

11-15-2023

## Surface Tension

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### Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Ryan, Kerry. "Surface Tension." *The Goose*, vol. 20 , no. 1 , article 26, 2023,

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol20/iss1/26>.

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KERRY RYAN

## *Surface Tension*

Like a pair of otters, my friend Jackie and I bum-scoot down the bank of the Assiniboine River. I feel a lightness—*whee!*—that’s been missing from this interminable Winnipeg February.

Jackie and I like to walk together in the evenings after our kids are asleep. We usually loop around the streets of our neighbourhood, talking about how to balance our desire to lead creative lives with the responsibilities of family and earning a paycheque. We don’t have it figured out yet, but knitting together our unanswerable questions as we navigate through the dark fulfills some of our ever-present desire to make something beautiful out of our days.

Walking in winter helps with my low-level, self-diagnosed Seasonal Affective Disorder, something I tried to describe to my doctor by saying “my face feels tired.” (The only follow-up she asked was if I wanted a prescription for anti-depressants. The same question she asked me about everything.) I’ve learned that moving, taking big breaths of fresh—if nostril-crystalizing—air makes me feel less tired, less trapped, more hopeful and capable.

The past few days have been difficult; a friend of mine has died unexpectedly. She didn’t die of COVID, but because she assumed she had COVID—advice that passed for healthcare in Manitoba in February 2022—she didn’t go the doctor. Her illness and death coincide with the Freedom Convoy blocking traffic and obnoxiously honking horns at the Manitoba Legislature to demand “rights” the protesters are already enjoying.

I’m sad and angry. It’s unfair, but I blame the convoy for my friend’s death. Nothing makes sense anymore, but walking helps. And the winter river is magical at night.

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Winnipeg’s character and infrastructure have been shaped by its rivers. It’s a history fraught with privilege, deep divides, and catastrophic flooding.

Six thousand years ago, Indigenous peoples met at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine, an important stop in a transcontinental trade route and rich grounds for hunting and fishing. In time, these same waters would bring colonists who established the area as a permanent trade hub and, later, deliver militia intent on wiping out Métis and Indigenous peoples.

Where the rivers meet, which we today call The Forks, a National Historic Site features green space, a market, a swank hotel where a standard room goes for up to \$499 a night, and the

Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Four million people visit The Forks every year—some to hop on a site-seeing water taxi, others to launch a canoe or skate along the rivers. It's one of the few spots that facilitates public access to Winnipeg's main waterways.

From The Forks, it's a nice walk or bike ride down the Riverwalk—a few kilometres of packed gravel that runs along the Assiniboine to the Manitoba Legislature—but you have to get your timing just right. It was built in 1989 to drought conditions that characterized the '80s, so it's seven feet lower than it should be. During spring and summer, it's often underwater or covered in the thick clay that lines the riverbeds.

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Jackie and I often walk along Wolseley Avenue, the street for which our older, gentrified neighbourhood is named. Nestled along the Assiniboine, Wolseley is known as Winnipeg's Granola Belt, home to liberal, open-minded hippies. Neighbourhood homeowners are largely white, relatively affluent, folks. There are plenty of lawn signs about welcoming and belonging, but the local Facebook page is rife with thinly-veiled racism.

The neighbourhood's name has been contentious in recent years; Colonel Garnet Wolseley was a British army general who came to what is now Manitoba in 1870 to overpower Louis Riel's Red River Rebellion. Indigenous folks have called for a renaming, but the community seems reluctant to change. Last year, someone spray-painted "Genocide Avenue" on the sidewalk.

Across the Assiniboine from Wolseley is River Heights, where sprawling early 20<sup>th</sup> century mansions and modern infills that look like dental offices run along Wellington Crescent—a street named for an early Winnipeg lawyer and business owner who bought up Métis land rights. The Crescent parallels Wolseley Avenue, the river between like jam in their sandwich.

Wellington Crescent homeowners have always been a who's who of the city. Until recently, Manitoba's 22<sup>nd</sup> Premier, Brian Pallister, lived on the street in a house that looks like a castle. While in office, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pallister split his time between his Winnipeg home and the luxury villa he owns in Costa Rica. In October 2020, protesters fed up with Manitoba's bumbling response to the pandemic set up 65 tombstones—representing the number of COVID deaths in Manitoba to that point—in front of Pallister's Wellington Crescent mansion. But my favourite jibe at Pallister was later that year; down on the river behind his home someone shoveled a skating rink in the shape of a penis. Who knows if the then-Premier even saw the Dink Rink? Probably he was in Costa Rica. In any case, it only lasted until the next snowfall.

In 2020, when we all went outside, many Winnipeg streets (Wolseley Avenue and Wellington Crescent included) were so well used by pedestrians the city closed them to car traffic. The move was controversial with River Heights residents. Most notably, the president of a foundation dedicated to human rights told media that being able to drive unimpeded down Wellington Crescent provided her with an "important mental health break."

Along the stretch of Wellington that mirrors Wolseley Avenue there is only one public access point to the river, compared to Wolseley's five, and it's hard to find. For the last few winters, some subversive has built a family of snowmen who point the way, with twiggy arms, where any old pleb can weave between multi-million-dollar homes down to the river.

But when I say *access*, I mean a place where a person could *conceivably* negotiate the riverbank. I don't mean any or every person though, I mean those with privilege, including physical privilege. These "access" points have little infrastructure in the way of stairs or railings. Those with mobility challenges or visual impairment are limited to getting onto the rivers at The Forks.

The spot Jackie and I use is steep and snowy, but we're pillowed by layers of down and Gore-Tex.

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Much of Winnipeg's riverfront is private property and premium real estate. Increasingly, unhoused folks are claiming space along the rivers, living in temporary encampments on public land because it's more desirable than staying in shelters. The 2022 Winnipeg Street Census, a point-in-time survey conducted over a 24-hour period, counted 1,256 people experiencing houselessness—a number thought to represent about one-third of the actual unhoused population. Of those surveyed, approximately 10% were unsheltered, living in bus shacks or encampments, including along riverbanks.

These encampments tend to raise the ire of nearby homeowners. The camps are often unsightly—strewn with garbage and broken household goods—and homeowners are quick to blame their unhoused neighbours when there's an increase in theft. My favourite Little Free Library (which has an interior light that switches on when you open the door) is regularly cleaned out; its owners suspect folks on the riverbank use the books as kindling. They post signs complaining about a few bad apples, though I'm not sure what they hope this will achieve. As a reader, I understand the frustration (*precious books!*). At the same time, we're talking about *discarded* books *shared* with *community*. Who's to say reading is more important than staying warm?

Living in a city built on a floodplain means Winnipeggers spend a lot of time and energy trying to tame the wildness of rivers. During the storied flood of 1950, one third of Winnipeggers were evacuated and 10,000 homes were destroyed. The devastation inspired construction of the Red River Floodway, a 47-kilometre channel that can route a swelling Red River around the city. It works, but in 1997's Flood of the Century, it almost didn't. Nine thousand Winnipeggers were evacuated and 23,000 required emergency food, shelter, or supports. Every few years, there's a call for hundreds of volunteers to help sandbag vulnerable properties many could never afford to own.

The clay-like soil on which Winnipeg sits is unstable and prone to erosion. Many private and public properties are slumping into the rivers. The city is installing riprap, huge chunks of

limestone that stabilize the bank, but only on public property. In 2020, a group of homeowners chipped in a total of \$1 million to have their section of riverbank stabilized after a hungry Red River swallowed their backyards. It's hard to imagine being able to pool that kind of cash.

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I like the word *woolgathering*, which used to refer to following flocks of sheep and collecting stray tufts of wool from shrubbery. Now it's come to mean wandering aimlessly or daydreaming. I'm drawn to the combination of wandering and collecting. When I walk, I'm often gathering material for poems, especially when it comes to encounters with wildlife.

Even walking on the sidewalks, Jackie and I tend to see more creatures together than I do when I walk alone. Once, a toad the size of a salad plate hunkered beside us on the boulevard; another time, we traced a screech owl by its sonar vibrato. A few times we've trailed a pair of foxes, endearingly criss-crossing our path. Maybe it's because we see more when we're nocturnal animals, our perception acute when our eyesight is tested. Or maybe it's because when we walk together the aperture of our hearts is open a little wider.

The Red and Assiniboine Rivers are wilderness corridors running through downtown Winnipeg. They deliver small mammals like beavers and muskrat, along with waterfowl, within a stone's throw of the city's centre at Portage and Main. Deer, foxes, and coyote use the riparian landscape for hunting, foraging, denning, and transportation. When those animals stray, or are chased from, the river, they sometimes end up in downtown traffic with disastrous results.

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I like the intimate way river walkers greet one another in the near-dark, unsure if they're passing stranger or friend, but recognizing the other as kindred nocturnal perambulator. I like the elaborately twinkle-lit tree I can see from across the river, and the multi-coloured laser lights that spray fireworks over the snow. (I've seen online complaints about this light, suggesting it scares away wildlife, but I've also seen plenty of foxes and deer using the riverbank at night.)

Even when the moon is bright, walking along the river can be tricky. The path has been trampled by hundreds of Sorels, so footing is uneven and it's hard to perceive depth from white on white. Every year there are sections of water that inexplicably remain open even during the coldest stretches. You have to use all your senses when you walk on the river in the dark.

As soon as we get down to the river Jackie and I hear it: a haunting, ethereal, drone. Jackie recognizes it first: the Freedom Convoy horns, carried along the frozen waterway. We couldn't hear them from the street, perhaps muffled by traffic or the hum of streetlamps or furnaces. The honking travels kilometres of twists and turns of the Assiniboine like breath amplified through a trumpet.

It's nauseating to realize the protest can reach me here: swaddled in darkness, friendship, my familiar neighbourhood, my winter gear. It takes me a minute to find my footing, not due to the uneven path, but because of the baffling, ominous soundtrack. We turn our backs to the sound, walk west, but we can still hear it as we talk about loss, work, family. Try to walk our way out of this winter.

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Winnipeg's rivers have long been used for winter recreation. As long as the water freezes smoothly enough, The Forks maintains a skating trail along the Red and/or Assiniboine Rivers. Varying from six to ten kilometres, it often rivals the one on Ottawa's Rideau Canal for length. Occasionally, it has stretched as far as Wolseley, but that's a rarity. It's usually open for about six weeks, Zambonied regularly.

During the first winter of the COVID pandemic, when we couldn't gather inside and it looked like even outdoor rinks wouldn't open, Wolseley residents took to the river. Volunteers created a homespun skating trail, dotted with several small, hand-shoveled rinks (including a couple for jam-pail curling), and those with augers monitored ice thickness. It happened organically: lawn furniture repurposed for skate lace-up, extension ladders packed into riverbank snow as makeshift footholds, Christmas trees turned into windbreaks. It was a great example of the creativity born out of the pandemic.

That winter was unusually mild, which made for idyllic, wholesome days spent walking, skating, skiing, tobogganing, warming up by a fire, and safely visiting friends on our neighbourhood stretch of river. But with increased use came conflict as people started laying claim to the public space. One riverfront homeowner who had maintained a hockey rink there pre-COVID, posted a sign saying his rink was for private use only. Skaters pointed out that no one actually owns the river ice. The homeowner argued that his time and effort gave him dibs. Tensions escalated, more signs were posted, media interviewed both sides of the dispute. Eventually, the homeowner caved and took down the sign, but I know the episode made some people feel unwelcome on the river.

The following winter, some neighbourhood residents organized, receiving a small grant for amenities like shovels and benches. A committee dubbed the river project Wolseley Winter Wonderland and coordinated a fleet of volunteer shovelers to head out after every snowfall. There was signage, public art, and increasing friction between those who saw the river as anything-goes international waters (read: off-leash dog walking) and those who wanted to control how and when people used the space (read: complaints about bonfires—already technically illegal—due to release of particulate matter). Maybe it was fortunate that a raw sewage spill in February shut down the whole works a month before the ice started to soften.

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By the time Jackie and I turn back toward home, walking shoulder to shoulder through the dark and cold feels like an act of resistance against the unbridled, inexplicable rage of the Convoy.

We climb up the bank, like alpine hikers, assisted by a sturdy, knotted rope someone has tied to a tree trunk. There are no real footholds and without the rope, I'm not sure we'd be able to ascend here. This practical, spontaneous kindness—installing a simple device to help a future, unknown river walker—returns me to myself, to the sense of community I sometimes feel, and always wish, for this wild, urban space.

This rope is only a few metres long but it's enough. Thick, anchored fast.

**KERRY RYAN**'s most recent collection of poetry, *Diagnosing Minor Illness in Children*, was released by Frontenac House in spring 2023. She is also the author of *The Sleeping Life* (The Muses' Company, 2008) and *Vs.* (Anvil, 2010), a finalist for the Acorn-Plantos Award for People's Poetry. In 2022, she was short-listed for the CBC Poetry Prize. Her poems and essays have appeared in journals across Canada. She lives and writes in Winnipeg.