supposed to feel invincible, even immortal. So, death is pervasively present. However, there are also poems here that recall particular individuals. In “Nineteen,” the speaker remembers a boy who commits suicide at 19 years of age. “Jordan, 1975-1994” another elegy, highlights the experiences of a young man who freezes to death trying to walk home to Sedley after a night at the bar in the city. And “Ms. Williams” is about a 30-year-old substitute teacher who dies in a car accident on her way to her summer job. Many of these elegies focus on the death of young people, in particular—not necessarily people whom the speaker is close with, but people the speaker nonetheless identifies with due to their youth. These are the sort of deaths that don’t affect the speaker on an individual level, as much as they affect the community as a collective. In small communities, death, especially an unusual death, or the death of a young person, is mourned fiercely, and

for a long time.

This idea of collective mourning is a trait of contemporary Canadian elegies, suggests Priscilla Uppal, in her book *We Are What We Mourn*: “While an elegist might initially grieve for an individual, a father or a mother, for example, these contemporary English-Canadian elegists collectively insist that individuals are not mourned in isolation. The loss of an individual can threaten losses of identity for entire communities. Mourning ensures that ties are sustained, or even invented, not lost or ignored” (264). She states that ties are “even invented,” and that is what the speaker in these poems is doing much of the time. She is inventing ties to the people whose deaths have affected her, and the community, in some way. She admits, “I never met Jordan. He died / when I was five” (18-19). The speaker does not praise or admire the dead. Rather, she tries to recall them as they were. She realizes they are remembered so clearly because of their tragic ends. She does not glorify them, but recalls what they did: sat around bonfires, played hockey, worked at the local seed plant in the summer time. She realizes they are celebrities, of sorts, but not because of what they did in life. They are celebrated because they died tragically, and they died young.

This raises the question: are these elegies exploitative? Particularly because the speaker admits, on one occasion, that she did not personally know the person who died. She is inventing stories and memories, partially through what she has read and been told by other community members, but also through her own imagination. I would argue that these elegies are tributes, of a sort—not exploitative. The deaths written about are events that remain in the memories of community members,

regardless of how personally “close” the community members were to the victims. Catherine Owen and Nikki Reimer discuss this issue in an interview with *Lemon Hound*: both writers agree that tributes to the dead are not exploitative; they are our attempt at creating a connection with the dead. Owen states, “We are poets so that’s what we do. Write. Intentions or not. And of course we loved these people, they impacted deeply on our lives and we want to announce traces of them and their connection to us in a beautiful way that draws others to perhaps an acknowledgment and honouring of their existences. How can that be wrong? I mean are funerals / memorials a blaspheming of the dead? This is all we have.” Again, it would be a stretch to say the speaker of “Sedley” loved these people. But she is, in her own way, attempting to acknowledge their existence and the impact their existence had on a community. And in Owen’s words, how can that be wrong?

Examined through a broader lens, what the speaker is really doing throughout the collection is mourning a place and time, which is a common mourning act for contemporary English-Canadian elegists, according to Uppal. Elegies for place “provide the poet with the opportunity to connect with past and future landscapes and past and future histories, thereby constructing the individual “I” of the poet as a convergence of the collected memories of ancestors who live, or have lived, at the intersection of ‘here’ (120). In other words, the contemporary elegy concerned with place is related, in many ways, to regionalism. Regionalism concerns itself with a particular place at a particular point in time—and all of the culture, language and traditions that construct an understanding of such a place. And these elegies are also concerned with place—past

landscapes and community members who've passed away, old community myths and legends. It is a way of writing history—a unique, localized history for people and a community that might not otherwise receive its own written history.

Uppal writes that this particular sort of mourning often takes the shape of the long poem. While “Sedley” is not a long poem, it certainly shares similar characteristics. It is a sustained study, or recollection, of place. The act of mourning is a long process, one resistant to closure, and this, suggests Uppal, resembles the long poem, “thus the goals of the work of mourning, to create connections and attachments to place and to the communities past, present, and future who live there, can be made explicit in the actual motion of the long poem” (120). “Sedley” may not be a long poem, but it is a collection that acknowledges the length needed to appropriately convey a particular place, and the experiences of individuals during a certain span of time. It resists closure. And in doing so, suggests that the act of remembering, and mourning, and memorializing, a certain place, and its inhabitants, is likely never really over for the speaker—or myself. I revisit the same experiences and places; I worry that I am writing the same poem over and over. And this repetition is an act of mourning.

Although the speaker of “Sedley” was not personally close to the individuals she memorializes, she does seek to find some sort of small consolation in their deaths—not in religion, or the possibility of an afterlife—but in the recording of experience. In “Ms. Williams,” the speaker tries to recreate the August day—the smell and care-free feeling of it—before the accident: “the dust / rising behind her car like steam / off a colt as she drove to work, windows / cracked, sunlight—dime-bright—sliding in,” (77-80). Similarly,

in “Jordan, 1975-1994,” the speaker imagines what Jordan might have remembered during his last minutes alive: “the soil that soaked the lines of his father’s fingers / during harvest, the salty palms of his mother’s hands, the leather / of his baseball glove, the damp lips of his first kiss, the morning mist” (25-27). In other poems, “Nineteen,” for instance, no such “consolation” exists. Here, the poem ends with questioning, rather than closure: “what compels you / to climb ladders into rafters, then look at the loft / below and step off—longingly into darkness?” (22-24). There is no consolation, but perhaps with enough thought, the speaker can create some understanding of the death. And if nothing else, at least she can raise the event, can assert the existence of such a death, can insist that *this* happened. And *this* happened *here*. The speaker recognizes that there is never a clear moment in time when someone “gets over” the death of someone else, or forgets about them, or stops grieving them completely.

In the collection, there is also a nod to the way that we memorialize people today, the need to use language to preserve the memories of lost loved ones. Oftentimes, it is through some form of writing, whether it be an obituary, a memoriam, or a few notes that appear on a grave stone. This is especially clear in “Jordan, 1975—1994.” His mother sustains his memory by publishing a memoriam in the paper for him every year. The title implies the year of his birth and the year of his death etched on his gravestone. His picture appears in the high school yearbook—it can be assumed with a dedication printed underneath. This sort of memorializing is also summoned in the image of Jordan and his friends skating in the rink “under / flags stamped with their fathers’ names...” (11-12). In a different poem, “Nineteen,” a line near the poem’s end

states: “His obit said he suffered from a long illness.” (21). This meditation on how we memorialize, or recall the dead, in contemporary Canadian culture parallels what the speaker herself is doing—preserving the memory of lost community members in writing, and in doing so, demonstrating how death can affect the collective psyche of a small community.

Memory / Form

A number of poems in this collection are written in fixed forms. There’s a sestina, a glosa, a villanelle, a couple of pantoums, a list poem. Fixed forms, of course, feature particular elements: certain words must be repeated, certain rhymes, certain lines. There might need to be a certain number of syllables contained in a line. At the heart, though, of most fixed forms—the pantoum and the list form, for instance—is repetition. The collection also contains poems, while not actually written in a particular fixed form, mimic fixed forms through repetition—“In Morning,” “Not a Farm,” and “Ball Diamond at Midnight,” for example. The collection experiments with fixed forms and repetition for two primary reasons. One: this close attention to repetition mimics the nature of the speaker’s experiences. And two: the repetition reflects the nature of memory, the way the speaker runs scenes and aspects of her experiences in her head over and over. It’s a way for the speaker to hold on to those memories which she feels have shaped her identity—by repeating them, by presenting them in an orderly fashion, by arranging them in sound patterns that are easy to recall.

The repetition help illustrates the monotony—so the speaker’s personal experiences— that can come with being a teenager growing up in small-town

Saskatchewan: summer days and school days seemingly blend together and repeat themselves. It becomes difficult to differentiate one party from the next. In “A Plain Run,” the pantoum creates the impression of the same scenes repeating themselves. It is clear that the speaker runs along the same roads and sees the same scenes—farmers’ fields, sky, horses in pastures. The repetition also evokes the repetitive nature of life in a farming community. In “Her Own Fading Light,” the villanelle form mimics the act of farming itself. Farmers have to physically sit in a tractor for hours making laps over and over in the same field—whether they’re seeding, spraying or harvesting. And the seasons, too, are cyclical and essential to farming.

The practice of oral storytelling, through repetition, is also recalled in several poems. In “The Sky is Red,” each line begins “The Sky.” In “The Second Fall,” ten sentences begin with the word “And.” In “We Knew,” nine sentences begin with the title phrase. These poems pile on detail. And the consistent repetition of sentence beginnings suggest a method for recalling large amounts of precise, specific detail. Plus, such a pattern allows details to more easily be recalled and shared. In other words, this particular tactic recalls the oral tradition prevalent in much Prairie writing.

Poetic Influences

Sheri Benning and Mathew Henderson’s writing at times recalls that Prairie oral tradition, and is also often connected to the Saskatchewan landscape. Benning writes about the Prairie in “Russian Thistle”: “the sun behind clouds / is an opal, everything / dusted with motes of / flexing light” (10-13). Her sparse word counts, use of metaphor, and frequently startling language, are qualities I hope I’ve emulated, at times, in my

own collection. While most have my own poems use long lines and narrative, some of them, such as “One Way to Die in Saskatchewan” and “Only three years” experiment with shorter lines and fewer words.

In his collection, *The Lease*, which highlights his time spent working in the oil fields in Alberta and Saskatchewan, Henderson pays similar attention to the landscape, to images and sound. Usually the speaker discusses the landscape as something that is oppressive and harsh, unyielding, while the speaker in my collection views the landscape more often as an escape, a safe haven from the goings-on in the community. Still, I admire his passages, like this one from “Migrant,” for their sound and clear images:

haggard coyotes who lie on their backs, face the sky
like it's a mother, wait to be fed. The spotlights show moths,
a billion beating wings that make the air so thick and dark
you can't even make a fist without crushing dusty bodies. (26-29)

His vivid description appeals to me, as does the sound: “a billion beating wings” and “crushing dusty bodies.” My descriptions of place pay similar attention to both image and sound. In “The full moon glows like a yard light,” the speaker and her friends explore an old, abandoned farmhouse. It is a crumbling house, slowly returning itself to nature. In the speaker's mind, it takes on an animalistic quality and as she leaves with her friends, the group looks “back at the house / outlined in moonlight against the horizon, like a bison” (23-24). Like Benning and Henderson, and many other prairie poets before me, I have considered the landscape in this collection. These poems are full of sky, soil and dust.

Katherine Lawrence—another Prairie poet I admire—writes more about relationships than she does about a particular prairie space. In one poem, “We Should Have Named Her Blaze,” from Lawrence’s *Lying to our Mothers*, the speaker compares her teenaged daughter to a horse, and it manages to be both humorous and tender:

though I don’t recall dreams
of open prairie or craving oats
while I was pregnant
yet everything about her says horse— (3-6)

Like Lawrence (and Crozier, too), I hope I’ve written about intimate relationships frankly and clearly. I hope the work is accessible. That being said, I’ve tried to pay more attention to sound, to make the language even tighter, to come at topics slant, a little bit more often than Lawrence and Crozier do. For instance, in “Reservations,” Lawrence writes:

We all hate
home but admission
risks another truth: marriage
is crowded, suburbs are tiresome,
television is 200 channels
of noise. (7-12)

Like Lawrence, I am interested in the banality of every day Canadian middle-class life, but I hope I’ve portrayed it less prosaically. I attempted to convey dissatisfaction by showing, rather than telling, as much as possible.

Conclusion

This collection is about a small Saskatchewan town that is not unlike a number of other small Saskatchewan towns. However, it is voiced into life by a young speaker

who carefully shares her experiences—what she sees and tastes and feels. These poems do not describe a ghost town, but a place that still exists—though it's changing. These poems memorialize this place by revisiting it again and again. The repetition found in many of these poems, particularly those presented in fixed forms, resembles the repetitive nature of mourning itself. Sedley is the speaker's home place. She grieves it, and the people in it. And it is a prairie place. It is a place the speaker holds on to, and now, holds out to others, so they might experience it, too: the soil, the people, the sky.

I. Cinnamon, smoke, the sulphur spark of a match

A Plain Run

I run at dusk, over gravel and stones
glance at red waves that rip through the sky.
Under my feet a crunch like bones.
Everywhere wind, a songbird, a sigh.

Glance at red waves that rip through the sky
that wash upon flax fields, lavender sand.
Here is a wind, a songbird, a sigh.
Now the day's breath sips cold at my hand.

Red waves wash upon flax fields, lavender sand.
A doe in the ditch stands bone-still and stares
as the day's breath sips cold at my hand
and the foals in the pasture nudge at the mares.

A doe in the ditch stands bone-still and stares.
My lungs, breathless shells, tap at my chest
while the foals in the pasture nudge at the mares
who feast on the grass. They eat without rest.

My lungs, breathless shells, tap at my chest.
Under my feet a crunch like bones.
The mares feast on grass. They eat without rest.
I run at dusk, over gravel and stones.

First Day Back

And I'm walking home under a backpack stuffed
with textbooks. Emma's sister, Kate, pulls up,
says, *Get in*, and I accept, glad

for her unexpected swerve. We drive
out of town, windows down, staring
at the last sips of summer

in the bottom of beer bottles.
We smell Fall before we see it:
Cinnamon, smoke, the sulphur spark

of a match. We're already imagining bonfires
we will huddle around with kids
who live just down the highway from us.

I believe this year I will learn the curve
of someone else's body, will wrap it around
my own, perfect as a comma; will stamp some part

of myself onto someone else, permanent
as a cigarette burn—stubborn, round reminder.
But right now, we are just friends

drinking in pin-sharp daylight, a bright sky
blank as our first-day
notebooks. Ashley sits beside me

in sunglasses, cigarette thin as herself
in one hand, beer in the other, dark hair
tumbling over her shoulders. She is the smartest

and the hardest partyer, so we call her *Rebel-Nerd*.
I have known her since the day before kindergarten.
We zip through the Teddy Bear Hills, a rare place

where prairie arches her back. CDs, shiny as diamonds,
line the visors. Emma plucks one, slips it in
the stereo and a Sheryl Crow song scratches

out so we turn it up and sing,
louder and louder, our voices lying
on top of each other. Embellished air:

dust flecks reflecting light
like sequins. Home by supper,
the drive a secret I clutch

like a stolen peach, hold up to my face later
in private, run the fuzz of its skin
across my lips, then rip in.

The full moon glows like a yard light

over this house surrounded by long grass
and tall Caragana bushes. This house
is a corpse returning herself to the soil,

slowly. While we still can, we visit
again and again. Perhaps to learn about our own
rotting bodies, what they might do if left empty

on the prairies. *Watch for nails*, we say,
as if we can see well beyond the dust
floating slow as ocean plankton in the paths

of our flashlights. First you think of falling
through the wooden floor, then of the family
who lived there before: a mother washing clothes

and rocking babies, hoping for better harvests, praying
beside her bed. Now every surface is dirt-smothered
and covered in mouse shit, and despite the wind

sneaking in through glassless windows, there's a skunk smell.
And a bathtub in the middle of the kitchen. Shattered amber
glass from those who trespassed before us: last weekend

or last year, it's impossible to tell. A barn swallow's
abandoned nest, fallen feathers curled like petals
on the floor. Passing cigarettes and Pilsner,

we yip like puppies, frightened and excited. When we leave,
we bring our bottles with us, glance back at the house
outlined in moonlight against the horizon, like a bison.

Ms. Douglas

Youngest teacher at Sedley High, had planned to commute from the nearest city, but the school board said *no*. So she rented a sunburnt shack—paint hanging

off it—on the town's edge, a house that reminded her of herself, tough and thin as a tumbleweed. Everyone curious about this tall, 22-year-old nobody

had ever seen before, unmarried. It was 1980 and school had just started. The young boys couldn't stand this woman hardly older than

a teenager, telling them how to serve a volleyball. They hid dead mice in her desk, strung up Jackrabbits on her front porch. The bachelors

wanted to cut her grass, wash her car. Every time she ran, two or three stopped to offer a ride, surprised to hear she wanted the exercise. One man, drunk, knocked

on her door late Saturday night, asked if he could come in to chat about school matters, since he sat on the board. She let him in, made tea, then

sent him on his wobbly way. He slept in his car and didn't wake until next day, all the Catholic church goers dressed in lace and beige, breezing past his Cadillac,

the sun falling slow as honey through his windows. Ms. Douglas met her future husband, my future father, at the town's only tavern one afternoon after school.

(The whole place lived in mist, everything soaked in booze and smoke and stale breath). She asked her friend: *Who's that?* and nodded toward a man black-haired

and tanned. *That's my brother*, her friend said, and laughed. *Some girls think he's handsome, but honestly, don't go out with him. He's an asshole.*

The Divide

(Living Room)

Fresh moms bounce pale
babies on young

laps. Someone's bride, still wedding-gown slim, passes
out a house plan, points

a finger at the optional bathroom.
Someone asks about low
flow toilets.

Their fingers boast mini
diamonds that peek and shine

like fillings. I gulp down another whiskey
coke, glance at my wristwatch.

A boy locked on his mother's knee
coos, blows
spit bubbles my way.

*Are you still in school
or working now?* his mother asks.

(Kitchen)

The guys grab
Pilsners.

They chat about rain, the price of canola,
tractors and senior hockey.

Their amber bottles and
double-negatives clink
and echo

on the counter. The wives trickle in at half
past twelve. The babies need their cribs.
So hurry.

A cake tucked under
too much frosting waits

to be sliced. I imagine resting
my face in the sugar
soaked topping.

(Bedroom)

I wanted to leave ages
ago, but I spread anyway

like a colt. He slides his hands down
my pop-bottle body and murmurs,
you're so gorgeous.

Morning, I wake, alone,
glance at the office space

jammed in the corner. Next moment
he sits, bedside with a baby

plate, a whole wheat bagel, cream
cheese and strawberries.

I thank him. He leaves me
in bed. He has to
spray his lentils.

Sestina For The Party

I glance at my shoes covered in dirt and dust
and drink warm beer from a plastic cup.
Someone pulls up a truck blaring music.
We don't know the guys from these other towns,
where we're sure hicks and inbreds live.
(Turns out our towns are exactly the same).

Though we are different, we all dress the same.
Nervous, I make a dull rainbow in dust
with my shoe. Wonder if this is how all kids live,
then look at Jenn as she looks in her cup.
We hardly know anyone from these next-door towns.
He stands near the truck, bobs his head. Music

plays. God-and-corn-and-good-woman music
is the kind most of us like. The same
stuff our parents liked, parents raised in towns
that we cruise now, windows down, spitting dust
at anyone walking. He fills my cup,
smiles, then speaks: *You lush, you know how to live,*

don't you? I laugh and tell him that *I live
the only way I know how.* More music
plays and he takes my hand and throws his cup
on the ground. We dance the same
way. Shuffle, drag our feet through dust
and name our small towns.

They have French and Russian names, these towns.
Places our grandparents used to love and live,
before they gave birth in all of this dust.
He asks if I like the music.
I don't like country. It all sounds the same,
I say as I sip from my cup.

He turns to the keg on the truck, fills his cup,
looks for his friends from other towns.
I don't like Sedley girls. They all look the same.
He says he's kidding, says I should *live
a little.* I do dance to the music,
slide my feet on brown ground, plain dust.

I sip from my cup, share the dust
with kids from different towns. We sway to the music
the same sort of way, wondering how we should live.

The Near-Death Drive

The truck's lodged near a dugout
at an unnerving angle, like a broken wrist.
We finally have a story to polish and hold
out to our friends, bright-ripe as an apple.
This will be a whole event. Someone
will have to save us. Someone will
have to tow out the truck. But our cells
don't have service, so we walk along
back roads, our mud-soaked shoes
heavy as hooves. The closest farmyard a pinprick
of white light. Pulses throbbing,
urging us forward: Go on, go on, go on.
Northern lights waver, a silent music
we can see. And once in a while
our own laughter bursts through
like roman candles, sharp and sparkling.

Nineteen

He was found hanging in the hay loft
of his father's old barn. Not the Quonset

where they stored New Holland combines
for winter. The old barn. His father found him

wearing a plaid work shirt and
his favourite Levi's. Everyone found out

the morning after Labour Day. *I can't explain
anything today*, our English teacher said.

So we wandered the halls like zombies.
Second class: Math. Fractions. White numbers

written on the blackboard. Pictured him
written in dust hovering above stale hay bales.

Dusk pouring in. His hands tied together
with twine at the wrists while he still existed

in rising dust, evening mist. Imagined him swaying
the slowest way, slower than lovers

in rowboats, slower than pendulums,
a subtle back and forth and back

and forth and his father walking in. A classmate
walked in, back from the washroom, her face stained

with tears. His obit said he suffered from a long illness.
We wanted to know: what compels you to climb

ladders into rafters, then look at the loft below
and step off—longingly into darkness?

The Drive Home

We drive slow, our heads thick
as fog in October. Dripping into
our shit-box car like sap:

the dark. Our mothers
wait up, haloed in lamplight,
wringing hands, imagining

mangled cars and tangled bodies.
We're dizzy from the drive,
stopping every few seconds

to pee or puke or both. The sky
is drenched in stars, our smoke-breath
sparkles in the cold.

Some of us keep hope folded
in our pockets. The rest
have held it up to lighters,

watched it turn to black,
then ash. We drink beer, hold
each other's damp hands, picture

faraway days and places.
But we don't mind right here,
either, watching the dawn crawl up

slowly from her prairie grave,
as the world slides notes to us
across a vanishing night.

Her Own Fading Light

Harvest goes on despite vanishing light.
Our dads traced dark fields in hundreds of lines.
Back then I waited for you every night.

Snow geese swooped slowly in synchronized flight,
each bird distinctive and common as shrines
reflecting the sun in fast-fading light.

In the sharp blade of day, we had a fight.
You ran to cry in the shade of the pines.
Back then I waited for you every night

while you fought with wheat infected with blight.
As our dads scraped the earth in their combines.
(Harvest goes on despite vanishing light).

I once held your hand, admired the white
flesh that spread over a spray of blue veins,
back when I waited for you every night.

You did not speak as I walked out of sight
and read our dads' fields for any last signs.
Harvest goes on despite vanishing light.
Back then I waited for you every night.

The Sky is Red

The sky is lentil red.

The sky is poppy-petal red.

The sky is red as his eyes after midnight.

The sky is red as his eyes after smoking two, maybe three, joints.

The sky is the red of your first period, staining the crotch of your cotton thong in the bathroom of your best friend's house, grade ten.

The sky is red blood dampening the sepia hair of a just shot white-tailed buck in October.

The sky is red as autumn.

The sky is red as wine.

The sky is red as his lips after eating the beet salad the neighbours won't stop dropping off.

The sky is red as a robin's breast.

The sky is his red arms in the springtime after that first warm week in June working twelve-hour days under unobscured sun.

The sky is a scarlet red cow's heart displayed in a butcher's case on parchment paper.

The sky is red as Heinz ketchup.

The sky is red as Cover Girl lipstick some brave girl might've slid on before driving out to a barn party.

The sky is red as a bible cover.

The sky is red as the words that Jesus might've said.

The sky is red as the poinsettias your mother displayed in her kitchen every Christmas.

The sky is purple-red and runny, the insides of Saskatoon berry pie.

The sky is flaking red paint, peeling off of falling down barns like skin after a bad burn.

The sky is glossy red, a Ford truck, freshly washed.

The sky is red as the tent you shared with the boy you liked and your mutual friend. While you pretended to sleep, he fingered her.

The sky is red as the pen your science teacher used to write 33% at the top of your Physics test.

The sky is red as the bricks of the Wilson Centre in Sedley, where Social Services once sent girls who broke the law. They were taught by nuns. They escaped regularly. The sky is the red Bohemian beer label you scraped off with bitten-down nails.

The sky is your red tongue, thinking of something to say.
The sky is red as love and hate and humiliation.
The sky is red. The sun is setting.

II. Hush of snow sending sleep

In Morning

We live in lines now, on pale pages
where snow falls slow and steady

as sleep, softly as swan feathers.
Softly as swan feathers, snow falls slow

from a midnight-ink sky that I could dip
the tip of my pen in, write whichever ending

I choose from the last two years. The ending I choose
is the one where I drag my pen over the coral-heart curve

of your lips. We used to kiss with open eyes
and yours were a cold shade of pasture—

cattle grazing on it—in the thick mist of morning.
In the thick mist of morning, I learn this

is how you write a poem: you run your tongue over it
10,000 times. Reckless, restless, relentless.

It is an open wound, chipped tooth.
Something almost senseless.

Home

(Living)

We live in a hunk
of house, on land that seeps through
trees and leggy skies.

He comes home every
night, every nail a dust-brown
moon he scrubs away

with soap and sponge. He sighs
at limp, homemade perogies.
His mom used to roll

stiff dough for hours while
hundreds of women pinched them
into pale purses

for a mash of cheese
and bacon and potato.
I pinch, never roll.

Mornings he studies
pears, their plump swell of belly.
I tend to the toast,

touch my own flat flesh.
He dreams in wheat and John-Deere
green, hums the loose hush

of wind, the rush of
sudden rain. I recite silent
lines from travel guides.

(Dreaming)

I live in a small,
single room, a patchwork square
in this light-grey-light

apartment tower.
Strings of yellow cabs
hung with red, bright beads. People

snake through traffic stopped.
I cling to pens and scattered
loose leaf. Words swirl and spin

and gasp for life;
they click across the concrete
every New York night.

I eat slick slices
of salami-studded pies
bought from sidewalk men.

My bed holds only
the curve and sweet shampoo smell
of myself. That's fine.

I recite lines I
might set down tomorrow.
And never smell sky.

The Second Fall

happens at the theatre. We embrace and I am panicked-calm,
a mouse wrapped in a snake, my small sparrow heart rattling

its cage as I seek out your farm boy smell: grease oil dirt
lentils spoiled. I look for a husk forgotten, caught in a lock

of your hair. I want to ask about the woman behind you
because she is beautiful and staring with eyes like Lake Louise.

But my tongue is stiff, a bleached carp, plump carcass
on pebbled sand. I bend down to pick it up, trip

into the water. And you are French braiding my hair the way
your sisters taught you. And you are carving out the feathery bones

of jackfish on your counter. And you are whipping
brown sugar and flour into a soft syrup, offering me the spoon.

And you are driving your boat through a ditch the summer
all of Saskatchewan flooded and everyone thanked God

for crop insurance. And you are reading out loud to me,
your tongue stumbling. (You say *Sorry* and I say *I don't mind*

but I do a little.) And you are showing me a photograph
of your mother who died of cancer in the same hospital

you were born in, bones poking through papery sheets,
her stomach a hollow bowl you could drink from.

And you are undressing me in the middle of your cold kitchen.
And you are undressing me trembling as a rabbit caught wild

in the long grass of the graveyard near town.
(We are hidden by windows grey with frost,

pale lacy ferns pressed onto the glass.)
And you are kissing goose bumps across my collar bone.

And you are dragging me, dead-heavy and drenched,
from the lake you showed me how to fish in, back to shore.

For my Mother

Skin thin as petals, woven
with wrinkles, life's inevitable thread.

Feather-smooth once, touched
by my restless father, reckless as a twig

in a river. He left her swollen, bud
of flesh that split to give me a sip

of light, sip of life. Her hands reached down
to that torn seam of skin and felt a shock of hair

not her own. She trembled the first time
she held me. She thought I looked like my father—

eyes gold-round as chickpeas.
Her fists might clench tight as cherry pits, or lie

loose as breath. She could catch a housefly mid-flight, poke thread
through a hole smaller than an ant's eye, pinch perogies

into the plump curve of half-hearts, pull carrots
from the earth in one seamless tug.

She reminds me. We are shaky, then certain;
certain, then shaky. We love, then do not love. We do

not love, then love. We inflict pain, then feel pain; feel pain,
then inflict pain. We live, then die; die and then live.

We Knew

not to fear the night. That darkness
held us to her breast, hummed
us to sleep with crickets, coyotes, rabbits.

We knew Dani's dad drank too much—
not in a mean way, just in a soft, lost way.
Every night alone in the cold concrete

of his detached garage, clinging to a bottle
of draught in one hand, cigarette in the other,
wands he used to cast himself out of there.

We knew when we saw storm clouds,
swirl of sky over canola,
we were really seeing something.

We knew in the end we'd forgive ourselves
for the torture, times we told the whole school
Angie got her period in class, Colin put cover-up

on his acne, I looked like a rodent, all cheeks and teeth.
We knew about winter, that if you tried
to walk home full of rye and lied down—hush

of snow sending sleep, under a sparkling ceiling
of two trillion stars—you wouldn't get frostbite,
you'd die. We knew Erin's dad switched to organics

not because he cared about being green,
eating clean or anything. He couldn't pay
for the chemicals anymore, couldn't pull

in big yields, couldn't keep up. Her mother left
him for another man and Erin never forgave her,
never will. We knew that prairie could pin you

down to the ground like a graveyard cross,
so that some of us couldn't leave,
even if we wanted to. We knew, sometimes,

we loved being 13 kids living 13 years together.
Often that knowing caught in our throats
like a compliment left unsaid. We knew death

walks steadily forward, doesn't rush or get tired,
just walks endlessly, calmly. And when she eventually
heads right toward you, most are too scared to look.

III. The rain fell cold and slow

Although That Town

is cupped in prairie's soft palm, where a cluster of homes sit like seeds
at a sunflower's center, where golden crops lap at a lake of sky,

it could never be the place I remember. If I lift the green
and gold, I remember some guys said they'd hang the fucking faggot

in the grade below us. And we all tossed words—retard, queer, cunt—
as casually as we tossed baseballs after class. I see the grade eleven girl who told me,

a tender-scared thirteen, with teeth-too-big and glasses, that I was the ugliest
girl she'd seen. What's a fresh teen to do, but believe her?

Still, some moments settled smooth as cream. Nikki and I washed her Chevy
in the creek for free. Suds slid down its red sides, then floated,

drifts of shimmer-snow. And the April air still held Winter's hand,
so I sat only on stones the sun slept on. And goose bumps rose regardless.

Seventeenth Spring

You had a thing for catching baby
animals. I think you wanted to prove

*you were good, a capable farm boy, while
I was scared, a spoiled-rotten town kid.*

We saw that mama cow in the pasture
plodding behind her brown

and white baby. He still had his
newborn hair—wavy and damp. The grass

was rain-laced (or was it afterbirth?).
Rain, I'm sure of it. The sky had spread

moments earlier. A deep, dark blue, punched
out by pairs of clouds. I remember

that now. We plowed through
pasture and you walked right up

to the calf, scooped him, squeezed his hooves
together at the bottom, a brown bouquet.

The calf, fresh, one long bead
of placenta still stretched off his belly.

And everything smelled
of cattle and rain.

One Way to Die in Saskatchewan

1.

Gravel road flooded

slip-skid toward
a slough swelled
with Spring's icy

child, steel and
wintry water you
should think about
breaking glass buckles

and every sucked
breath, but don't, twelve hours

later, a hand touches you

too late, diver discovers death
already painted you

pale dress
floats thin

as a fish fin and tightly
curled snails hover

around you

like watery stars

2.

Truck plunges, you remember
the buckle the breath to break

the glass and as steel
plows you flee
ribbon-limbed

but determined
hair unfurled like drenched

petals, shudder

onto clear
hard road
as something like

pale paint stains
the water around

you too tired
to stand, pant,

suck every breath,
until a stranger stops

presses one hot hand
against your forehead.
Seems like ages since you felt

flesh, yours
or someone else's.

Only three years

eight months, twenty-
one days to go.
Wish to skim
off some part
of yourself, shed
your skin in one
smooth curve, thin
petal of flesh. Cuticles
picked into slim blood
lines, hard sharp scratch
at the back of your
throat, hope for the bell
to hit 3:30 soon, escape.

This wish hangs, tangled
as wet hair, ropey, slick
as a seal. It stings, too,
like a long breath-hold,
one length of the pool,
lonely trip in clear
chlorine.

Underneath, blue-
green glow and a drain passes,
a band-aid, grate, another drain, dropped
ear plug, lost bobby pin. All
the way to the other side
until finger tips, white-wrinkled
as bedsheets, press gently
to the concrete and you shatter
the surface, gasp, pant, chest
pressed tight against your
suit, brick-heavy and hard
as a stone fist.

And the mind
cradling you like a mother: *You're ok.*
You're ok. You're ok.

The Garden

My fingers settle.
Your lips, moth wings on Lady
Slippers. Whisper this

story full of rain.
Still your words, tumbling like leaves.
Feel it: breeze of breath.

My hand drifts across
your back, a petal on moon-
washed sky. My hand rests

across your arm, curls
of lilac, on smooth stone now
cool and slick with dew.

We are two clouds set
free from sky. I want to drink
these nights, sip them straight

from cupped palm. Find it,
the soft wave of hip, and glide,
explore it, tender

study of skin. We
want only the shape, gentle
scrape, of each other.

The Pearl

In the front yard: fuchsia
petunias. I imagine I am
the hummingbird flitting
in between thin leaves.

I imagine I am the receipt
tossed around my dust-flooded
dashboard by the wind, then sucked
out the window. (Below smooth,

youthful skin, there are ripples).
You want to pour me into a tea
cup made of cheap china,
floral web printed on it, lacy

as Valentine's Day. You will hover
above that cup until your face
is damp-warm as a washcloth
from steam. I am the wind

of spring that spreads
through the prairie like a fever,
forces everything inside.
Don't take me to your home and tie

the gingham apron strings
tight around my waist. Don't place
the towel in my hands, rest
your head in the slope between

my shoulder and my throat,
press me up against the edge
of the sink a few moments.
Show me the pickled egg in the palm

of your hand—pale-slick and
round as a pearl. Lick the skin.
It's sour. I am the sky cracked
open and the rain running down

thick as yolk. You go outside
(it's been dry) and stand in it,
even though it's freezing—
early April—and you shiver.

Jordan, 1975—1994

His graduation photo is printed at the front
of an old high school yearbook. The same photo
etched on his grave stone. With his slicked hair,

his suit and straight teeth, he looks like a teenaged CEO.
His father's name, Peter, carved after his first name.
His mother writes a memoriam for him

every year. He is dead now longer than he lived.
Tried walking home from the city bar one night.
Drunk, he lay down. A farmer found him in his field,

few days later, frozen. Eighteen. Everyone asks, *Where were his
friends?* The ones he grew up with, who scored beside him, under
flags stamped with their fathers' names, behind portrait walls of mothers

in Grade 8, spinning unsteadily on stiff, white skates. The boys
who walked him to school, teased him first time his voice
cracked, who sat laughing beside him, in bonfire light,

sucking on cigarettes whose cherry tips drooped like plump tulips
in the soft, steady heart of night. Maybe those boys left him, sick
of his lulling tongue, bittersweet breath. I never met Jordan. He died

when I was five. One theory now is that the cops took him on a starlight
tour, picked him up, slurring his steps, on a busy street, then dumped him
outside city limits. He felt cold that last night, must have. But perhaps

there was a moment when cold seeped out and earth curled
around him. And the mud-luscious scent
of her hair was everywhere, until he slipped into sleep, tasting

the soil that soaked the lines of his father's fingers
during harvest, the salty palms of his mother's hands, the leather
of his baseball glove, the damp lips of his first kiss, the morning mist.

Graduation

*Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

The Summer Day, Mary Oliver

Build house, career, right here.
New season of settlers—their wives and TVs overseas
in Pakistan or Ireland—who haven't come to seed flat land
by hand. We are too young
to know change in this place.
Promise pours into new Saskatchewan,
but we have not pondered potash. Only think of oil
if the neighbours build a pool or buy brand-new.
Thousands of jobs. More bodies than ever. More than a million.
Tell me, what else should I have done?

All we know is the price of land and lentils.
Most of us squeezed the hands of our dreams
then let go, long time ago. No dancers here.
No writers. No musicians. They are cattle dying
beside a dugout somewhere. Some already believe the best
has left us, even though we're fresh as ever, faces still smooth as spoons.
First summer out, we'll move into shacks quivering
like canola on the edge of town, clutch jobs on rigs,
the pipeline, wherever money's strewn.
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Know someday not far away, we'll all live tick-tock
ho-hum day-to-day. Some still texting high school loves
who remind us of times we lay on the hoods
of hand-me-down trucks, our summer breath thick
as whiskey, warm as grain bin dust. Nights
our sticky hands and foreheads felt like flu.
When we held the soft throb of each other's tongues
and couldn't believe how damn lucky we were
that all our parents wanted were live bodies in bed by 2:00.
Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with that new 500 horsepower Ford Raptor?
Some of us want out of new Saskatchewan—
already had enough of winter curled up
and cold, a dead foal. Some escape and answer
to bosses, others stay and answer to spouses,
sentenced to crumbling houses. New wife
changing diapers alone while the dog barks.
I ask myself: Is it enough to tend
children and wade through red fife
with your one wild and precious life?

Last Party

Mondays will be different
from now on. After thirteen years
we will return home to curl under
childhood bedsheets—old pillows

held to ears like conch
shells—one last time. At the last
party we cling, swarm like flies
around the sticky mouths

of each other, forgive what we flung
in anger in the daytime. We hold
the night folding slowly
as a fan. Grab vodka,

bitter-hot, share a j- inside
the quonset, floor stained
with spilled stories, warm
beer. *Chels, are you drunk*

*yet? No, I'm actually not even drunk,
honest to God. We are explorers
memorizing the unsteady pulse
of one another. Gentle push, sudden weight*

of hands, silky eyelids. Silently lying
to ourselves. *We will always be young.
We will always be friends.* Time
wrinkled as a fan

waves us softly away from
the sticky mouths of one
another. Thrum of night, lazy
hum, unsteady pulse of one.

You Taught Me

1.

how to pull northern pike
through that lake's glossy lips

how to tear bodies firm as fists
through her rippling skin.

You laid them in your boat's bottom,
swearing: *You dumb sonofabitch. You little dick.*

That thing is so far down. But skilled
as a seamstress you swivelled out every hook

as their strong bodies squirmed, every scale
aching for that lake to take them. Gills flared,

brilliant fans, and when you slipped them in
they took off in one smooth ribbon swerve.

Your hands sliced and bleeding
from teeth and fishing line.

2.

Up north a pike gulped my hook,
thin curl of blade wrapped up

in gut. Soaked in lake spit
he almost slipped through my fingers.

I tried to coax it out quick as he twisted,
slim and strong as a wrist, fins thin-stiff

as feathers. But soon blood swirled
over my skin his scales so I tugged out

the hook in three quick rips and threw him in.
His body bobbed, up and down in his own crimson cloud.

That morning full of fog and the rain fell cold
and slow. I shivered pulled up anchor pictured you.

Not a Farm

He was the first boy she liked. He called her pretty
funny and that was the first time she heard a boy

call someone he liked something other than pretty.
He wanted something for them: a far-away farm

and a barn for her horse. That's it. She wanted—
not a farm or a barn far away from the light of the city.

Not a horse grazing under a sky soaked in star light.
(For the first time she sleeps in the city under an orange-fog

sky that hovers above houses at night. He sleeps
in a hundred-year-old house under the soft wing

of night). She drives to his yard in her mind,
where he drives around in a John Deere tractor,

cuts grass, hundreds of laps. He has a few more wrinkles
around his eyes. A few, that's it. She walks across

his yard in the rain, walks over wrinkled soil. In her mind
he and this soil are just the same as the summer she left.

His eyes are the same hazel: a horse's mouth after grazing
on pasture grass. Pasture grass after rain: hazel, grazing, just the same.

Rural Hangover

I picture myself sometimes, slim
as I was then, walking in, stripping

down, lying down in that dirt-morning
light, hungover, and nausea tucked

under my mind like an old note.
I didn't mind those mornings: click

of dried contacts, tumbleweed
stomach, and the sun pouring

through bedroom windows
slowly. Before the farmhouse,

you lived in a trailer
with walls so thin I swear

you could see through them.
Hardly a yard, just pasture, and cattle

peering in, curious as trick-or-treaters.
You woke early to work: feed cows,

move bales, study seed openers. The rhythm
of heavy equipment shushing around

in the background, behind an alarm clock
song, low volume. Held between that

scribble of tin, we loved each other
while dust fell around us, silver

and squinting and gently—leftover
confetti, dead and then reanimated again.

Flatlander

Before seeding, but after the snow melts
you run the gravel road that leads you
out of town. Pencil-lead sky:
gold stubble glows sharp
against the grey. The way the land is.
You watch rain hurl itself toward earth
in the distance. You watch it reach you.
It covers and reveals like a journal like a veil.
Silence surrounds it. Everything slows
holds its breath for a moment:
you the geese the frogs. And you run
through it run through until
your white bra shows up under
your white shirt. Hope nobody
drives by. (Canola can drown
even with its yellow heads above ground).
Here there is blank space.
No rivers no lakes no trees just dugouts one single
thin creek. The sky writes something
down pours itself into the lushest ground
it can find. When everything dries out again
you'll make sparrow tracks in the dust
with a stick smooth over your own footprints
with the palm of your hand.
Hide yourself from this
vastness
flat land.

IV. Where everything reflects the electric sun

Sedley

Thin slip of earth buried
under a July sky so clear-blue
you could bathe in it. But slim

surfaces deceive. Beneath
is damp, black soil, the kind
farmers fall to their knees for.

They cradle it in their palms,
inhale the scent of its velvety flesh.
It's the type of soil a man claws at

with his bare hands
after three broke, hungry years
to find one tiny seed—no larger

than a pearl—with one green, thin curl
bursting from it, and cries.
It's a place where everything reflects

the electric sun and some people
hide their eyes from it.
This is where I'm from.

This place,

home to a few hundred people
who know what it means to bet everything
on sun and rain and sky.

Your Hometown

That childhood quilt, threadbare
and faded, from the rub of your own body.
The bones of your first cat—buried under a fir tree
in the farmyard your father still regrets selling.
Prairie stretched thin as an apron.
Land licked clean as a plate.
Fields wide and wavering
as linen on your mother's clothesline.
Your first sip of seven-up mixed
with vodka in a plastic pop bottle.
The first time you got drunk, one midnight
in June, at the baseball diamond, with girls
you once sat next to, sounding out words.
A snowy owl's long, slow swoop—
a vole in his talons.
A frog folded up in the palm
of your hands like a poplar leaf,
or an olive heart, softly beating.
But it was more than firsts, more
than moments where wild
life, bright and sudden, stumbled in.
It was where you felt the firm tug
of tomorrow like a fish
on the end of the line.

Ball Diamond at Midnight

We sit in the diamond in the dark,
run fingers over the red braids
of baseballs as if they are braille.
Glance at our nails painted
Sally Hansen teal, wait

for the empty days ahead
to fill. Pass plastic bottles full
of vodka, try not to spill, recall
the time Cody read out loud:
"chicken Co-op" instead of coop.

The nights to come a certain hum
in the distance. Discuss Mr. Duffy,
what makes him sexy. (He's a poor man's
Wayne Gretzky). Wait for the empty days
ahead to fill. We read each other better

than the red braids of baseballs:
know who shoplifts, who emails shots
of herself topless to a boy in grade eleven,
who wears air-filled bras, terrified
someone will brush up against her.

A certain hum in the distance.
The nights to come will drain the wild
from us, leave us stunned that the nights
we sat in the diamond slipped away
quick as deer in wheat fields in the dark.

Cat's Eye

When we lived together, each day dragged
wide as a wishbone. Cow-eyed, I survived,
cracked into apples for fun, just to feel

something tender bend, something ripe burst.
Scent of lunch: spaghetti, meat sauce,
lemon dish liquid on fingertips. My skin

pale-smooth, sliver of soap left behind.
Your skin stained bronze. And some days rain,
clear as cat's eye marbles, nestled in the blush

of peonies, each rain-braided petal reflecting
my whole life back at me. We hid
from rain in the bar where boys hoping

to inherit the family farm wished on the freckles
of nineteen-year-old girls sipping hard iced teas,
the ones who last year sat on Co-op steps drinking

Coke. Three a.m. we emerged to wisps of rain, wet
smoke uncoiling from the street. The air, damp
as a cherry, sweet as the mouth of a past love.

That Summer

1.

He builds a doll house for the one
he met at a grade eight dance. The one with big eyes

blonde hair bow-tie waist nipped in neat. She wants a kitchen
with bread-and-baby-powder smells plush cheeks to pluck

in her own hands, a diamond dot, shiny eye to stare up at her
always. Morning coffee with other wives

and a dust-flecked husband, handsome, whose hands
hold her but also seeds and soft soil.

2.

I'm writing this poem for you. I'm pouring
rain into it. That day we huddled on one side

of your couch and cried. Rain moseyed down
the panes, glowed in grass, hung lights

in poplars. It ripped through roads, flooded farm
lanes. That rain-soaked summer, our dads swore more than usual,

my last summer home. You begged me to stay.
But I was too scared of sky.

The First Light and The Last*

They gripped brand-new life in strong, small fists.
Slipped in, like pickerel, all eyes and slick
lips, tasting her skin in quick small sips.

First drink: warm and thick,
not as warm as the womb, but they liked it.
First glimpse: her long, blonde hair, her skin

soft as a blossom. She raised them all
in a farm house, long forgotten now,
on a small plot of land not near any water.

One of those babies was my father's father,
a man who flew planes until he grew wheat.
He gripped life tight in sinewy fists, until the last

fluorescent- lit minute when, I hope, he forgot
the green glow of the hospital, and thought
of the first light: the farmhouse washed white,

the crabapples, pink and ripe and right outside;
casting shadows on her bedroom wall, dappled
as an Appaloosa. In that light, he slipped in, gripped

brand-new life in strong, small fists,
lapped at her skin, tasted his new world,
bright as a silver fish: in quick small sips.

*This poem is inspired by Laisha Rosnau's "The Girls Are Sleeping" and repeats its phrase, "in quick small sips"

Death, Take Me Home

When death finds me, I hope I'm standing
under a summer sky split open
the way it does sometimes on the prairie in July:

mounds of clouds on one side, the navy
ripples of a storm on the other. Somewhere the frown
of a rainbow, a lick of sun. I hope death finds me

under that sky, same one I was born under, the one
that hovers just above land, the one that looks
earth in the eye, softly strokes her cheek and says,

I'm not going anywhere. And if I'm not
under that sky, I hope I have a child who flies
to where I've spent my last years and flies

my ashes home, places them in the dirt of that
small Saskatchewan village in the same soil
that holds the bones of my oldest family members—

stubborn, hard-working farmers, ex-Quebecers—
the soil that gave my fathers everything. Food,
cash and home. The soil that took everything

from my fathers. Time, cash and home. When death
finds me, I hope I can follow him confidently into
the dark and say *I walked always where I wanted,
even if I was afraid, even if I was alone.*

Homecoming

My mother calls the Sedley Hotel, crumbled hunk of bar that sits on town's rim, bloated as marshmallow. She asks for my father.

It is August 20th 1988 and the land is dry and pale as an acorn. Never a cloud, not even a wrinkle of one. Every night

is the same and tonight is no exception: starry, cloudless, full moon radiant as a flame. Barmaid says he's not there

(that he told her to say that) and hangs up. She scratches her striped belly swell, second beating heart. My foot stuck

into it like a cookie cutter. My parents' house is new: beige paint and plush peach carpet. Crickets cry out in the concrete

basement. Electric fan shakes its head "no" over and over, slowly, in one corner of the kitchen. She waddles out to the year-old Camaro

(horrible on gravel; she rolled it driving 40 clicks an hour) she'll be forced to sell once I'm here. Drives, windows all the way

down to let in the foggy breath of animals, steady bug lullaby. Strolls in, confident as a coyote, belly sticks out way past her jean jacket, belly button

pops through her tee shirt. *You—pointing at my father—get your ass out of that chair right now. Baby's coming. Smarten up. I'll drive.*

Ms. Williams

August morning, she lies
crumpled as a sheet
in a grassy ditch between
gravel and canola.
The two boys, both 15, hit her

on their way to work.
Sedley's first responders
try to save her, CPR, mouth-
to-mouth. But it is not a day
for saving. They ignore

her quickly cooling skin, the dirt
and the flies. These grown men:
sweat, dust, watery eyes.
Her shirt torn off and

farmers stopping to help
or gawk. Scent of pennies
mixed in with late-summer
sun and eventually the moment

when Benjamin comes. He dives down
to her, holds up her heavy head
and wails for his wife, her life

stopped at 30 by steel.
He shakes her, shakes her,
shakes her, as if it might
wake her. Cries in that rare,

animal way. That rain fills
his stomach and
his throat and his mouth
and his eyes until he can barely
move, his body sloshing.

As he cries, he prays
her eyes open.

The twins huddled
to the side, not able to look
at this woman who months earlier
taught them school.

They know this
will be one of those moments,
a stone they place carefully
in their pockets, carry with them
every day. A small stone that rubs
against their bodies always; a small
stone, smooth and cool.

One they will touch often, before they fall
asleep and again when they wake up.
They will feel it when they walk across
the stage at graduation, on first dates,
at weddings, and at funerals. They will

feel the stone in the grocery store, in the car,
at the doctor's office, as they cradle
their first child.

When my dad calls to tell me
about Ms. Williams, I am standing
on our back deck
in a two-piece swimsuit.

It has been the most delicious
summer. I have held it to my lips
like watermelon and sucked.

About to enter Grade 12 and I have a crush
on someone. We've touched and kissed and
for the first time I feel like my life
is as good as the movies. I feel pretty-jittery-
tingly all the time and want only
for him to hold me.

I look out past the fields, shimmery
skins, whispering to each other.

Although the prairie is vast
and bare as birth, it has its own way
of obscuring. I can't see the accident.

Kara knew one day would be her last,
but she couldn't have predicted that
August day would be it, the sky dragging
its fingers across the spine of the prairies,
over every ridge, every bump, the dust

rising behind her car like steam
off a colt as she drove to work, windows
cracked, sunlight—dime-bright—sliding in,

radio singing hits, cherry air freshener swinging
and summer so ripe she could taste it, the salt
and the dirt and the heat of it. No school, no students,

nobody's mother, just a job at the seed plant
to keep her and her husband in groceries
until the fall.

Kara Luanne Williams. April 8, 1975—August 5, 2005.

Breath in August

Side by side in the box of the old Ford
you plan to trade in, we lie under blankets
with cherry whiskey and each other.
Your hair's covered in dust

and I taste the Saskatoon berries
you ate under a cloudless blue
moment this afternoon. Here: spilled lentils,
crickets, grasshoppers, damp. The fields are hard

and black as horse hooves, clear as breath
in August. The night is scraped bare
for us. We talk. You will not leave
the farm. One day it's yours. I wonder

if I should stay home, learn to cook, and you say: *No,*
I've seen you happy here, but never seen you content.
Here: spilled lust, limbs, velvet breath, wet.
And some faraway train that rips through night,

bright-sharp as a knife. Like a comet born
in a shock of light, it moves quickly and slowly
at the same time, then disappears—a body
in a coffin of soft soil, a dazzling corpse.

Late-Night Tulip

His face felt like a crop sown in silk dirt—
sharp stubble on freckled skin.
He was farmer-shy. I was the flirt.
He was thick, not fat. I was plain, wisp-thin.

Sharp stubble on freckled skin,
I felt it one day when I leaned in close.
I saw him bottle-feed a black, too-thin
calf to stop the gun shot, the lethal dose.

I felt it one day when I leaned in close.
We lay side-by-side in the bed of his Ford.
We listened for a gun shot, the lethal dose.
To keep him close, I pretended to be bored.

We lay side-by-side in the bed of his Ford,
I touched his mouth. Like a late-night tulip, it stayed
softly closed. To keep him I pretended to be bored.
He ran his hand down the ripple of my braid.

I touched his mouth. Like a late-night tulip, it stayed
softly closed. I smiled. I was after all, the flirt.
With a seed of shyness, he touched the ripple of my braid.
His face felt like a crop sown in silk dirt.

1988

"...southern Saskatchewan received only 50% of normal precipitation and recorded one of its hottest summers ever...the 1986-88 drought also triggered staggering losses (eg., a \$4 billion drop in grain exports) to Canadian agriculture." (Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan)

The summer I am born, the soil splits
wide open: chapped as winter lips,
a faded mosaic, dirt quilt. Sun

sucks up dugouts, ditches, creeks.
Calves collapse and coyotes
tear flesh from the bodies.

There is neither rain nor money.
Mothers go back to work.
Lawyers drive down farm lanes

through a greasy heat you can see,
demanding land and signatures
from men with tanned, cracked faces.

The sun can be hungry, but you can't imagine
answering to anyone else. You know one day
she'll lead you out to a field so gold-soft,

you'll worry it's a mirage until you brush
your hands over braided heads
and remember wind mixed with wheat

sounds like whispering and rain. But that summer
of drought, the sun swells bright, a poisonous bloom
in a sky you wish you could tip to your lips and drink from.

Small Town, Saskatchewan: After Farmers Spray For Grasshoppers

The air smells like a body in a hospital:
sweat and heavy breath, medicine
and toxins. The fields are scrubbed
clean, gleaming. Your father hates

gloves and masks, and when
he arrives home for beef stew,
he walks into the bathroom first
and vomits. Insecticide is designed

to dull the hearts of living things.
Town council tore down
the seed plant that used
to greet people on the outskirts,

sold the land to a man who
opened a salvage yard. The school
board closed the high school in '08,
too few students. New farmers:

an ex-Calgarian, a nostalgic dot-com
millionaire, and a man backed
by Chinese billionaires. (Most couples
retired to double-wide trailers in Arizona).

A coyote slips into a canola field.
The sulphur flowers swallow him.
Only canola and sky are left behind.
And the thin line separating them.

The Way Home

Once we found a robin's nest on a grain truck.
I held one of the eggs, marvelling at pale blue
on peach palm, its plumpness—the way it hid
small, steady hearts—its gentle curve.

Sometimes we watched a storm drag its feet through a pasture
full of black cattle, stirring up a watery broth
of thunder and rain, raspberries, crushed clover,
clouds. Sometimes we stood in it and back in the truck,
you plucked rain from my eyelashes.

When you stumble on first love, you have a feeling
it will be warm and fleeting as Saskatchewan
summer, wide as the hips of a prairie-blue sky.
What you don't know is that once it ends, it doesn't
leave, but follows just behind. Sometimes you forget
it's there, then stop, look over your shoulder.

Together, we entered a dark barn. Streams of light hung
in the rafters between the soft conversation of pigeons.
We watched a tabby lap water from a margarine tub,
sweep it up with her freckled-petal tongue.

When you find it, you know it's fragile as frost
at dawn in August. So you carry it
like a dandelion blossom, shield it
from the wind and your own breath.
When it ends, it's as if lentils have spilled
inside a truck. At first, they litter the floor
like fish scales. But you pick them up. Years later,
you drop a coin, dig around on the mat and
grab something: a lentil leftover from the spill.

We stroked the noses of your neighbours' horses.
Sucked up the salty-sweet musk of summer: hay, dust, sweat.
Yanked up grass and let them eat it from our hands,
their mouths green and foamy with it, like the skin of a marsh.

It follows like a familiar horse: head low, slow, ears forward. It doesn't charge or rear up, just plods behind, trusting you know the way home.

The Summer Before Grade Twelve: Stretch of Recklessness

We started to covet unobstructed
sky opened wide as a bible
and wind slithering. In love with the lull
of Saskatchewan summer, a ballad

of grasshoppers and boreal chorus frogs.
We didn't say so, but we hoped a stretch
of recklessness still lay ahead. The catch:
some of us already sensed our epilogues.

August, we lay in wheatgrass and junegrass
when some still believed in outsmarting death
and crickets confessed without stopping for breath.
Moonless sky and pewter stars stood still as glass

in our mothers' coffee tables. First dew
dampened the grass and our hand-me-down shirts
while we studied the dark on the outskirts
of town, drinking Boh until 2 a.m. curfew.

It seemed like there were always more Augusts
until the last one arrived, wide-eyed
as a burrowing owl, the bird they've tried
to save from disappearing into dust.

Lucky

Electric webs stretched across
the night like frogs' feet.
Rain fell thick and sleek
as fur pelts. It was August
and we were driving back
to your farmhouse
from a wedding, a school gym
reception: basketball nets
draped in white Christmas lights.

We knew it was cliché—
at least I did—but we pulled over
anyway to have sex in the backseat
of the F-350 you were still
making payments on. Leather seats,
diesel fuel, floor mats covered
in dust and dog hair. A film
of our own breath on the windows.

It's not often you feel lucky
to be from Saskatchewan, but
I think that night we did.
Poplar branch canopy overhead.
Steady thundercloud pulse—
you could press your hands
against the glass and read it.
You left the interior humidity
to take a piss in the storm.
Your brown hair stood straight up
in the gale, and it felt good to laugh
in that atmosphere, chaotic
and static, like the one long pause
before the groom lifts the veil.

Sedley/2

Sometimes you drive down
Highway 33, the pin-straight length
of pavement that runs past

a town held in the hands
of gravel and flax flowers.
That town lures you,

covers your face
with the ether cloth.
It's a biologist pushing pins

straight through silk wings.
It's a meteorologist studying
garter-snake wind

for a few seconds
before it slips away
quickly, cutting a path

through sun-dappled
grass. Was it only
a vast sky, a handful

of people you knew?
A bit of earth
thin and essential

as blood,
as breath?

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