



*write
across*

An
Anthology of
Emerging Writers

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Curators

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Write Across Canada

An Anthology of Emerging Writers

Curated by
Joseph Kertes
&
Geoffrey Taylor

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British Columbia

Memories from Milk Crates

Miles Steyn

When I think of mangoes I think of my father who thinks of my sister when he thinks of mangoes. It is hard to think of anything else in Durban, South Africa, where teens sell Kents and Zills and Titan Tommies from milk crates on the highway shoulder and at every exit.

In summer, the humidity can ripen mangoes in an afternoon. Neglected on the kitchen counter, they rot by morning. And so, when Taylor and I were young, Dad would buy only one mango at a time and return before breakfast to boast about his find, a specimen so heavy it must have dropped from the tree by itself. There was always no mango bigger or sweeter in the world—proof, he'd claim, that Africa is the Cradle of Humankind and Everything Else.

Then he'd leave us to monitor his latest pick. We would watch it blush and freckle under the veranda's shade, and fetch him once we'd declared it ready. We stepped into bathing suits still cool from yesterday's swim and prepared our backyard pool for the Eucharist, using the netted skimmer like a thurible to cleanse the water of sunken leaves and drowned dragonflies. Dad would anoint our noses with zinc and consecrate the mango in a chlorine bath.

He was dexterous with his knife. He'd carve the skin from the flesh, snatch the first leathery strap with his teeth, let Taylor take the second piece balanced between his thumb and the blade, and then measure an equal cut for me. One for him, one for her, one for me. We'd follow that order down to the hairy pip, which Dad would then hurl into the deep end and race us for the last few resinous licks.

I'd keep my head down and kick like hell in the direction I thought it landed. Often, by the time I came up for air and

rubbed the sting from my eyes to search for what was already gone, Taylor would be seated on the lip of the deep end, juice slipping down her wrists.

I was consoled by the fact of tomorrow: there would be another race, another mango.

Tomorrow came and then it didn't. We immigrated to Canada and settled in a tiny townhouse on the hem of East Vancouver, where the three of us shared the occasional mango over the kitchen sink.

Tomorrow came and then it disappeared altogether. Taylor died making a left turn onto the road that would have brought her home, and Dad hasn't browsed a produce aisle since.

When I think of mangoes I think of my father who thinks of my sister when he thinks of mangoes. Last summer I could think of nothing else when we returned to Durban without Taylor for the first time, drove by the teens selling Kents and Zills and Titan Tommies on the roadside.

But Dad didn't pull over to sort through the waxy pyramids for a mango with deceptive heft and a slight rise at its stem and a little give under his palm and skin that wrinkled at the pressure of his thumb because he believed every touch could alter it irrevocably—another scratch, another bruise, each time drawing further from the perfect fruit.

He moved on, switched lanes, put the teens selling memories from milk crates in his rear-view mirror. He said the mangoes would be sweeter next month. He said we'd never finish one, just the two of us. He said fine, that maybe we could try tomorrow.

Granny Connor Kerr

“I hear you, my boy.” My grandmother’s face is in every notokesiw that sits outside the liquor stores that run up and down Whyte Avenue. Her laugh is in every ask for spare change from the mooniyaw walking past her. Her bones and blood are in every blade of grass, every leaf and needle, every speck of dirt, every drop of rain. Her voice is in the mufflers of the motorcycles and the laughter of the drunk university students. Her footsteps shuffle back and forth across the land where her ancestors were born. The concrete boxes of bars, restaurants, pawn shops, liquor stores, clothing stores, cheap trinket stores, and vintage stores where she ended up.

She got her news from eavesdropping on the conversations of smokers and people drinking beer on patios. She had become invisible to their eyes, and they stared right through her. When she didn’t understand their words, she used her imagination to fill in the blanks. To her, there was no difference between the importance of national politics and teen-girl drama. I would sit beside her on the bench outside the karaoke lounge, chain-smoking borrowed cigarettes and talking.

“Did you hear that Andrew and Megan hooked up last night and she forgot her boyfriend’s hoodie in Andrew’s room?”

“Namoya, Granny. Not that one.”

“What about Obama being a Jew?”

“What?”

“Pfft. You’re out of it, my boy.”

When they were young, her sisters would get her to buy the booze. “You’re the white one,” they’d chant in unison, “you don’t get in any trouble.” And she’d put on her reddest lipstick, a fake wedding ring, and her nicest dress to wander over to the liquor store and pick up some cheap wine. Her mother

often said to her, “You’re lucky. You can pass. Your sisters, now, they’re in trouble.”

She needed the drink to stop the shake. She shook so bad she could no longer place the tiny red, blue, and white beads on her needle without it. The drop-in centre said No Booze, Drugs, or Weapons on the door, but she needed a nip to be able to bead. And the old man who ran the program didn’t care. That sign was for the young people, or the ones who screamed in voices, not the old ladies from the avenue.

In the summers she slept behind the old brick public library building or under the Mill Creek bridge. She had this big old blanket, red faded to orange, with a bison skull on it. The blanket never left her side, and even when she was asking for change she’d use it to cover her lap properly. She told me that when she died I should throw her in the river, because she wanted to see her cousin, who had moved to Prince Albert, one last time. The other day a young woman shuffled by me with the blanket on her shoulders. I thought I heard her whisper, “I hear you, my boy.”

Alberta

Jeannette's Window

Matthew James Weigel

When the ship that carried Jeannette Villepreux-Power's collections, records, and equipment sank off the coast of France in 1848, her lifework was returned to the sea. From that time on, she no longer engaged in scientific research.

I invented the aquarium in 1832.

It was just a small box made of glass, but when I poured in ocean water and it caught the sun, my heart was filled with light. Before the water brought this magic, air alone had transmitted these rays and the light accentuated the box's emptiness. Water caught the rays and bounced them throughout the room. I was uplifted by a liquid beauty, a little glowing box of water. A ripple of the water's shadow moved across my dress as though I were in the throes of dance while standing still. Compelled by the joy of light and ocean that I felt within me, I took up this signal, and my feet and body moved in dance.

My youth was far away, and I thought over my journey. Home was the greenery of Juillac and its cool-water creeks, where I would rest my feet on warm afternoons. I had spent so many cheerful days in exploration, turning over rocks to look for hidden creatures, searching the fresh and flowing streams for pearl-bearing mussels. I was eighteen when I left Juillac and walked the 450 kilometres to Paris. Juillac's trees and gorges were so different from the tall buildings and narrow streets of the capital, but the complexities of society life interested me in the same manner as the forest. In Paris, I made dresses, embroidering with pearls that caught the light as the ladies danced. My skills caught attentions, and I was tasked with producing the wedding gown of Princess Caroline. Greater

attentions gathered, and soon after, James and I were married and making a new home for ourselves in Sicily.

There I felt an overflowing of love for the sparkling ocean, and longed to experience it more fully. This shore held long-limbed scarlet sea stars, pink sponges, and flitting fish of orange and blue. My fascination with mussels and how they formed their pearls was amplified at the sight of the elegant spiral case of the argonaut. This clever octopus carried a secret in its shell, and I was drawn to investigate. The aquarium let me set foot beneath the sea without taking a single step.

All the stages of a life are a wonder. Our entire path contributes to our development. When I stood in front of that first aquarium, I was struck with this notion, that I was precisely where I needed to be. I felt illuminated, like some specimen beneath a microscope, and I saw myself and the path that put me there. This new device allowed me to see all the stages of the argonaut's life, how its delicate shell progressed from a grain's weight to its adult size. In this discovery, I formed my life of science.

The aquarium's waterlight sent vibrations in a tingle through my extremities. A warmth filled my core. My ears burned. The roots of my hair shivered in a path along my scalp, down my neck, and around my sides to curl in turbulence within my belly. The luminosity of the natural world felt expansive, felt as great as the sea. Warmed by this light, I wondered if this may have been as Newton felt, as Galileo felt. The glass of my aquarium, through which I was the first to see the argonaut construct its shell, was like the prism that splits the sunlight to show us the colours of its composition. Or the fine lenses that brought the moons of Jupiter within our view.

It was not just a small box made of glass: it was a window.

I saw inside the sea and in the rivers of Sicily. I saw how these taxed rivers could be made whole again. If I could rear the paper nautilus for research, what might local industry do

for native fish and crustaceans? The warmth I felt became a cooling shiver when I thought upon what good might be accomplished through my invention.

I corresponded regularly with all the European academies on these subjects, as there is a considerable demand for knowledge. At London I saw the Regent's Park fish house, earliest of the public displays now common throughout the continent. I am overjoyed to see such oceanic passions in the public brought about by the practice. Indeed, it is now quite fashionable for aquariums to be kept in the home, and much trade has developed in support of this habit.

But the fashions of London and Paris appeared much smaller to me since my world became the sea. The streets were not the crowded rock pools of searching fish and scuttling hermit crabs. The parks were not the shore.

James and I abandoned Paris when we received word of the approaching Prussian army. With little hesitation I knew my path was finally bringing me home. Not to Sicily, where I knew the sea would be unbearable in its reminder of my losses, but to Juillac.

It is winter. I recall those hot Sicilian days and expansive thoughts of future study, but these recollections bring a sadness. I may still write and speak of science, but I no longer pursue those broader thoughts. A winter in the hills will suit, and spring is always so exquisite here, a lovely green cut through by cooling streams. Out the window now it is cloudy, and I see only falling snow through a hazy light. The cold tightens the skin of my face. My body feels small and heavy. But soon the frost will be melted, and the light will warm again.

That January in 1871, Jeannette died in Juillac, France.

Saskatchewan

Invocation

Kate Spencer

you are missing
from my first bedroom—
yellow, bright beside shaky

and ancient train tracks. you are missing,
vanished from the sunny pantry,
vanilla and sugar cubes left unattended.

you are missing. from each recipe
card i try to conjure your laugh,
but you are missing still.

from photos—the first christmas
after the hospital, and all our April
birthdays—you are missing.

from the cedar-lined chest
still soaked in your smell, half-
full of our things, you are

missing. the letters signed
your name, now strange

syllables in black ink.