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EMILY URSULIAK

Reflections From a Maternity Leave: The Complex History of Beaver Dam Flats and Refinery Park

When I started my maternity leave last fall, the parks near our house sustained me. With my newborn son in his carrier, I would traverse the path along the ridge, looking down on the Bow River. Sleep-deprived, overwhelmed, and at the same time in the jubilant throes of new motherhood, the land grounded me in the way that I have often relied on over the years. As a high-strung young girl, my mom, observing me spinning off my axis, would tell me it was time to go for a walk in the woods that surrounded my childhood home. It was always exactly what I needed.

I carried that lesson with me when I moved to Calgary over a decade ago, always craving whatever bit of wilderness I could find in my new urban home. When my husband, Ethan, and I bought our house a couple of years ago, the nearby access to the river pathway system was a major selling feature for me. The path system links a number of parks, with their common bond a shared relationship to the Bow River's winding path over the land. The parks closest to us are Beaver Dam Flats and Refinery Park.

At first my interaction with these parks was no different to any of the others I've frequented across Calgary. I'd wander in feeling stressed and scattered, and as I rambled along the pathways, catching a smattering of birdsong here, pausing to listen to the endless soft applause of the river there, I'd feel all that tension shed from me. During my maternity leave, that relationship began to shift and become more complex. There I was bringing my son through this landscape and his tiny presence, this fresh set of eyes seeing his world for the first time, made me realise just how fraught with tension and history this landscape was.

I was walking across wounded land. I had known this intellectually when we bought our house; we had looked into the history of the area, concerned about rumours of health issues and toxic soil. Thankfully, the area where our soon-to-be-home was had been unaffected, we could move ahead with our conditional offer without fear of poisoning ourselves and our potential future children. But now, the first of our children had arrived, and walking through the still-present evidence of the land's wounding made me wonder what he would have to say when he was old enough to notice the odd features in the park so close to our home. What was once an

intellectual awareness now became deeply personal and tied to the anxiety that many parents of my generation carry: did I make the right choice bringing a child into this world?

Of the two parks near our house, Refinery Park carries the history of the land right in its name. Beaver Dam Flats is a bit more deceptive. Sure, there are indeed beavers that live there. The woven mounds of their homes rise from the marsh areas of the park, and their incisors have sculpted a number of trees in the area. But walking along one of the many paths that wind through its woodland of balsam poplar, dogwood, and wolf willow, it is easy to be oblivious to how this land had once been at risk. You don't really get a sense of it until you move northward to where it borders Refinery Park.

The boundary between the two parks is quite clear. You see it long before you get there, looming through the trees: the CP railway bridge; the black angles of its steel construction are a bold font at odds with the curving calligraphy of the trees' branches. Then, as you round a bend in the pathway and make your approach to Refinery Park, you see the first oddities, these industrial sentinels on either side of the path, these small white metal huts. They are a disconcerting sight in what otherwise appears to be a wild, natural landscape.

From what I've been able to gather, these sheds must be pump houses, part of the reclamation project that started in 2006, after official testing confirmed soil contamination in 2001 (City of Calgary 1; "Lynnview Ridge Timeline"). Refinery Park is the result of a toxic abuse of the land by Imperial Oil. Prior to becoming a park, part of the land had been a residential neighbourhood, and prior to that, one of Imperial Oil's refineries stood on the land, where it had been operating since 1923. Closed in 1977, the refinery was torn down with little thought given to what impact over five decades of its operation had had on the environment. Instead, a year later, the area was rezoned for residential use, houses were erected and families moved in. It wasn't until 1985 that residents suspected something might be wrong when oil was found oozing out of the land in Beaver Dam Flats. While that specific area was cleaned up by 1989, it took until that official soil testing in 2001 for everyone to realize the much larger scale of the issue and the dangerous levels of hydrocarbons and lead that lurked beneath the surface. Imperial Oil refused to take responsibility for several years, until a Calgary judge ruled in favour of the province's order for the oil company to address the situation, with remediation work not beginning until 2003. While so many of the contentious battles over the land happened around twenty years ago, the land still feels haunted by what happened there.

Not long after Ethan and I moved to our home, we went for a walk around the neighbourhood with his family, an activity we'd started during the pandemic as a way to connect during those trying times and something we've kept up even as Covid has faded back into the shadows. Ethan's uncle, David, led us; he's a retired teacher who has turned his passion for local history and walks into a series of books that encourage readers to follow one of his many routes while reading about the history of the area they traverse. As we followed him, he told us interesting facts about our new neighbourhood, and then we reached the far north end of the street we were walking down. Beyond is this odd section of undeveloped land. It's not technically part of Refinery Park; it doesn't have a name at all. If you look at it on Google Maps it's just a grey,

blank patch with a newly-built playground on its very edge. David pointed out into the empty field and said, “My house used to be over there.”

When the official soil testing in 2001 revealed how dangerous the area was, the residents were offered a buyout of their properties (“Lynnview Ridge Timeline”). David had moved away from the area before any of this had happened, but by 2007, the home he had once lived in, and all of the rest in the area, roughly 150 in total, had been demolished. I wonder now how looking out over that field that was once his neighbourhood must have felt, to have a part of your personal history completely obliterated as part of such a fraught situation. When you observe the field where these homes once stood, the only evidence of their having been there is the trees that dot the landscape. If you look closely, you’ll notice that the trees, which would have been in the front and back yards of the former houses, roughly mark out the grid of the old neighbourhood. Another hint at what has been erased is the stretch of Lynnview Road that has been blocked off. Prior to the early 2000s, this main road had looped around to meet up with Millican Road. Now, when you travel north down Lynnview Road, you hit a barricade. Beyond it the road is still there, only this stretch has become apocalyptic with neglect, weeds and tree roots already shattering the cement into cracked shards, evidence of how little time has to pass before nature begins to unravel the strict geometry of urban planning.

During our first summer in our house, my parents came for a visit and we walked them past this odd wasteland, explaining what had happened. My parents were curious about the houses on the other side of the road from the demolished neighbourhood: weren’t they also built on toxic land? Why were they still standing? My research found that those eleven houses were the ones whose owners refused to leave (“Soil contamination saga”). I get it to some extent; I’m very attached to our home, not to mention the fact that all the houses that remain are right on the ridge with a beautiful view of the river valley. As part of the remediation work Imperial Oil was ordered to remove a depth of 1.5 metres of soil around the remaining homes, although when testing showed how deep the hydrocarbons were found in some lots, they had to double or sometimes even triple that depth (“Soil contamination saga”). There’s a pathway that runs behind many of the houses and this is where we took my parents next to admire some of the gardens people have planted; a few of them have even mixed vegetables in with their ornamentals. After the years-long battle Imperial Oil forced these people into, imagine having the trust to be able to plant tomatoes and kale behind your house again. It must have felt like a defiant victory, planting seeds into that soil for the first time in so many years, but I can’t help but wonder if there was still a bit of worry there too.

While the majority of the houses on the ridge remain, their owners steadfast and determined, there are a couple of lots at the end of the row that were cleared. We walked past those, working our way back to Lynnview Road, when we heard a crashing sound from the dense thicket of bushes that cloaks the steep bank. All of us looked up to see a young buck burst through the branches behind us. He couldn’t have been more than a couple of years old; his antlers only had a few points on them and his body was lean and youthful. He paused only momentarily to study us and then moved on towards what had drawn him here: a stout crabapple tree that stands in the back corner of one of the abandoned lots. We heard more

thrashing and then a second buck emerged and joined him. We stood quietly, watching. I don't think I've ever seen two bucks travelling together like that. Then the thicket became a brief whirl of snapping twigs and rustling branches as more bucks appeared, one right after the other: three, four, five, until finally there were six bucks, all circling this little crabapple tree. And then they began to attack it. I hadn't noticed when we walked by it on the way in that it was laden with fruit, but now I heard the crunch of their teeth sinking into the flesh of the apples, clipping the fruit from the branches, and the muted thud of it hitting the long grass below. All four of us stood transfixed. The deer were aware of us, but didn't see us as a threat, continuing their feasting as the sun melted into the western horizon and the kind of velvety blue dusk you can only get on a muggy day, late in June, settled across the river valley. Some of the bucks even reared up onto their hind legs to drag down the higher branches and strip the tree of everything it had to offer. Just moments ago I had been relating all the sad and broken history of this place, and now we were lost in the strange magic of this moment: this unlikely gang of six bucks happily pulling fruit from a tree with no thought about whether its flesh was filled with poison or not, unaware of the human history this place is laden with. We were all quiet on our way back; the moment felt more like a collective hallucination than a commonplace scene you'd stumble across in an urban park.

The more time I spend in the river valley over my maternity leave, one season merging into the next, the more contradictions seem to emerge: a broken place, riddled with poison; a fiercely beautiful place where lean, powerful coyotes meet my gaze with their yellow eyes before vanishing into latticework of red dogwood branches; and a comforting place where my son snuggles against my body as I carry him along the banks of the Bow, listening to the winter chatter of the river. My son often falls asleep during these many and varied walks, untroubled by this land that he isn't fully aware of yet. It's summer now and he's grown so big that I push him in the stroller. I watch his big brown eyes search the tree branches for the birds that he hears singing. We have paused at a bench in the heart of Beaverdam Flats.

I watch him take in everything around him and I think about how I will explain this place to him when he grows older. My husband and I have talked so often about becoming parents during this climate crisis, one that is played out on a smaller scale in our little section of the river valley. I always say that I have faith in the positive nature of humanity, that we can find a new way of living that will bring us more into harmony with the land and help heal the wounds we've inflicted. I don't want my son to grow up naive or unaware of what's wrong with the world. When he's old enough, I'll tell him about the history of the park, explain the funny little white metal buildings and the sections of woods bound with chain link fences that smell of oil and industrial fumes whenever you walk by them on a hot summer day. I can't hide the ugliness that's in plain sight, but I can also explain the other side of it, the signs of those working to help, and the messages the land may be sending us that show that we are on the right path.

One day I entered the park and found a sign propped up at the head of the main trail; it described a project to support pollinators that the city parks department was working on in Beaver Dam Flats. Back in 2020 some University of Calgary researchers found an endangered species of bee, the Gypsy Cuckoo Bumble Bee, in the park and since then I've observed the

work of a team of volunteers that has planted a variety of flowering plants and shrubs: clusters of baby saskatoons and wild roses amongst other species (Calgary Parks). Once they are established, these plants will blend seamlessly into the environment, but for the time being are sequestered from the rest of the forest by large wire fences. A network of pipes carries water to all of the planting areas from a fire hydrant on top of the ridge. The pipe network, the wire mesh fences: they look almost as awkward, ugly, and out-of-place as the white pump houses that are dotted throughout Refinery Park. All of these weird anomalies in these parks are ways of repairing the damage we've done. Our approaches often don't have the grace or sophistication of what the land is capable of, but when it's been wounded in such an extreme way, all of our efforts, no matter how much they stick out like a sore thumb in the landscape, are what's needed, the best we have to offer.

When my son is older, when he asks about whatever odd remnants linger by that point in the reclamation of this land, I'll tell him the whole story: how the land was poisoned, but people did their best to come to its aid. This is the kind of optimism you need to have to be a parent in this era. I have to believe that no matter how many catastrophic mistakes we've made as a species, that we will still find ways to come back into relationship with the land. I don't know how long it will take, but I feel like that is the lesson for our generation: to keep finding our way back to that place, no matter how clumsy and ham-fisted the start to that journey is.

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