



## SONG OF THE SUBURBS

### A CANADIAN POET REFLECTS ON THE VANISHING COUNTRY AROUND HER MODERN HOME

*Whoever knifed out the heart left proof—streaks of blackened blood on the dirt around the carcass, a smear on the fence, droplets stuttered down the trail. Flies and midges hovered above the muzzle, the velvet ears, the glossy open eyes, but the hide hadn't worn from the bones, nor had bloat swollen the belly. That a dead deer lay on the weedy clay just off the graveled walking trail, well away from any road, stoked my curiosity. But that hole carved into the animal's chest held me there. It was the size of a man's hand and ragged at the edges, the ribcage hacked and frayed.*

Ten feet away, a small excavator sat parked, and around it, surveyor's stakes and fluorescent flagging tape marked the site that, rumor had it, would become an in-ground swimming pool or a soccer pitch. The builder hadn't yet decided. Up on the bluff, nail guns, buzz saws, and the shouts of the steel-toed, hard-hatted crew jolted the quietness of the cove.

We sat in the shade of his gazebo, cows grazing at the nearby fence line, honeybees zigzagging en route to the hives, and the farmer told me the story of his land. Before they passed from his grandfather to his own father and finally to him, the Hudson's Bay Company had owned these acres. A century ago, up through the inlet and into the cove, the Royal Navy eased their ships, shallowing their lighters with water from the stream's rushing falls. This same stream powered the company's sawmill, carried timber and logs down its flume, and roiled late autumn with the run of coho salmon.

This land, the farmer said, was his childhood domain. Hayfield, orchard, garden, and forest—he knew every corner. As a boy, he tracked cougars in the woods, fished the stream

for minnows, and with a stick in the dirt, dug. When his mother from the front porch blew her silver whistle, he ran the hill home. Until he left for teacher's college, he lived that land, and alongside his own father, tilled it, planted it, and harvested what grew. The same scythe his grandfather and father swung in the hayfield now hangs in his toolshed.

Three days after the farmer's father died, a local developer—the same one who built our cove-side neighborhood—telephoned the family to ask if they wanted to sell. In response, the farmer nailed a sign to the end of the driveway:

*We Will Invoke  
Right To Farm Legislation.*

A great blue heron called from shore—a harsh, gargled clearing of the throat, like an old chain-smoker before his morning cigarette. On a break from angling at low tide, the bird croaked, eyed me, then went back to stabbing the shallows.

I walked the trail often, flanked shoreside by Scotch broom, horsetail, and blackberry bushes gone rogue. I liked the feeling of the wildness, of my backyard little Eden, however broken.

A circus of birds wheeled and sang, swooped and skimmed. A killdeer. A constellation of starlings. A turkey vulture. A flock of buffleheads. Finches and robins, sparrows and jays. While trills and whistles annotated the cove, across the water and up through the trees, a woman's shrill voice echoed over the P.A. of the car dealership fronting the busy highway: *Larry to the front lot, Larry to the front lot.*

Most of the land was still held under covenant, protected from future development but belonging on paper to those who owned the bluff-top homes. The newest house rising would be the grandest in the neighborhood, anchoring the lane with the prestige of a modern mansion and higher resale value for us all. It was the only lot from which the covenant had been removed and the zoning bylaws amended to make room for the builder's dream house.

Beyond the trail and the stacked cedar fence cleaving private property from public, most of the soggy floodplain oozed wild grasses and loamy mud, but the builder had razed his property to the clay. Past the stacks of lumber, the earth-moving equipment, and piles of backfill, a wire fence cut through the trees, dividing the land into past, present, future.

In the cool basement room turned farm stand, I set four beefsteak tomatoes and a basket of raspberries on the counter.

"That deer," I said, "moldered three days before someone finally hauled it away."

The farmer weighed my purchases on his silver scale, penciled a tally on a paper sheet, and gave me my total.

"Well, now," he said.

"That's a fitting metaphor."

Twenty years ago, this land was open and green. Before the strata houses began to rise and the gravel, asphalt, and tidy suburban turf took root, sheep grazed here. Before the sheep, horses cantered these fields. Before the fields yielded hay, alfalfa, and fall rye, a fur trader named Fitzhenry ran a mink farm here. A century ago, he tromped this ground, swinging a bucket of meat paste for the minks that mewled in their cages. What I've carried over this ground—plastic bags of compost, trays of seedlings bought at the big box store, the lawnmower bag full of clippings—feels too light to connect to that history. Mine is the history of courteous ruin, of middle-class plunder in the heart of the country.

Mine is the song of the guilty suburbanite. Give me the life pastoral but without the toil and sweat. I want the idyll of the country but the comfort of the city. Let guests sit at my table and praise these tomatoes grown locally, but let the supermarket up the road feed us easily with what grows on the far side of the planet.

From my back deck, I watch deer at dusk drift like shadows across the road, then leap the barbed wire fence in a fluid arc. Once in the farmer's field, they cruise the

shorn hay, bending to fresh shoots that grow up from the stubble. Their ears twitch at the boozy hoots from a neighbor's backyard barbecue. The buck pauses, his antlers lifted like question marks against the cooling sky. What else moved here? What other wings, hooves, paws, feet? What sailed, slid, and stalked this clay-heavy soil?

Histories ago, a man knelt on this same ground, shut one eye, pulled taut the string of his bow, and let fly the arrow. Whatever bled there fed the dirt, the grasses, and the leaves, the blossom and the root. Below, in centuries of strata, teeth and bones and flint dress the field with honesty. The woman who bent here to pluck berries from a bush



tasted the iron of the earth and the sun's sugar. The child who dragged a stick through mud also whistled back the hawk's call. Those deer that rose from the clearing and walked into the wind still rise, scenting the air as they move, cutting trails into the ground beneath them, marks of where they've been and where they're going.



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