



*Subduction Zone*

# *Subduction Zone*

*Emily McGiffin*

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No pidamos milagros, no pidamos que se interese por el bien del país quien viene como extranjero para hacer su fortuna y marcharse después.

— JOSÉ RIZAL

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# Postcards from the Supply Chain

Et puisque vous parlez d'usines et d'industries, ne voyez-vous pas, hystérique, en plein coeur de nos forêts ou de nos brousses, crachant ses escarbilles, la formidable usine, mais à larbins, la prodigieuse mécanisation, mais de l'homme, le gigantesque viol de ce que notre humanité de spoliés a su encore préserver d'intime, d'intact, de non souillé, la machine, oui, jamais vue la machine mais à écraser, à broyer, à abrutir les peuples?

— AIMÉ CÉSAIRE



## *Subduction Zone*

On the sidewalk, a school of new bicycles  
gleam like shiner sea perch. You've stepped in  
to buy a pump or a tire. It is April. The sun  
flutters hopefully behind the passing weather.

Darwin waits with me. Fiddling with the brakes  
on a blue Norco road bike, he mentions again  
that species evolve. Chuck! what good  
does that do us now? We've argued this point

already. Remember the gas flares, Terminator gene,  
Dolly, the imperatives of commerce. He nods,  
slowly, and we gaze out at the thick city, an ocean  
buoying exquisite glass diatoms, tiny

sea butterflies winging through its glinting  
blue. I should have been frantic, there  
at the edge of a fault, the Marianas  
trench. But how could I know?

Darwin, too, was blinded by the day, its varieties  
of intricate machines. I couldn't guess  
how it would haunt me, the ocean rolling on  
and all of us swimming out into it.

## *Nine Meditations on Edward Burtynsky*

### **GREAT SPHINX**

Broad headdress fanned 'round the regal brow,  
It gazes inland to Gangaridai's ancient cities,  
Green hills smouldering in the day's last heat.

Beneath its lofty, rusted sternum—steel  
Article of transoceanic faith—men, barefoot,  
Shirtless in the russet mud, undo the hephaestic

Labour in this stripped, eroded monument  
With their acetylene tools. Ah, commerce!  
Gas lines coil like entrails on the sand.

*After "Shipbreaking #27, with Cutter, Chittagong,  
Bangladesh"*

## COLLOSEUM

Lions elephants bears and horses wild goats  
deer and boars numbering nine thousand  
fetched from throughout the empire  
slain in one hundred days

of venationes and horse races, naval battles  
three thousand strong, infantry combats, chariot races,  
wild beast hunts and gladiatorial duels that marked  
the hunting-theatre's dedication. At its close, Titus  
wept bitterly for all to see and on the next sundown

died. Perhaps he shouldn't have  
taken his brother's wife. History  
isn't clear. In any case, by noon  
his brother had claimed his title.

*After "Mines #22, Kennecott Copper Mine,  
Bingham Valley, Utah"*

## PYRAMIDS AT GIZA

But when Cheops took the throne,  
they say, all Egyptians were made to abandon  
their arts, their talents, their skills and trades  
and give themselves to the labour  
of stones, their quarrying and conveyance.

The Pharaoh dreamed a mountain  
where none had been, a pinnacle  
of imperial might, his immortality.

They brought the stones  
from the range of Arabian hills,  
across the Nile to the Libyan range beyond.  
Ten years to build the causeway, twenty  
for the pyramid itself, hundreds

of thousands of men. An inscription  
records the quantity of onions, radishes, garlic  
the labourers consumed.

*After "Bao Steel #8, Shanghai, 2005"*

## TROJAN HORSE

The world made small by water.  
Shipload on shipload

of war arrived at the coast. Grinding,  
weathering them all. Now, at sunset, ships  
gone home, they open the gates  
to the beachhead, its rusted debris,  
the scuffed-up battleground and then

the horse. It is mammoth. It looms.

A line of men, cables over their shoulders,  
head out to reel it in: its high-arched shiplap neck,  
the clinker-built belly, great  
hewn-pine keel of its spine.

Tell me the whole truth. Why  
raise up this giant, gleaming thing?

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Bring it in! cried Thymoetes, who saw  
not the last of the ships but a prize,  
a gift of the kind, the generous gods.

*After "Shipbreaking #8 Chittagong, Bangladesh"*

## STYX

You have left the low hills,  
mute now with distance,

for barren ground. A stream glints  
with whatever spirit moves water

from high and lonely places  
in search of companionship,

never turning back. It reminds you  
not to be hard, nor unsettled

in this absence of ancestors,  
your part in the story uncertain.

It lies here burnt and trickling,  
a sadder, broken thing

you cannot drink nor take  
delight in. For its waters will eat

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crystal and glass, copper and tin,  
silver and pottery and flesh—things

you might once have brought it  
to be livened, to be cleansed.

*After "Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario"*

## HANGING GARDENS

I destroyed the city  
and its houses, from foundation to parapet.  
I devastated and I burned them.

I tore out the bricks  
and earth of its walls, of its temples,  
of the ziggurat—all that there was  
I hove into the Euphrates. I dug canals

through that city, I drowned it.  
I made its very foundations disappear.

I destroyed it more completely  
than a devastating flood.

So that the city, its temples and gods,  
would not be remembered, I blotted it out  
with water. I made of it an inundated land.

And with the labourers I took, my spoil,  
I raised up the palace at Kuyunjik. I cut  
a canal through the arduous Mount Tas  
to bring the waters of the Khosr, I watered

the meadows of the Tigris and planted gardens,  
orchards with seeds gathered in the lands  
I had conquered: pines, cypresses, junipers, almonds,

dates, ebony, ash, rosewood, olive, tamarik, walnut,  
terebinth, fir, oak, pomegranate, pear, quince, grapevine,  
fig. All that the gods had bestowed upon the earth

I arrayed in my palace without rival, amid streams  
numerous as the stars of heaven. I gave it order, grace,  
grandeur as befitted me, guardian of honour, lover  
of justice, pious and charitable, with all humankind  
submissive at my feet.

*After "Feng Jie #4, Three Gorges Dam Project,  
Yangtze River, 2002"*

## AQUEDUCT

*Tot aquarum tam multis necessariis molibus  
pyramidas videlicet otiosas compares aut cetera  
inertia sed fama celebrata opera Graecorum?  
Sextus Iulius Frontius, De Aquaeductu Urbis Romae*

A city above all  
must have water, public works  
to ensure its supply. How beautiful

and how useless the pyramids,  
the Mausoleum, the statue of Zeus.  
Pretentious and fanciful, those empires

crumpled. We have annexed their lands.  
We have engineered roads, conduits  
that converge in imperial Rome,

their substructures and arches  
traverse the valleys, the low-lying terrain.  
Their tunnels perforate mountains.

No sight is more marvellous, no work  
more enduring. We have laid  
ten thousand miles of pipes.

*After "Oil Fields #28, Cold Lake Alberta, Canada,  
2001"*

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## TAJ MAHAL

It rose like a lotus from the riverbank,  
a great white blossom of his grief.

In the shadow of her absence, how he longed  
for sovereignty over the world

of seclusion, but Divine Decree  
had burdened him with care

of all humanity, its protection  
and management, administration of all matters

pertaining to the common good.  
Were he not charged with these

most pressing affairs of the Caliphate, great  
pearls of sadness might have bowed him

but the helmsman of a glorious kingdom may not miss  
a day attending to matters of state. For love of his wife

he raised the Taj, jewel of the empire,  
inscribing on its funereal arch: Ye are

an ill omen to us; if ye desist not,  
we will stone you.

*After "Oil Refineries #15, Saint John, New Brunswick,  
Canada, 1999"*

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## ATLANTIS

Critias, when Timaeus had finished,  
took his turn to speak. He spoke  
of Athens as it had been long ago,  
its citizens virtuous and bold.

In those days, said Critias, thick forests  
cloaked the highlands. And the soil! None  
could match what we possessed—crops  
abundant, our pastures enviably rich.

When they bared the land,  
the loam rolled into the sea.  
What remains, said Critias,  
is a body wasted by disease.



He spoke next of Atlantis, lost island  
larger than Libya and Asia, of its citadel  
and sons of Poseidon, its temples,  
palaces, its gymnasia and canals.

High-minded, he said, they cared  
nothing for wealth, their blood laced  
with the gods'. But the divinity in them  
faded. Their ambition grew.

Avarice—steely, dangerous—  
tainted their minds. And a wound  
opened in the blood-dark sea,  
a cavernous throat that the land

slid into, smug waves  
licking over the unnavigable mud.



The cries of the drowning Atlantans  
streamed over the sea as it buried them.

Where would they have fled  
in the vast, desert ocean? They had made war  
with each nation, its lands, extracting  
as they desired.

Critias sat looking down at his hands  
that had grown old, thinking  
on all that he knew and it saddened him.  
He said, I am old. I am old, I am filled

with the enormity of things  
that haven't yet passed from this world.

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*After "Pivot Irrigation / Suburb South of Yuma,  
Arizona, USA, 2011"*

## *Coal Trains*

Nightly, coal-trains  
thrusting through the soft spruce  
wake us with their couplings, crash

and grate that shake the house and jingle  
stacks of china in the cupboards. They slide in  
whistling, mile-long, bound for the swelling economies of Asia

from mines—Bear Run,  
Deer Creek—you'd want to visit  
for the wildlife-viewing if not

industrial prowess. Production at an all-time high  
bends the Midwest flatland into growth curves  
prowled by trucks that dwarf the average

suburban house. What riches from an old swamp.  
One hundred forty-five billion short tons waiting  
to hump into the daylight. Fifty thousand

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square miles seamed with wealth, land lying ready  
ready, crying out! for development, YES  
to Jobs! Grow Trade and the Economy! Those natural

resources return tenfold in containers from China's

gay markets. Cosco and Seaspan fetch our toasters  
and t-shirts, handbags, sofas, Nikes, while our marine

bulk handling plant—furnished with technology,  
Best of Its Kind!—ramps up for this burgeoning flow  
of affordable goods. Daily, progress

cuts a graceful arc along the North Pacific  
shipping lanes, while the mines, the trains,  
the factories, loading docks

keep up their good work 24/7. Even this  
otherwise quiet backwater of the unindustrious,  
this unhurried thoroughfare and happy depot

of the boons of developed and developing states,  
plays its own small part: lubing the tracks  
to speed the twenty-five million tonne throughput

on its one-way journey skyward. Now there's  
something to get fired up about! The sheer  
power in each car surging past to the far-off engine

pumping out SO<sub>x</sub> and good times: beach vacations,  
GoreTex, all the little  
party favours of the age.

## *Cerro Rico*

When the mountain has eaten  
all the men they can feed it, they order more  
from overseas and shovel those in too. Coal

firing an empire, they descend by thousands  
to die underground. The crossed God stops  
at the land's orifice and watches them go,

little boys slithering down capillaries  
in the blasted rock, men losing themselves  
to explosion and rock fall and bloom of dark gas.

They pickaxe down the muddy warrens,  
hips and shoulders sticking in the squeezes  
chewed through by water puckering cold

in stalactites overhead—cobalt bright, gleam  
of cupric and sulphur in the rock-dusted air—  
leaking into pools at their ankles and knees.

Corpses come up dust-shrouded and the living,  
eyes bandaged against daylight, stagger out  
hot and damp, heaving up baskets of ore.

Blue-skinned, bony, lungs rotted with dust,  
they fall with fever in the mountain's thick frost  
that Spain might make war with the Dutch.



## *La Granadilla*

It is the season. An old woman without teeth  
enters the café. She carries  
a plaid canvas bag from which she takes the fruit,  
placing it on the table, raising two fingers.  
I pass the coin.

Later, on the terrace, sun  
pressing itself against the mountainsides,  
I take the granadilla in my palm. It is light  
as an egg. I slice it with a pocket knife  
and break open the golden rind

to foetal dawn, mist's  
petals, sunrise  
pearled in a rising sun. I taste  
the smooth, sweet skins of sky,  
black words breaking in the teeth.

## *Leaving the Mountains*

Hands in the small warmth of pockets,  
walk across the pebbled ground. Wind

whistles a tune through its teeth, icy,  
dry. Flamingos have gathered at the lake,

lifting their wrought-iron legs. Smoke trails  
from the mud-brick house near the shore

where a woman bakes flatbreads for her family  
in a tiny stove lit with twisted shrubs.

Her llamas flick their ribboned ears,  
gazing over the stone wall of the corral

to their pasture—knots of rock,  
snow-streaked, tufted yellow grass. Mountains

tip their hard, wrinkled throats. Forget  
living here. You will always be poor. Often

lonely. It makes this beauty much more  
difficult to see.

## *Illness*

All day I lie alone  
in the stone hut  
unable to eat,  
drink, stand. Heat  
rolls in, merciless.

Years after parting,  
I still write  
the unsent letters—  
grateful, at such times,  
for your company.

## *Vorkuta*

The locomotive galloped all night to arrive here, this desolate  
platform brazen with frost. I have no suitcase. Only a memory  
I've carried again and again out of the Kapitalnaia  
with barrows of its coal: you on the steppe, an antelope

cantering under the sun that stooped to bless  
the pious barley, all of us bending to the sheaves,  
to scythes that whisked, bringing the grain to its knees.  
And it seems now that there is no more sense

in what we did, in the wheat we cut and sheaved that summer  
only to cut and stook again the following year, than there is  
in the mine, but at least the end of the harvest brought gladness  
to you and Oleg and the children, round-faced, golden.

The wind surges, blurring the world into a nether realm  
of blue-white bones hemmed with frost, glass shards  
that drive me to the steps of the train and I clutch the sun  
in my mind like a torch, the only thing I might be sure

is not a dream. A small boy creeps near, his open hands  
frostbitten, bare, feet wrapped in rags, the wire cage  
of his body rattling in the wind.

I unbutton my coat and crouch to wrap him in it,

## *Thank You for Patiently Waiting*

and his thin peaked face moves into what he thinks joy might look like. He is almost correct, though in truth, neither of us is moved by these gestures we each perform out of necessity.

The technician is generous. I have certainly been waiting; I am not patient. A customer service rep patched me through a series of clicks and silences and seven minutes of soft rock and now he and I and my ailing computer are here together in the ether.

There is a delay in the connection so that time and again the technician and I start in at the same moment, stop, pause, talk over one another once again. Something's gone haywire and I haven't backed up in weeks! He is unruffled. *Yes ma'am don't worry we will fix it.* Sure. They aren't his files, not his problem. He speaks with a lilt and I wonder where I've wound up. Mumbai? Bangalore?

I don't ask. It would defy the industry ruse that the neighbourhood technician is just across town. Maybe he is, does it matter? Why complicate things. The cursor flits across the screen, prowling through menus and settings. I don't ask about his children or his parents, what it looks like outside his window, what time it is there and whether it is rainy or hot, how he slept, what he will eat today—none of the elemental human concerns that bridge every distance. He is busy doing his job and I am preoccupied with my files. *Ma'am?* His voice arrives clearly via binary code, translating the contraption that unites us.

## *Red List*

Morning in that kitchen,  
drying dishes was it? Tired,  
your eyelid drooped, a pale leaf  
under its petiole scar. We stepped out  
into the garden. There may have been bees.

Everywhere, the forests go on dying.  
If there were some way to gather up  
the ashy thrush, the small-clawed otter,  
the pittas, the narrow-mouthed toad,  
I would bring them to you, one by one,  
before the wind scatters them like milkweed.

How many creatures need your good heart!  
Wait here, I will bring okapis, rhinos,  
hawks. I will fetch a coiled black millipede,  
thick and supple as a rope. The thousand  
loose threads of its feet will carry it  
out of my hands into yours.

# Expat

1. *A person working outside their own country, sometimes on a fat corporate contract, sometimes as a foreign expert, sometimes just as an English teacher.*

2. *A migrant, generally from an English speaking country, with more money and/or attitude than the average citizen.*

— URBAN DICTIONARY

## *Arrival: Manila*

midnight traffic north lane lane lane south lane lane  
lane chock-a-block gridlock fighting cocks bumpered  
up bus car jeepney truck taxi taxi moped car out the  
windows billboard billboard mall mall mall apartment  
blocks palm trees cola sellers office blocks and three  
two one more block hotel parking lot street vendors  
donuts mam mam donuts donuts eating rice fish coke  
bright white fluorescent light and sidewalks under  
doorways under staircases and overpasses rodents  
and the cardboard bed-sheets sleeping little kids

## *The Work*

*Whether or not your local colleagues wanted you there in  
the first place,  
your first job is to make them glad that you have arrived.*

New arrival from Manila, complete  
with logframe, Gantt chart, outcomes,  
alphabet soup accountability.  
Desk in Forest Management alongside  
thirty others. Myra types forms  
on a Remington in triplicate,  
Tata does payroll  
with a pen, Edwin files it all  
in banks of cabinets  
that subdivide the hall,  
its cheerful curtains drawn to help  
the ramshackle A/C unit. Money  
might have been more useful,  
but a creature of higher  
learning must possess  
particular skill. Say,  
an aerial view.

## *Evening*

Late-day light drops its yellow leaves  
on the village and the silver-tongued hills.  
Placid carabaos muzzle the cropped grass.  
From the canal a leggy water bird takes flight.

Roosted on the far hills, tall, backlit  
clouds flash and rumble, coquettes.  
Above, the sky all ruddy, mauve.  
Bats appear. A star.

The dark, unleashed, stalks out of the undergrowth.  
It creeps around the equable cows,  
slips down from its nest in the palms, climbs  
damply out of the creek. A nameless bird calls.

Wind stirs the cogon grass. The mountains,  
the trees go, even the ground. The path, invisible,  
cuts a line through the mind. It blurs and bleeds  
into night's foreign plain.

## *Labourers*

On the jeepney roof ten bags of cement,  
three labourers, fat rebar bundles jutting fore and aft.  
At the corner before the climb, the shiftless hillside  
has dropped a new fan of rubble on the road.

Far below, a river folds itself into the fields,  
into the long shadows of the steep green hills.

Three miles over this mountain to the village—  
up the switchbacked road, down precipitous steps  
to the footpath sidewinding around the hill.  
Hopping down, I shoulder my pack and go.

Behind, the labourers unload  
rebar, the cement. They heave the sacks  
onto one another's backs,  
lime clouding at the seams.

A little way up, I pause to let them muscle past,  
panting, slick, slogging their burdens upslope.

## *Kin*

Packed jeepney. Driver reaching back for coins. Passengers  
on two long benches, third row down the middle,  
back to back on stools set between the lines of knees,  
wise to cross yourself before you sit.

Wedge around me, three dozen others and a man,  
twenty-something, tight jeans, black t-shirt, spiked hair,  
a child sleeping on his lap. She leans  
against him, but has nowhere to rest her head.

Outside, the moonlit ocean flashes through the trees.  
The rusting jeepney, jolting, stops and starts, people  
jostle out. Clatter of unmuffled engine.  
Hot wind huffs through the cutaway walls.

The girl is three, maybe four, and sleeps  
upright without stirring. The man holds her  
with an arm around her waist—elbows out, awkward—  
one slender steady hand cradling her face.

## *The Work*

In March, the men went to the villages with clipboards  
and questionnaires the foreigner had prepared. The  
villagers were polite. They set aside their morning  
tasks—laundry, tending crops, hauling water, walking  
their carabaos to the shady streams, minding shops  
and small children, building and mending—and  
waited patiently in the shade for their turn to be  
questioned. Perhaps they were curious. Maybe they  
hoped to hear *what is it that you need?* There might  
be benefits of some kind. The men were also polite.  
Efficient. On the sheets they circled numbers, letters,  
marked down yes or no. They asked the assigned  
questions, check-marked the boxes and wrote a word  
or two where only many words could reasonably  
suffice. They cracked a few jokes that made everyone  
smile. When it was over, the villagers trailed home  
and the men drove by motorbike to the next place.



## *Island*

Thin land, bare,  
bony, exhausted,  
its limestone knuckles up  
through a skiff of shabby grass.  
Scrubby trees panhandle,  
collecting plastic trash. Tethered cows—  
thin, long-neglected garden tools—  
rake at the stubble.

In the village they have captured a manta ray  
and now flense its starry arms  
outside the huts. Along the gunwales  
and the outriggers of fishing boats,  
strips of meat hang drying. Smoke  
curdles like hot albumin around  
the yolky sun. Out on the beach, its stink  
settles into my clothes. Oh

to swim out! past the pale reef  
into the blue purity of sea and sky.  
But a fish—long  
as a machete and swift—  
rips through the shallows.  
The little wrasse leaps up,  
stranding itself on shore.

## *Tappia Falls*

Early morning. Across the terraced gold bowl  
of the stonewalled fields, down the steep trail  
to the falls—no one. The path drops  
into deep-throated gorge, dips into sweet  
hullabaloo of green, its extravagance—undergrowth,  
overgrowth piling and twining, tresses  
laid over the rocks, lianas dripping tangled  
in sheets down the cliffs. And water! Water  
chutes over its bedrock, olive green  
plunging and licking up whitely, its wind  
lifting ferns up the canyon's  
slick walls, wet air levering the spray,  
mist surging and roiling, uplifted  
by the water's sheer drop. It comes down  
plumed, roaring, veiled and gentle, tasting  
of its secret headwaters, the high-up places,  
unsullied, sunlit, unknown, unseen.

## *The Work*

In the evenings, I write out the new words.  
By day, transcribe them onto the landscape.

Kahoy: tree  
Bukid: mountain  
Bugas: rice  
Ulan: rain

Init: hot  
Kaayo: very  
Lisod: difficult  
Wala: none

## *Morning Jog*

Each morning at daybreak the man jogs slow laps of the basketball court. He wears sneakers and blue track pants with yellow stripes down the legs. When he sees me round the bend in the dusty lane, he bounces in place beneath the line of breadfruit trees until I reach him. We jog together as far as the first bridge. Then he says, "Let's walk now." He used to be stronger but has grown old. Seventy. If he were young, he would run *fast!* all the way to Putloncam! It pains him, not to be able to run so far now. But at this sensible speed he can greet the neighbours tending their orchids, their potted onions. He waves as we pass and they gibe about his new pastime. Other things, too, best to ignore. At the second bridge, I trot on ahead, up one small hill then the next, between the pastures past grazing cattle and farmers whose heads swivel as I pass. And then I turn back, slowing to a walk as I reach him. We return to the junction and he lopes toward his home and I turn back to the rented house. "See you tomorrow!" he cries, lifting his hand. "Yes, tomorrow," though I've never asked for company. It's 6:30 now, the day already searing.

## *Reef*

Drop into the sovereign blue.  
It takes your weight

like an ingot in its palm,  
considering. Very well,

jackfish!— three storeys  
of the finest silver plates.

A vat of indigo,  
quicksilver-spliced, blennies

school among the parapets  
pillars, polyps. Ruffed

and quilled, a lionfish  
to promenade you down

the hanging garden's wall  
past its minarets and friezes,

chiaroscuro and statuary,  
ostentatious, baroque!

But what of words?

Glassy nothings  
gasp, flitting off.

## *Market*

This morning one of the market kittens  
lay down to die. Its curled body rests  
in a corner at the bottom of the steps,  
beneath the table of foot-long beans  
and sari sari vegetables. Its little head

lies slightly sideways, one ear flattened,  
chin tipped up, an incisor just visible  
below the lip. Its whole body slumps  
over the bone undercarriage,  
a heap of twigs beneath its fur.  
Dear kitten, how sweetly  
death called to you, stroking  
your xylophone ribs, little ginger throat.

It is early. The vendors  
of fruit and dried fish have just risen.  
They put away their bedding and wash  
at the tap. A woman rounds up bits of trash  
with a dustpan, a worn palmyra broom.

## Scalded

At home, winter.  
Dim, impenetrable days.  
But here? Fiercest  
month of the year, sun  
lances down murderous,  
glancing off the glossed palms,  
wilting the languid bananas.

Swimming out  
from rocks carpeted with urchins—  
where to step? Breakers,  
shore, sun, all furious. By nightfall,

the skin is slow-spit-roasted,  
gut studded with landmines.  
Body pilloried, the spirit falls out,  
and hair, too, day by day,  
fistfuls.

But

the breeze-lifted curtains.

The coltish palms.

Swallows in the mossed cathedral,  
and the moonlit canticles of banyan.

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## Levee

Breezing along the land's ridge cap, red levee road,  
helmetless, leaning the curves. Blurred world slurs past,  
blousy clouds flouncing over, and the rice paddies—flooded,  
brilliant  
with seedlings and late afternoon sun—flash silver, brown,

slender green. We chase yesterday's rain gush  
down the concrete canal, past white-shirted children,  
goats tethered in the roadside shade. In the valley far  
beyond, below, more fields chequer the lowlands lifting

smoothly into peaks that nudge the distant sky: pinions, or  
vertebrae of starved cats. Land's fabric, threadbare,  
draped over them. Think Brahmin cattle  
and their hanging hides. Dewlaps. Lizard's wattle.

Decades ago, machines arrived  
to scrape the hillsides clean. They peeled back  
towering diptero-  
carps, mottled *Rafflesia*, rhinoceros beetles round and

shiny as spoons, the rolling pin  
millipedes, butter-  
flies that live nowhere else. They  
swallowed

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the hornbills, the  
barbets, the blue-  
throated bee-  
eaters,

shaded  
hollows and their  
leopard  
cats,

and shat out  
the bones, shards  
of coral rock sprouting  
hot cogon grass, cobras. Rain,  
washing over, scours out its little souvenirs.

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Under the unfettered sun,  
heat:  
an iron cage with no door.

## *The Work*

An old man from the village, writing:  
Tungod kay daghan ang mga illegal loggers, daghan  
na mga kalamidad sama sa baha, landslide ug huwaw  
tungod kay na upaw na ang nga kalasangan dakung  
epeкто sa mga mag-uuma.

*There are many illegal loggers and many calamities—  
floods, landslides and scarcity—because the hills are  
denuded. This has great effects on the rice farmers.*

The young man beside him who waited for the pen:  
Ang kahimtang namo karon lisod kaayo kay dili na  
makapamotol wala kahoy. Kay dakpon man mao  
untay among paninguha an ang pag baligya sa kahoy  
arong ang ipalit ug bugas.

*Our situation now is very difficult because we can no  
longer cut down trees—they will arrest us. It is our  
livelihood, selling trees to buy rice.*

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## *Cockpit*

The neighbour's five cocks, chained  
at the ankles, peck Venn diagrams  
of all possible logical relations. Attentive  
to duty (in fact, OCD), they herald  
each morning two hours before it arrives.  
My cinder block bedroom, echo chamber  
in turquoise, amplifies their mighty din.

I have high hopes for the cocks. At 4 a.m.,  
may they will go one by one sa bowangan,  
to the cockpit down the hill,  
and lose. I pray for an occasion  
honourable enough to mark  
with a feast. Chicken  
adobo, *lechon* chicken, *hinalang*  
*na manok. Gigutom na ko!*



The chickens, their shrieks, break open  
the morning to rhythmic metallic on metal.  
Crouched shirtless on his lawn, Eddy  
mows with a pair of large and rusted shears.  
His cigarette dangles. The cocks  
twitch their royal heads. His wife Dinah  
stands rocking the baby, her little boy,  
maybe three, playing at her feet.  
She is twenty-three. Her black hair  
falls all the way down her back, thick  
as a forest, a waterfall at night.  
Later Eddy pulls the nets out.  
They mend them together on the grass.



Cockpit, a weekly spectacle,  
Sundays after church.

Some men, some vendors of snacks  
doze on benches in the shade.

Under the tin roof a man stitches shut  
the wounded bird lolling in his lap.

Tiers of packed benches ring the pit,  
its rust-stained floor, its drifting feathers.

Fingers bristling folded bills, the kristo  
gathers bets. The referee brings the birds,

sets them down to circle, flush up,  
lunge with bladed legs—once,

thrice, and slump to the planks, ready  
enough to die. But the ref scoops them up,

riles them. There's life left here,  
and money still to change hands.



After midnight. A fat moon lounges in the sky,  
tossing dice across the bay. It runs its hands  
over the manes of palms that shift like mules in a corral.  
The fishermen are out, Eddy and the others. At dawn  
they haul up the slender, outriggered boats.

Their wives are there to meet them, to lay the catch  
on tables along the road. Small tuna mostly,  
the odd skate, plenty of reef fishes: fat and pink,  
square-headed, silver, their bodies piled and sliding.  
Steadily less plentiful, yet all of us go on eating.



## *The Work*

Full-blown day thrusts itself on us  
sticky-hot, laced with salt. We retreat  
to our shaded homes. Bougainvillea  
erupts over the fences. In the gardens

orchids, euphorbs, opulent hibiscus  
nod prettily at the washboard sky. Dinah  
has been absent all week. Her mother-in-law  
on the patio bench jigs the baby on her knee,

the little boy swings his feet. To Canada,  
she says, smiling broadly. Very cold.  
There are homes for the aged, many  
children in need of good care.

Respondents 1 through 48:

these times it's hard the harvest was bad very hot  
weather frequent typhoons we need work lack of  
water lack of job it's hard now faced with crises and  
very hot weather unemployment there's no work  
commodities are expensive many are jobless we're  
faced with problem of climate change when it rains  
our crops are flooded and when it's hot it's so hot our  
plants wither it would be nice if there's livelihood  
there's a problem of income it's not enough for the  
family now it's hard people should help one another  
so that there's a little progress problems with lack  
of food lack of water resources our situation now is  
hard we need finances so much hard work we have  
problems with water crisis of expenses not enough  
livelihood people need finances and food crisis need  
food really very hard rice is expensive there's little  
water no money problems of employment problem of  
lack of food it's hard due to hot weather we didn't have  
a good harvest our livelihood is affected problems  
with water and hard to find food our situation is very  
hard now we don't have potable water it's very hard  
because of problems with water and very hot weather  
we're having problems finding livelihoods no rain and  
no work we didn't have a good harvest very hard for



us farmers because we're practicing three croppings and we didn't have a good harvest due to floods it's hard because it's very hot we don't have potable water it's hard to find money we have a problem on water and the surroundings are dirty trash is thrown anywhere malnutrition lack of education especially on cleaning the surroundings it's hard now rice and copra are expensive no jobs there's a lack of sources of livelihood and water and food problem of water it's very hard commodities are expensive and there's no permanent job our condition is a little difficult because of low income there's problems with water we are thankful to God for our good health there's lack of food and water maybe lack of prayer it's hard because there's lack of food problem of livelihood the environment is no longer sustainable very hard because there's less catch in the river problem of water and everyday needs and food and the very hot weather it's very hard there's no money to support our families we're having a problem on water rice finances in other words it's hard

## *Pump in the Yard*

The girls from up the hill have finished  
laundry in basins at the tap in our yard,  
last in the neighbourhood to give water.  
Their cooking fires smudge the noon air.

The rain we've waited weeks for arrives  
briefly this afternoon, washing the sweat  
from the broad black backs of the carabaos  
who swish their tails in delight. I've had

plenty of ideas about things—about water,  
about hard work. Men hurry out to break  
the stubbled fields, heaving ploughs  
behind their animals, ankle deep in muck.

I watch them out the kitchen window, filling  
my kettle at the sink, turning on the gas.

## *Ants*

In the two days of my absence, a string of ants  
arrives in the kitchen to carry away the rice.

They jawed open the plastic sack and now heft it, grain  
by grain, under the shelf along the counter to the window.

They ignore my arrival, working steadily until  
my sticky buns, mangoes, coax them past the sink

in red knots, swarming. Their little hearts  
swell at my offerings. They have never run

faster, worked harder. Their holes in the walls  
bloom semicircles of sand. I inform the landlady.

She arrives with the spray.

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After that, the apartment goes quiet. I leave fish bones  
in the sink with impunity. Day after day, my own company.



The neighbour in the facing house, elderly and ill,  
dies in the night. Someone strings a tarp

across the road, sets out tables, chairs.  
Well-wishers crowd the street. They sit me down

and offer Beer na Beer with Coke. Small kids  
race around on bikes and the priest arrives

to say the blessings. The crowd grows  
all evening, filling the street loudly,

more food, more beer, singing, prayers.  
I watch from behind my curtain.

At dawn, cockerels. Whiskey bottles  
on the table, three men lounging in the chairs,

a breeze and their lingering voices softly  
billow the curtain, filling the quiet room.

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For ten days the street is an impassable clatter,  
voices jangling into the night. I fall asleep late

to laughter and Mah Jong tiles shuffled,  
wake to the same sounds. Five days in,

the ants return. Penitent, they creep around  
the edges of the room, grabbing morsels

off the floor. I drop larger crumbs, listening  
to the throngs outside. The late neighbour's  
daughter,

a schoolteacher in Davao, waits for a leave.  
The priest returns. I lose track of days

but soon the ants, *hormigas, amigas*,  
disappear again. All evening, nothing.

Again the next day. I crouch  
near the sand piles, cajoling the wall.



At last the daughter arrives.  
They bury the neighbour.

They put away the tables and stash the tarp.  
Litter and beer bottles linger on the roadsides

and a son or a nephew moves into the house.  
Life continues as before. I go out

to get bread. I go out like a teenager  
in a growth spurt, everything ill-fitting, strange words

gangly in my mouth. I collect  
glances, whispers; waves

of conversation part before me, closing as I pass.  
In the evenings, sometimes,

the tiniest black ants. Larger brown ones. Going on  
around my comings, goings

as if I wasn't there.

Hinterlands

My Lord, I am Delgamuukw. I am a Gitxsan Chief and a plaintiff in this case. My House owns territories in the Upper Kispiox Valley and Upper Nass Valley. Each Gitxsan plaintiff's House owns similar territories. Together, the Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en Chiefs own and govern the 22,000 square miles of Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en territory. For us, the ownership of the territory is a marriage of the Chief and the land. Each chief has an ancestor who encountered and acknowledged the life of the land. From such encounters come power. The land, the plants, the animals and the people all have spirit, they all must be shown respect. That is the basis of our law.

— *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*  
*Proceedings of the Supreme Court, May 12 1987*

## *Accessory*

When fall came, I was not the one to rest  
the tip of the .22 on the broad forehead

of one trusting hog after another. I did not squeeze.  
I stood ready to pass the sticking knife

and I pinned the pig down as it lurched  
and kicked the air. I did not draw the knife

through the throats of thirty six  
roosters. I drew out their sodden feathers,

their slick entrails, the stiff, spent windpipes  
that squawked. I held the bobbing pig under

and it scalded. Red-handed, I scraped. I hung  
its headless hairless carcass to cure.

And when all that—thank God—was over,  
I was still whole, untainted

by that dark thing that might dwell in me. Death  
was in my hands but not of them. I dealt

with death, but did not deal it. I stood beside it,  
watching, making what good I could of its offal.

And yet. All winter I served the farm dog  
severed heads and feet. I ate their cleaned

and butchered bodies. And there was  
no distance, no difference.

## *Umshewa*

Again I walked the canyon's rim in order  
not to think. White sat fat on the land, black dactyl  
creeks, rivers breaking through.

I had bludgeoned

each uncertainty with logic, intellect, those blunt  
weapons. Their measured, hyperbolic words  
dice shaken in a loose fist. My learning,  
heavy

bundle of sticks. Hemlocks bent  
under their snow load—mind  
coasting its tired track—and the raw air  
knifed in,

pivoting bare aspens that stroked the lovelorn  
grey sky. Everywhere, winter stood, gaunt nostalgia  
mewing at its ankles.

Below,

ice leaned over the passing water, thrusting  
blue knees into the sleek dark. Night  
had ebbed just enough to expose

this small rock of noon. I was riddled  
with thinking, with the thought of our time,  
wormed, eaten.

What small husk

remained to see the world? Blind  
heart, it burrowed into human knowing  
that had drifted here from elsewhere.

## *D11 Cat*

Beyond the mind's flight—circumscribed  
by gravity, grammar, Descartes—a fiasco of poplars  
lift stippled hands to the clean October sky.  
Resplendent, they have almost finished speaking.  
They stand together below the honeyed

sacrificial ridge, its burnished throat laid bare.  
In the yellow autumnal air four grizzlies  
root through the undergrowth. Water trickles  
down a fan of scree into the ground becoming

its sinews, arteries, lungs—and the land  
sinks into your subterranean mind,  
the cavernous space there, brightness  
surging through. The stone sheep  
that starts at your scent and canters off, its breath  
hanging in the air as you arrive where it stood.  
That is your wonder made real.

Go there. And go at once. By daybreak,

this mountain will be Cat tracks.  
Someone else's job.

## *April*

Blue, blue and the slapdash clouds—clouds  
burlled up over the buckled ridge. Limelight  
fell through the naked windows of my eyes.

We skinned toward the spiny peak, across  
the boilerplate wind-slab, sun-broken cornice  
ominous above, toward its many-named face,

a granite altar scoured, fissured, polished by time,  
by tongues that have praised it, by empty hands  
pressed against it, extended for its alms.

In the lockjawed rock, a vein  
of ancestry, fault line of migration,  
our story. Landfall.



## *Trapline*

A high fog, pearl-grey and lifting; clear  
sky peers through, blue. Overnight,  
white air alighted on each thing.  
Each twig sprouts white thorns. White  
fringes the clinging leaves—curled,  
brown, edges aflame with cold.  
He goes out to check the line.

Clouding up underfoot, snow, its attic  
of small treasures, legible movements  
of invisible, intersecting lives. Five miles  
from the cabin, he kneels  
in the wreckage of snow that clots  
on his mittens, furring the slender mink

that he pries from the Conibear. Lifting it  
to meet his breath, the fine-point crystals  
weep into its pelt and he touches his cheek  
to the almost-alive fur, its fine, hidden bones.

Snow arrives. It lays an arm across his shoulders  
its breath cold in his ear. And the snowflakes  
go on gathering, whispering  
among themselves.

## *Weight*

The boot-crunch of snow says it.  
I have grown old. Stopping, silence

rises all around. My breath  
lifts and dies in the frozen air.

Across the river two horses,  
shaggy, bend to their tattered bale,

the lone warm figures  
on this grey, bruised land.

I would go to them,  
thawing as they idled over

unhurried, curious, to snuffle  
at my hands for apples, grain—

but the black river  
roils between us.

I lie down beside it.  
It covers me with stones.

## *Milking*

It is early evening, it is already dark,  
when someone comes to the gate

with the blue rope, the halter. Together  
they cross the yard to the barn.

There is the grain. There, the glow  
of a bare bulb falling through the half-door

on the scaled, blown snow.  
There is the frosty stantion's clank.

A shoulder against her rumen.  
A forehead, cheek. That snuffling

breath clouding the dim air,  
warm hands underneath, tugging,

then the hollow, tinny jet  
of milk on metal and she shifts

her weight, the calf kicking.  
She glances behind

at the stooped back, the knees  
gripping the cold pail. This one

is sad again. She is sorry.  
She has given what she can.

## *Sleeping Out*

Night. The moose stepped up. I woke where I lay  
on the moss and our gazes met, caesural.

What I was then: lifted: wind breathed through  
the dewy webs of thought and broke them.

And then afraid. Petrified by night,  
its strangeness, inscrutable inhumane  
mountains, the freshet creek and its language  
no human ear can know. I closed

my eyes. Rain rode in, sharp hooves  
dashing over the tarpaulin. Again, thought,  
fearful, hammered in my mind's pipes—  
an airlock stuck behind the walls.

It was too much to be alone with,  
all this wild. My mind still framed  
with the houses I had built there,  
rooms I haven't found my way out of.

## *Fourth Law of Ecology*

The sun doesn't lift the yellow hand  
it has laid on your back. Summer heat

rises from the blonde sweep of grass  
to a hawk drawing circles on the liquid sky.

The rabbit, snared, sees the hawk. It feels  
your footsteps thump down the wire, taut

and blameless as hunger,  
as greed.

## *Burning off*

First the old grass—matted, drab, unclothed  
by last year's snow. The line of flame  
charges like a light brigade.

He watches it gallop, its eager skirmish  
flaring in the wind, its snicker at the grass.  
It meets the road and falters,

and he crosses the scorched earth to heap  
branches from the fence line, pour  
the gasoline. He brings the box and tosses on

sheaves of letters, notebooks  
that smoked at the margins, caught.  
Heat carried their soft leaves,

brittle, blackened,  
into the afternoon sky, the tired brush leaping,  
resplendent.

## *Sunset*

Evening light rose-gold on the spruce, sunset  
and I lie back to admire the Ming dynasty sky.

Bees hum around us in the clover, making good  
on obligations, keeping everything on track.

But the river roars, far off. Wind traipses about  
wherever it wants, roguish, seeing things.

Soon the aspens will drop everything  
and turn to their Trappist contemplation,

trusting in the order of things. They must.  
Will they feel as I do at the sound of the cranes?

## *August*

Huckleberries  
wildly I ate you  
lifting

each nipples fruit  
from its green home  
with my curious tongue

I was a bear  
I was  
ptarmigan

alive on the hellebore slope  
breathing  
the coalescing mist

small summer  
rain descending desiring only  
you

## *On Bikes*

It's best begun on bicycles,  
flying no-hands down a hill, wind  
in your hair, your mouths, your open palms,  
filled with heady abnegation of despair

for the human race, the mountain  
ranges of its mind, its preoccupations and ordeals,  
exist first, last, best in giddy two-wheeled careening,  
in knee-pistoning glory, in a moment forever

summer, cut flowers and peaches on the table  
of a kitchen still ringing long after the breathless  
conversations have trailed off  
into the sunlit room upstairs.

## *New Season*

The last day of summer, she knocks down  
the old chimney and carries the bricks outside.  
Now the house is open to the sky.

She patches it  
with an old blue tarp but the wind  
lifts the edges and slides in anyway,  
making itself at home. Each evening,

leaning against the counter,  
the same expectant  
bowl of fruit. Seated at the table,  
the same salt.

But at the back door, someone  
else's shoes. Everything blossoms,  
the quiet air laden with its scent.

# Nocturnes

The rain is tenacious. Intermittent all day, it falls through sunlight from an almost clear sky. Swallows lark about. Its downy fingers play arpeggios over their wings.

In from the autumn meadow  
I build a fire in the oil-drum stove. Boots in the heat, drying  
the cuffs of my pants while darkness  
snuffs out the far, the middle distance. Tousled blonde moon  
steps out from behind the hills.

All afternoon, the field. Grass rustles overhead.

We let the beer cool in the brook and the sun  
butter our skin. I lie gazing up  
at you and the sky that leaks summer,

geese calling out their valedictions.

The evening is filled with moths  
needing to be carried outside. Hold them lightly  
and their tracery wings, the silver feathers, suffer no injury.

More commonly, the startled moths, trapped by the light,  
their captors, struggle, leaving the fingers  
dusted with their breakage.

Under the pines, the soil's thin, scabbed. Fireweed  
hasn't bloomed. Midway through the effort the small  
plants died, leaves gone fuchsia,  
stiff in summer's last breeze.

Wind follows its worn route.

Wind  
gestures and the trees lean to see what it sees. Do they  
see me? Whispering, they know.

I've stepped into the river of someone else's life.  
My own flows on without me, somewhere else.



Until sunset, I'd held my hand against the low, brilliant sun.  
Now your slender fingers on the piano, Chopin's Nocturne,  
E minor. Night  
opens the door to listen, its undressing hands laying us bare.

It drops aspen-gold coins on the threshold. For the eyes,  
the tongues of our love.

A trill of sleet already  
on the air. Cranes  
muster overhead,  
spiralling.

This was to have been  
the perennial tale:  
this flyway,  
this place.

They cry out to one another in their parting. High,  
trumpeting calls.

Was it your name that clanged in my mind, a church bell?  
The petals  
of your fingertips on my shoulders?

Or was it only rain.



**NOTES**

The opening epigraph by José Rizal is taken from his 1887 novel *Noli mi tangere* that exposed the corruption and despotism of the Spanish ruling class during its three hundred year occupation of the Philippines. It reads, “Let us not ask for miracles. Let us not ask for concern with what is good for the country of him who comes as a stranger to make his fortune and leave.” Rizal is a Philippine national hero whose words and actions inspired the revolutionary activities that ended the Spanish colonial period. He was executed at the age of thirty-five.

### **Postcards from the Supply Chain**

The epigraph is from Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1955. It reads: “And since you are talking about factories and industries, do you not see the tremendous factory hysterically spitting out its cinders in the heart of our forests or deep in the bush, the factory for the production of lackeys; do you not see the prodigious mechanization, the

mechanization of man; the gigantic rape of everything intimate, undamaged, undefiled that, despoiled as we are, our human spirit has still managed to preserve; the machine, yes, have you never seen it, the machine for crushing, grinding, for degrading peoples?” Translated by Joan Pinkham, Monthly Review Press, 1972.

Edward Burtynsky is a renowned Canadian photographer whose work documents the industrial sublime. The photographs referred to are published in the following books:

*Manufactured Landscapes*, National Gallery of Canada/ Yale University Press, 2003: “Nickel Tailings #34, Sudbury, Ontario” and “Mines #22, Kennecott Copper Mine, Bingham Valley, Utah”

*China*, Steidl, 2005: “Shipbreaking #27, with Cutter, Chittagong, Bangladesh,” “Bao Steel #8, Shanghai, 2005,” “Shipbreaking #8 Chittagong, Bangladesh” and “Feng Jie #4, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, 2002.”

*Oil*, Steidl, 2009: “Oil Fields #28, Cold Lake Alberta, Canada, 2001” and “Oil Refineries #15, Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, 1999”

*Water*, Steidl, 2013: “Pivot Irrigation/Suburb South of Yuma, Arizona, USA, 2011”

Most of these images can also be viewed at [edwardburtynsky.com](http://edwardburtynsky.com).

The fifth stanza of “Trojan Horse” is adapted from a passage in Robert Fagles’s translation of Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, Viking Press, 2006.

Pausanias (c. CE 110 – CE 180) in his *Guide to Greece* discusses the Stygian stream that emerges from the

ground at Nonakris, stating “its water is death to men and to all animals...The water of the Styx dissolves glass and crystal and agate and all the stone objects known to man, even pottery vessels. The water corrupts horn and bone, iron and bronze and even lead and tin and silver and the alloy of silver and gold.” Translated by Peter Levi, Penguin Books, 1971.

“Hanging Garden” describes the sack of Babylon by King Sennacherib of Assyria in 689 BCE and the subsequent construction of the magnificent hanging gardens at his palace in Nineveh (where recent scholarship has found that this wonder of the ancient world was located, not in Babylon as popularly supposed). Much of the text is adapted from passages in “The Bavian Inscriptions” translated from the cuneiform by Daniel David Luckenbill in *The Annals of Sennacherib*, University of Chicago Press, 1924.

The epigraph of “Aqueduct” reads: “With these grand structures, so numerous and indispensable, carrying so many waters, who indeed would compare the idle Pyramids or other useless, although renowned, works of the Greeks?” (translated by R.H. Rodgers, University of Vermont).

106 “Taj Mahal” is inspired by original Mughal texts collected in *Taj Mahal: The Illuminated Tomb: An anthology of seventeenth-century Mughal and European documentary sources*, compiled and translated by W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai (The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; distributed by University of Washington Press, Seattle and London).

Vorkuta was the administrative headquarters for a network of Soviet gulags near the Arctic coast of the USSR.

Cerro Rico is the conical red mountain that towers over the town of Potosí in the Bolivian Andes. Beginning in the 1500s, an estimated two million enslaved indigenous South Americans and Africans lost their lives while extracting the silver that bankrolled the Spanish empire for three hundred years.

The IUCN Red List catalogues plant and animal species at risk of global extinction.

### **Expat**

The Filipino voices in this section are speaking Cebuano, one of some 175 languages and dialects spoken in the archipelago.

The epigraph for “Work Poem” is taken from Ruth Stark’s guide *How to Work in Someone Else’s Country*, University of Washington Press, 2011.

### **Hinterlands**

The Delgamuukw trial, initiated in 1984 by the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en nations, established aboriginal title as the right to the land itself rather than simply rights to its usage. Following ten years of trials and appeals, the Supreme Court ruled that the oral histories of Canada’s first peoples are admissible as legal evidence for their claim to the land.

“Umshewa” (Oom-shwa) is a Gitksan word meaning driftwood, commonly a slur for a white person.

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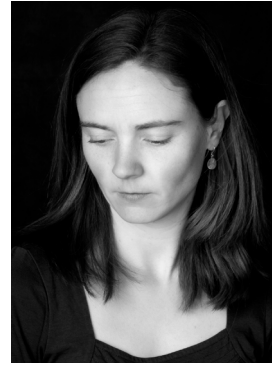
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DANI COUTURE



Emily McGiffin's first poetry collection, *Between Dusk and Night*, was a finalist for the Raymond Souster Award and the Canadian Authors' Association Poetry Award. She is currently a PhD student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto.



