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## Before Showtime

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AMY KALER

## *Before Showtime*

For almost a decade, ending this year, I was a liminal cheer mom. The cheer mom part meant that every fall and winter, at least five or six times, I would find myself in various towns and cities attending travel meets for my daughter’s cheer team. The regional meets were in smallish and slightly obscure places like Lloydminster and Red Deer; the big international meets with bells and whistles were in places like Vancouver and Calgary. Big or small, from my perspective most meets came down to wandering around aimlessly for a few days while waiting for the three-minute flashes of excitement when our team took the mat before the crowd.

“Liminal” was how I saw myself: adjacent to the main attraction and not particularly inclined to embed myself in the middle of cheer-mom culture, which involved hairspray, glitter “CHEER MOM” sweatshirts, trash-talking the judges who docked points for our girls’ routine, and second-guessing the coaches. I was necessary as supervisor and guarantor of my daughter’s well-being, as she was under eighteen, but I didn’t have a function (or a desire) beyond that. So I was both free to wander and constrained as to where and for how long I could go.

Sometime last year, I realized that “liminal” also describes the spaces that I moved through, while waiting for our team’s time to compete. Cheer is not as high-profile as hockey and other team sports (although the cheer moms would have you believe otherwise), which meant that we usually ended up in the second-string sportsplexes, the arenas on the outskirts of the cities, surrounded by warehouses and brownfields. When I walked around and around and around, I wasn’t seeing the highlights of a place, nor the sides that its boosters want to show the world. But I was seeing something, even if I didn’t know immediately what it was.

When I ran across the idea of psychogeography, a few years into my career as cheer mom, something about its emphasis on the exploration of arbitrary and peripheral places, and the notion of the *dérive*, the unplanned traverse of urban and peri-urban environments, with no goal but the absorption of what the built environment provides, struck home for me. I thought, “so this is what it’s called – this is what I’ve been doing, while waiting for showtime”. I read about Iain Sinclair, one of the luminaries of psychogeography, and his *London Orbital*, the story of his treks across London, following London’s outer-ring motorway, which is neither scenic nor very pedestrian-friendly, and I recognized my own paths through the disorienting and marginal spaces of strip malls and storage facilities.

I slowly came into possession of the stories of these places, facilitated by the Internet searches I did when we got home, and shaped by ambient anxieties about the state of the world, the 2023 edition. It may seem a bit jarring to go from mindless wandering around strip malls to contemplating the threat of flood and fire, but such is the condition of being awake in the mid-twenty-first century and aware that we are never as far as we think from a bad ending.

These past few years have been conducive to thinking about the end of the world while walking around the penumbras (penumbrae?) of sports and entertainment. As I type these words, I'm at home in Edmonton, waiting for another days-long blast of the hot smoky wind from the wildfires to my north. When I remember other times when I've felt that blast or seen it hovering near the horizon of the perceptible world, two places in my cheer-adjacent career stand out: Las Vegas, Nevada, and Abbotsford, British Columbia.

These places are very different in any ecological sense—desert versus river delta, dry versus humid, leaves versus sand. They're both places of excess and insufficiency, the places where stuff is stored or disposed of, where you can buy what you need for less than the cost of making it, where nobody is really at home, where the detritus of capitalism piles up and drains out of parking lots, strip malls, and underused industrial land.

### **Las Vegas, 2019**

We're here for JAMZ International Cheer competition. No one seems to know if JAMZ is an acronym, or if it just looks better spelled in all caps. The team and the moms are housed in an enormous downmarket casino a mile or two from the Strip, with a half-hearted New Orleans theme. Outside is blazing and dazzling sun, inside is artificial humidity that was not exactly moisture but a mix of warmth and smells—food reheating in the food court, carpet cleaner, cigarette smoke, and the remains of last night's beer.

The gambling floor takes up most of the space in the airport-sized ground floor and because no one under eighteen is allowed to loiter around gambling, the parents have to escort the girls across the floor to the adjacent sportsplex for competition. In the main arena, no bags of any size are allowed past security because just over a year prior, a man in a high hotel room had opened fire on a crowd at a country music festival.

I had time on my hands, thanks to the practice schedule. I brought with me a long-out-of-print book from 1958, Austrian author Robert Jungk's *Brighter than a Thousand Suns: The Moral and Political History of the Atomic Scientists*. The book itself is a missive from the 1950s, possibly the last era when a serious author could unironically invoke the idea of "moral history."

Jungk held that every era in history has a corresponding intellectual frontier, an area of thought or scholarship, which draws the brightest minds of a generation (for him, generations were composed of age-ranks of white men) and leaves its stamp upon them. He makes an explicit connection between the frontiers of the mind and the desert lands in North America where the development and testing of nuclear weapons was carried out and from which this enormous artificial city in which I find myself was carved.

In the time Jungk is writing about, for a white academic from the eastern seaboard or a visiting European scientist, the deserts of Nevada and New Mexico were wild, a world away from the cultivated urban salons they were used to. But, says Jungk, they were drawn to the desert not just by practical concerns with finding places where you could set off city-destroying bombs without disturbing too many people, but also because they imagined the sky, the wide-open spaces, the mesas, the red rocks, the Navajo spiritual practices, in their untroubled beliefs about a pre-contact, pre-settler past.

Robert Oppenheimer, the patriarch of the bomb, had gone to boarding school in the desert near Los Alamos, where he relocated his lab high up on a mesa, to build a nuclear bomb. I knew what happened next: the Trinity bomb in 1945, the first mushroom cloud rising over the horizon, Oppenheimer quoting the Bhagavad-Gita about becoming Death, the destroyer of worlds. This all happened not so far from my hotel, these young men playing with forces that could have leveled all the nations of the world.

(Some of them understood and feared the world-ending risk of their work. Jungk tells of Klaus Fuchs, a German-born Quaker, a nuclear physicist who fed information about the weapons program to a spy for the Soviet Union. Fuchs appears to have been motivated, at least initially, less by an attraction to Communism and more by the fear of what he and his colleagues might do to the world, and a desire to fend off that danger by enabling the Soviet Union to balance the power of American nuclear weapons. His father, a pastor, wrote of his son, “I can understand his extreme inward distress at the moment that he realized that he was working for the manufacture of the bomb. He must have said to himself, ‘if I don’t take this step, the imminent danger to humanity will never cease’” [173]).

By the early 1950s, the Nevada Test Site outside Las Vegas was used for earth and atmospheric tests as the American nuclear establishment expanded during the Cold War to encompass great chunks of the western deserts. Las Vegas tourism operators began promoting the city as a place for vacationers to watch the bombs go off with a drink in hand, as the mushroom cloud ascends. “Atomic cocktails” and “atomic hairdos” were promoted, and hotels offered “dawn parties,” where guests could gather at midnight to drink and dance as they waited for the flash to light up the sky in the morning. In retrospect, knowing what we now know about radiation, this seems extraordinarily dangerous. The apocalypse as a party, a fancy-dress celebration of the weapons that made the end of the world thinkable? A nuclear *danse macabre*?

I’m reading Jungk while lying on an uncomfortable casino hotel bed, eleven stories up and overlooking not the Sunset Strip but the anthills of storage and service businesses that spilled out from it. I’m bored, I have time to kill before the performance in a few hours, and these stories of nuclear history in its tragic and absurd forms draw me out of my hotel, hoping to find a way out to the desert or the rooftops of the old hotel, to see what the physicists or the partygoers saw in the moments before the clouds went up, decades ago.

Google Maps tells me that I can find a bus stop, which would take me to another bus stop, which would take me out of the city... but the maze of warehouses and light industrial sites

around our hotel defeat me. I walk across one parking lot and then another and then backtrack towards the first.

The closest I can get to the brightness of a thousand suns was the hard shimmer of innumerable chips of mica embedded in the asphalt. Some of the streets have names, some don't, and hardy bits of cacti pushed up around the base of their signs. The businesses seem to be all about the storage, movement, and disposition of goods—FedEx, U-Haul, self-storage, something to do with Amazon. Occasionally a vehicle comes up behind me and slides past, bearing names and logos of companies that did something I can't identify: Signature Expressions? Elite Systems Unlimited? Something about the geography, consisting almost entirely of low-slung buildings in shades of brown, holding the excess stuff from affluent people who lived elsewhere, spoke of contingency and inconsequentiality.

After I abandon the quest for the bus stop, I stumble on an economically-marginal thrift store run by some sort of Pentecostal mission, hanging onto a tiny slice of an otherwise vacant warehouse, and void of customers. I buy a pair of mother-of-pearl earrings and keep walking, this time with no destination, just a desire to not return to the hotel's interior climate until I have to.

Then I saw an Ethiopian coffee shop, beside a Mailboxes Etc. and a U-Store-It. I had been to Addis Ababa a few years earlier, and the smell of roasting coffee with those particular spices is unmistakable. The shop from which it emanates reminds me of a high-end café in Addis: Kaldis Coffee, whose muted brown décor, white cups, and green logo are in turn a close-but-not-too-close rendition of Starbucks. It wasn't very crowded—just two other customers, both (I guessed) middle-aged Ethiopian men, so when I ordered a coffee and a sweet, the under-occupied owner came out to talk to me.

She was a pharmacist from the highlands of Ethiopia who had somehow washed up in Nevada. The American desert felt like home, she said—she didn't like places that had too many trees. She used part of the profits of her cafe to buy pharmaceuticals for a clinic in her hometown, but said she didn't want to practice her profession in the United States. Too much unhappiness, too many people with problems that medicine can't fix.

She asked if I liked Ethiopian food and I said yes, I liked it much better than the pizzas and fish-and-chips at the casino food court. "Ethiopian restaurants are everywhere here," she replied and gave me directions to her favorites in the sprawl surrounding us. I had walked past two or three of them, but had not seen them. They were part of a shadow neighbourhood, really, not visible unless someone told you where to look, providing for the needs of people whose jobs had brought them from one desert city in Africa to another in the United States.

There is a large Ethiopian and Eritrean contingent among the drivers-for-hire of the city, taxi and limo and livery. The work is plentiful because no tourist ever rents a car, but business doesn't pick up until evening. Because the drivers live far out from the Strip and the city center, they make the trek into town and kill time at a restaurant in the afternoon, waiting for a call,

waiting out the blazing sun. Once the sun goes down, they move faster, dipping in and out of restaurants to pick up snacks in between customers.

(I went back to Google Maps to check my recall, and yes, there they are again: a string of marts and markets and cafés with one-word Amharic names, sharing parking lots with Super Pawn and Cash Title Loan, up and down South Decatur Boulevard).

The last couple of nights we spend in Las Vegas, I leave the casino-hotel complex and walk across acres of parking lot to an Ethiopian restaurant about a mile away. This time I know where I'm going. There's no sign on the front door of the restaurant, which abuts a loading dock, and it may not be entirely legal that the place exists at all. There are a few older men nursing St. George beers and watching African football on a TV propped on a rolling cart. I buy vegetarian combos with spongy, sour injera bread and weave my way back to the casino, in and out of the circles of light cast by the streetlamps on the vacant spaces.

### **Abbotsford**

It's the middle of November 2021, and I'm in Edmonton reading about the floods inundating British Columbia. Pundits are saying this could be the biggest natural disaster since white people arrived. Highways are gone completely and the time to fix them is being estimated in months, not days or weeks. The city of Vancouver is, incredibly, an island, with no road or rail access to the rest of Canada.

I always thought that if British Columbia were to be devastated, it would be an earthquake or fire or maybe rising sea levels on the coast—I did not foresee mudslides taking out the infrastructure. The fact that I can imagine several different but very plausible weather-related disasters afflicting inland British Columbia, yet still be surprised by the one that actually happens, tells me that things are indeed sliding in all directions.

The epicentre of the floods appears to be Abbotsford. I know Abbotsford in a glancing way, the way you know a place that is slightly familiar but not really noteworthy. I was there in 2019, just before the pandemic, for CheerFest. The athletes and their moms stayed in two nondescript and nearly empty chain motels (a Super 8 and a Motel 6, if memory serves) on either side of an arterial highway buzzing with streaks of inbound Vancouver commuters.

On warm-up day, the teams were practicing in the Travex Centre, a cavernous sportsplex that is the architectural vernacular of western towns, and I was once again tired of my motel room. There was no performance that day, which would require me to orbit the arena until it was time to show up and applaud. I had time for a walk. No destination presented itself, besides the drive-through Tim Horton's between the two motels, so I decided for no reason to walk to what my phone told me was downtown Abbotsford.

However, the lines on the map on my phone did not correspond to the ground under my feet. It took me several tries to get across the arterials and when I got to the main road, it was not meant for walkers, with a raggedy and alarmingly narrow strip of wet grass beside the

pavement and a few places selling gas and fast food to commuters. I walked in circles for about twenty minutes, as the rain stopped and started, coming around again and again to the same convenience store/gas station combination. Everything looked like it had been built in the last ten years, which confounded my attempts to navigate with landmarks.

When I finally found my way onto a barely-used rail track heading in the direction of the river, I hit my stride and hiked the last few kilometres into Abbotsford. The railroad tracks were obviously from a different era of transport than the multi-lane blacktop. They were damp and rusty, and the small storehouses that lined the tracks had tendrils of mold spidering down their cracks.

There were plenty of tents, individually and in small clusters, people sheltering in the interstices of commerce and transportation, shopping carts and bikes stationed outside the tents, and hoodies and t-shirts drying on the guylines, leaching their dampness into the heavy air. I didn't see any people—perhaps they were at work, perhaps they were sleeping, perhaps they were simply somewhere else.

I could tell that Abbotsford was a town that had seen better days. It did not remind me of the west-coast Pacific vibe of Vancouver as much as one of British Columbia's more northerly logging towns in the interior, practically in Alberta. The better days of Abbotsford, like most of those resource-dependent towns, were part of the long-vanished settler dream of railroads knitting the farmlands and the sawmills and the mines with the cities.

I emerged from the railbed near the centre of Abbotsford. I walked halfway up a low hill, a short trendy main street with coffee shops and a French bakery, plus a few lawyers' and accountants' offices that spread a few blocks to either side of a central intersection. An old harrow was parked in a spot of green, just up the hill from the tracks, a nod to the Abbotsford of a hundred or so years ago.

I bought my artisanal coffee and kept walking. When I left the elevation of main street and dropped back down onto the old railroad bed, I saw a different town, curled around the up-to-date Abbotsford like old smoke around a fire.

This older Abbotsford is a religious place, evidenced not so much by churches as by the number of Christian-run thrift stores backing onto the railroad, and the plenitude of Christian fiction weighing down the bookshelves when I went in. The most devout people in Abbotsford today, in terms of numbers, are probably the Sikh communities of greater Vancouver, but the town had conservative Christian bones. I was reminded that this part of British Columbia, like the remote towns in the north where Alberta and British Columbia meet, or the south-central Alberta stretch of prairie around Red Deer, is fundamentalist country, where Calvinists coexist with American-flavored charismatic megachurches.

The biggest Christian thrift store along the old railroad tracks in Abbotsford, however, was the Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC) operation. The MCC is not just another notch on the bible belt. MCC Mennonites are left-leaning pacifists with strong agrarian roots. They've been in

western Canada for over a hundred years, and in my earlier days traveling in Africa I found MCC international development projects had very good reputations for being well-run, honest, and integrated into their communities.

This was not a cramped slice of a building, like the store I'd found in Las Vegas—it was a multifunctional commercial establishment, well used by people buying t-shirts and plastic cups and backpacks. More stuff was being carried in by donors through the doors from the muddy parking lot—those downsizing for retirement, selling the parents' farm, clearing out storage.

I spent an hour poking around that thrift store, a warehouse of serviceable goods that doubled as a museum of mid-century farm life, with artifacts tagged to sell for a few dollars. I saw milking stools and homemade cupboards with open shelves above the drawers for showing off the good china. I contemplated for a moment the possibility of buying a hundred-year-old sewing machine that folded down into its table, but couldn't fathom getting it back home on a plane. I imagined tiny filaments trailing from each item, back into whatever useful past the item must have had, connecting the superfluous dishes, furniture, knickknacks, books, to a time before they were superfluous, before they were bundled up and put into the back seats of cars to be donated to the MCC thrift store.

Then I followed the rail bed back, out to the highway and the pedestrian-defying traffic, to wait outside the Motel 6 for the shuttle bus to arrive, dropping off the young athletes at the end of their competition day.

That was in 2019.

In the fall of 2021, after days of continuous rain, the Nooksack River in northern Washington state, which has emptied into Puget Sound for as long as anyone has been alive in the region, changed its course and turned north, into Canada, following an ancient riverbed, towards Abbotsford. According to a story on Washington's National Public Radio affiliate, geologists had predicted that this reversal was possible, and the Indigenous communities in the area have histories of a time when the Nooksack turned away from the ocean and became a "ghost river."

In climatological vocabulary, this is called an avulsion, a river rapidly abandoning its old channel and seeking a new one, driving its waters over whatever may be in its path. No one alive today remembers the last Nooksack avulsion, but the river did not forget.

In late November, the Nooksack swept over the towns and farms on the Sumas Prairie floodplain, destroying homes and businesses, killing livestock by the thousand, and cutting off lower British Columbia from the rest of the country. The Travex Centre became an evacuation centre. The Castle Fun Park, where the coaches had taken the girls for a night out, was inundated.

The trouble goes back to climate change, as almost all trouble does—the Nooksack receives the snowmelt from Mount Baker in Washington and warmer temperatures mean that snow is melting at the same time as rain is falling. The rain came from a "river in the sky" or



“atmospheric river”—an oddly poetic term. Atmospheric rivers are the air currents that carry water vapour from tropical latitudes northwards. When they pass over the land, especially if a mountain range or other landform is in their way, the river’s flow stalls, the vapour condenses, and pours down as torrential rain. The rivers in the sky dwarf their counterparts on the earth, with their flow up to ten times that of the Mississippi river at its mouth.

So—the river on the earth changed direction and sought out its old pathways; the river in the sky slowed. These are fantastical descriptions of crisis events. They sound almost like magic. The reports from the Abbotsford held other images of the fantastical—the giant sturgeon that crossed the highway on currents of water and swam into the power station, rescued by local men struggling to hold the enormous fish still; the cows that followed the motorboats leading them out of submerged pastures, some of them roped together. Things that I would never have imagined possible are happening.

These things were not happening before my eyes when I was in Abbotsford, although even then the forces that created the avulsion must have been brewing. When I look back on my half-baked *dérives*, I’m struck by how much time I spent in Abbotsford and Las Vegas, as well as Lloydminster, Red Deer, Warman, and many more places, just doing nothing. I was always waiting for the thing that was supposed to happen, waiting to go back to the arena to watch the cheer team burst onto stage, in peak performance mode, all eyes on them for three or four minutes.

In comparison, my own circumambulation of the borderlands and marginal spaces surrounding the sports venues seems especially pointless. Even when I had a destination, when I tried to go somewhere—the desert, downtown Abbotsford—the spaces themselves seemed to thwart me. I seem to have spent entire days walking without really knowing where I was, or where I would end up.

What I only half-knew, what becomes clear to me now, is that I was never outside the realm of human disasters, past or present or yet to come. I was always, am always, in the neighbourhood of great powers. The atomic bomb that I knew about; the atmospheric river that I did not (but now do). The explosions which could have engulfed the world (but did not); the roiling climate which may yet do so. Nowhere is very far from the possibility of fire or inundation, from the ends that we have unleashed upon ourselves. The danger is as close as the asphalt under my feet, the parking lots and strip malls and arterial roads that I covered mile after mile, a liminal walker, contingent, pointless, with no need to be anywhere else for the time being.

**AMY KALER** is a writer living in Edmonton and a Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta. She is a Killam Annual Professor and the recipient of awards for research and narrative writing. Her forthcoming book *Half-Light: Westbound on a Hot Planet* will be published by

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