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Christine L. Lowther

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CHRISTINE LOWTHER

That Was Then, This Is Hell

When the trees roar, I wake in the dark, my face in its usual resting place, pressed up to the open window's insect screen. I close the glass. Earplugs don't help, the forest that loud, my shelter moving that much. "Floathome" sounds too posh; I live in a floating shack. Which is currently a jostling, rocking one.

I should get up anyway to check my motorboat, a fourteen-foot fibreglass tub I call the *Ron Weasley*. Its ropes will need securing, maybe given a little more slack, knots tightened. Before I leave my pillow, I pause to listen harder, crack the window again: the boat's bilge pump is stuck on, trying to suck rain water in circular groans. I catch sight of rows of seductively beautiful bioluminescent-tipped waves rolling into the bay, alongside my home, to surge against the shore.

Groping around, I can't find the headlamp. Have to hold a flashlight in my mouth. Rain is smirring the windows now, so I pull on my leaky old Helly Hansen gear. As I step out the door, a blast of wind and rain compresses my breath and for a moment I can only stand there, knees bent, and hang on. Careful not to shine light on the water because it will scare me too much, I can't help noticing the nearest landline, aglow with bioluminescence. Like having partial night vision.

I step from my floatshack barge, over a gap to a separate floating deck—the one that supports my greenhouse, container garden, and favourite chair. The *Ron Weasley* is tied to this deck. I re-knot the boat's ropes with one eye on its starboard hull, in case a wave slams it onto my hands. Crouch low on my soaked knees as another huge gurling gussock of wind comes; squeeze my eyes shut, elbows and fists tucked in. When the gust has passed over, I plant my bottom on the deck and quickly swing my legs down into the dented and dinged *Ron Weasley*. On all fours, I shine my torch into the bilge, a square well at the very bottom of the stern, where the pump is still running, despite having expelled all accumulated rain water for the time being. The groaning gadget is wedged into a corner so I pull it into the bilge's centre. Swat the auto-switch free and it shuts off at last. Stay low, and leap out—onto the deck as quickly as possible. Back indoors, I peel away my streaming raingear and start a fire.

Daylight comes. My home has turned completely diagonal to its normal position. Too much of the structure is exposed to and buffeted by this flattening westerly, everything inside swinging. Even the propane cooker shakes. These are the times I wish I had visitors. The ones who call this Paradise and talk about their dream to live in a "houseboat." Be here during a storm, I tell

them. I wanted a home I could take walks from. Affordable housing is nonexistent in the district of Tofino; I did not lightheartedly choose a floating squat. Yes, I ended up falling in love with parts of this life. But I've witnessed the changes, felt them on my skin. Wind, heat, and intensity. Over decades the surrounding rainforest has dried considerably. In the warming ocean, sea star wasting disease has dissolved all the biggest starfish. How beautiful and startling they were, with twenty arms and 15,000 tube feet, surface spines and pincers: magnificent predators. Hell is watching nature disintegrate, wither and warp. Hell is a burning bioregion. This territory, Tla-o-qui-aht traditional Ha'Houlthee, remains incredibly temperate compared to much of the rest of the planet. Fires, floods, and ice storms occur elsewhere, though not so far away. Only the last two summers have cloaked all of Clayoquot Sound in smoke. No place is safe from the hells we mamalni (white people) have caused.

What is the essential nature of a coastal storm as it funnels down the inlet to rush this cove? Is this simply weather at its most natural, or have tempests indeed been hideously altered by humans through our overuse of fossil fuels, vehicular and aircraft exhaust? How much have I contributed to the hardest part of living here? Kayaking ruined my shoulders; my motorboat, with its four-stroke engine, uses more gas than a car. Is the latest hell-storm a symptom of climate change, side effect of convenience? I'd like to go electric now, but I'll have to go into debt to replace the *Ron Weasley* with a much lighter Zodiac.

At least the garden is still on deck, greenhouse not broken away this time. Nothing's missing. Other times brought temporary losses: kayaks up the creek, solar panels disappeared overboard. That phone call from a neighbour who was watching my greenhouse drifting by. I won't go into the greenhouse during a storm; hate the threatening uproar of wind and hard rain on plastic. If things don't calm down this morning I'll miss my shift at work. Town is a solid twenty minutes away, in good weather. I know the inlet must be rough around the corner past the oyster farm, by the bending and flailing of the trees in that direction.

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Hours later, having called in to say I'm not coming, I gear up and go out to check on the bilge again. Should have done it sooner; its filter could jam with debris and the boat could fill up and sink, or the battery could die. Then the motor wouldn't start. All is well, however. Gusts of wind have longer breaks between them now, too.

Standing on deck beside the boat, I look up to the treetops. See them suddenly blast sideways, then hear them. Shift my gaze to the water and wait. . . . There it is: the green surface whitening with squall. I want to turn and flee but stay still, watching the wind approach across the sea, the space between us shrinking. It hits my boat first, pounds the bumpers and then rushes my face, hair, ears, and body. Staying bent at the knees, I try to turn fear into exhilaration. Grip the deck from inside my boots. My eyes close involuntarily, watering. The force, strength, movement are all terrible, but the voice is most frightening of all. It is a howl of soulless indifference.

I retreat inside to stand by the eastern window, which looks out at my unfinished dock running the length of the floatshack. Gusts are sending up great spouts between the unnailed planks. The water is pushed out from under the dock in craters as if gouged by vigorous puffs from a giant's mouth. Three planks have landed in the chuck and are colliding with the billets and each other. Out I go again, clenching my teeth as I mount the restless dock and sink tottering to my knees. I manage to grab each plank and pull it dripping onto the frame. Shakily standing up, I see another plank halfway to the creek. There is no possibility of safe retrieval, by kayak or motor. I go back inside and watch waves merging in a white, blown spray. I want to track the progress of the escaped plank, but it's gone. Until I hear telltale splashes and see that it has returned, been carried back under the dock, and I'm able to fetch it out.

I am fifty at a time when many human activities decimate whole species spanning the globe, altering temperatures, patterns, glaciers' very existence. I stand in the rainless forest and ask, Did I do this? In my twenties, clear-cut logging was making Bruce Cockburn's "mangy BC hills" into vast areas of devastated moonscapes. Seeing was believing. There was a place not too distant from my current home where many people could converge and place our bodies in front of the logging trucks. Which we did.

Such innocence I had then, caught up in the Wicca movement, each act of nature goddess-seeped! One of the drawings in a pagan wall calendar caught my imagination. A tiny woman with dark, wind-billowed cloak stood next to her small cabin, arms raised in praise or invocation. All around and above her was a terrible storm. Trees were being uprooted—by giant hands. The swirling wind was long hair filling the sky. Amid flying branches, leaves, and tangles of roots, a giant pair of breasts hung, above which was the huge face and open mouth full of trees she had torn from the soil in her fury, their boughs between the rows of her teeth. Beneath the blowing hair were pointed ears and widening eyes—caught in surprise at the sight of the small human saluting her from the ground. She—this storm-Entity—had not, perhaps, been expecting any greeting after hundreds, even thousands of years since the patriarchy took away her human followers/worshippers.

There was a positive, ancient, brave connection between them that transformed how I felt about storms. A humble welcome, a triumphant return, a key recognition. Rather than fear and dismay, respect, veneration, and awe were declared. I assumed these and ventured out into the middle of gales, thunder, rainstorms, and hail, on streets or sand. In forests. But that was before I moved into an open-water dwelling with my fossil-fueled commuting vessel. The local Entity: wouldn't she be pulling up my anchors, chewing and spitting out ropes, brandishing bull-kelp and my landlines as her whips? I can raise my arms in pleading apology, but I'd rather raise them in recognition again. What I want and need is to acknowledge the alterations, grieve them, act to contain them as far as they come from me. And then to find some way to return to exaltation from horror and despair, even as trucks idle, planes choke the sky, farms and wetlands are drowned, and pipelines are bought and built.

Works Cited

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CHRISTINE LOWTHER is the author of *Born Out of This* as well as three collections of poetry. She lives in Tla-o-qui-aht territory on Vancouver Island's west coast.