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## Co-editors Notes: Moving on Land? Choose Your Instrument

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TANIS MACDONALD AND  
ARIEL GORDON

***Co-editors Notes:  
Moving on Land? Choose Your  
Instrument***

***Tanis MacDonald***

**M**oving on land—that phrase of sizeable proportions—can capture everything from Indigenous hunting and trade routes, to a history of human migration, to leisure and athletic pursuits, to animal movements on land and humans in relation with them, to our experiences of our bodies as they traverse the land for work, pleasure, or necessities of all kinds. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it almost inevitably means an engagement with capitalist systems and the need to consider our roles in those systems’ snarly, many-armed compatriots: white supremacy, patriarchy, and ableism, which work in concert to dictate who gets to move where, and how, and who does not. Access to land and ways of moving are highly regulated, and can arrive—when such opportunities do—with a set of expectations that we may chafe against. One of the ways we demonstrate our resistance is moving as we can, when we can, how we can: often pushing back against the colonial, sexist, and racist admonitions that we shouldn’t or can’t move across the land, or defying unwritten assumptions that can be as rigid as written rules.

This special issue of *The Goose* grew out of the different ways that Ariel and I have, separately and together, considered our movements across land, striving for an informed and respectful engagement with what our urban lives and desk jobs would deny us if we let them: time to understand what is being saved and lost in the natural world via habitat loss, urban sprawl, climate change, capitalist greed, ignorance of Indigenous ways of knowing, and a strange but pervasive idea (both in and out of academia) that nature writing and the environmental humanities are a mite too hippy-dippy to effect change on the crises that attend us daily. We wanted to know how others pursued that refusal to abandon the land to capitalism, to invite others to think with us about the problems and the pleasures of moving on land. We wanted equal emphasis on moving and land, two capacious subjects.

Ariel and I have been troublemakers-in-arms for about a decade, a friendship borne from many walks in Assiniboine Forest in southern Manitoba, a few more woody trails and lake walks followed in Ontario and Saskatchewan, our co-editorship (with Rosanna Deerchild) of an

anthology of menstruation writing in 2018, a shared writing residency at the Al Purdy A-Frame, and a lot of Zoom calls to keep ourselves accountable to our writing practices, such as this “Moving on Land” issue.

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### **Ariel Gordon**

This mid-August morning, I had an editorial meeting with Tanis and the rest of *The Goose* team scheduled for the same time as my weekly walk with my bookish friend/organizer John.

We started walking on Monday mornings during the pandemic, walking the Wolseley/Wellington loop, in and out of Winnipeg’s granola belt, through one of the city’s richest neighbourhood. We cross the Assiniboine River at two points on this walk, on a train bridge in Omand’s Creek Park and the twinned Maryland Bridge.

That meant that I would be on the Omand’s Creek train bridge every Monday, peering at the river, for two years. No matter what was happening, I had that standing date with my friend, with myself. And I brought whatever and however I was feeling and thinking to those walks. I was present, which meant watching the seasons slowly change and noting the flora and fauna that inhabited those spaces. I appreciate that Emily Ursuliak notes in her essay that she was stalking the banks of the Bow River in Calgary with her newborn son during those same years, thinking through what it means to pollute waterways, what it means to try to remediate the water and the land.

This particular Monday, I asked John if we could push today’s walk to the afternoon, so that my editing of movement could co-exist with my movement. Thankfully, he agreed.

This summer, the Assiniboine was very low—so much so that it looks like you could cross most of it in knee-high rubber boots—and the wider/deeper Red was sitting at “normal” water levels. The water levels are artificially controlled by the Province of Manitoba via the Shellmouth Dam and the Red River Floodway, a ring-dike that surrounds the City of Winnipeg. And probably other mechanisms that I don’t understand.

We were about to turn left, from the bridge to the central boulevard on Wellington Crescent toward home, when John said, “My friend recently showed me the staircase down the riverbank on the other side.”

And I said, “Staircase!? Show me!”

We found a hole in the chain link fence separating the train bridge from the train tracks and walked up and across. On the other side of the tracks, there was a steep dirt path down, which looked un-firm because of the rain the day before. Next to it there was a set of stairs made of rough-hewn stone, though I’m not sure they were stairs so much as bridge infrastructure. I am not afraid of heights, but my legs and hips were sore and I wasn’t confident that I could take

the big steps down. Teetering-at-height isn't my favourite leisure activity, so I tried walking sideways and then, when I still felt insecure, sat on my bum and leveraged myself down.

To his credit, when John looked back and saw my screwed-up face, my hesitation, he held out his hand to help me down, but I waved him away, having already sat down, having already committed to the scootch.

And the riverbank was cool and green and covered in plateaus of the thick clay-mud that Winnipeg is famous for: Red River gumbo. Glinting in the mud were signs of the hundred years of Euro-Western occupation of this stretch of river—old glass and china—as well as my generation's legacy, plastic. (Day-glo tampon applicators for everyone!) I stalked the water's edge, finding a few old marbles for my trouble, but John stayed up higher up the bank, unwilling to muck up his shoes. A few times, I reached out and let him help me up the bank.

"I'm a bit wobbly today," I said.

"Oh! Do you want to walk somewhere else?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Walking this way will make me less wobbly."

Eventually, my hip joint warmed up and stopped protesting and my legs lost their heaviness, but even if they hadn't, I would have wanted to keep going, because this is the body I've got and moving on land changes me.

Working on this special issue of *The Goose* has changed me too. I feel very lucky to have had the chance to collect this work, to have moved and not-moved alongside its authors, their children, and their dogs. As someone who has seen the homeless encampments along the riverbanks ebb and flow with the seasons, with pandemic scarcity and now inflation, I appreciated knowing that Duncan Mercredi walks them too, that he asks "What path did you take?" It was instructive to set the two weeks of walking Ken Wilson did along the Haldimand Tract in southern Ontario against the time it took to walk the length of dee Hobsbawn-Smith's rural Saskatchewan driveway after injury. As someone who regularly walks in the city's shadows, I recognized the liminal spaces Amy Kaler walks when not being a dance-parent in cities across Canada.

Above all, I appreciate how much these writers have taught me about how to live in this changed and changing world, as climate rewrites the landscape, the seasons, the sky.

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### **Tanis MacDonald**

Early in September, I woke up with a neck like rock, aching muscles around my right scapula, right hip and knee very unhappy. I knew what was wrong—too much time at the keyboard—and I knew that if I wanted to be well enough to teach the following week, I would have to walk. My RMT, a radical truth-teller with an intimate knowledge of musculature and a way with

a metaphor, had said to me a few days before, “These scapular muscles are angry. They are not convinced of what you are telling them.” If it was up to her, she’d outlaw the use of computer mice, that handy tool that pulls the right side of a body out of whack. She got my displaced ribs back in line and now I had to maintain them. That’s the hard part.

How much pain am I in? About 2.5 kms worth.

I walk often to unbuckle my body, to disarm it. There’s a sweet spot in my moving on land; it requires steady forward locomotion, in good shoes, carrying nothing heavier than keys and a notebook, with no sudden leaps or twists. Distracting myself from the grip of my body also helps; having learned the names of birds in the area, I am moving away from my lifelong plant blindness and starting to see that a fruit thief could do very well in almost any suburban neighbourhood in southwestern Ontario.

As the epigraph for my last book, *Straggle: Adventures in Walking While Female*, I chose these words by British writer Jay Griffiths from her 2006 book *Wild: An Elemental Journey*: “Choose your instrument, asking only: can you play it while walking?” Many of the writers in this issue note the long history of moving around as an engine for their creativity, and just as many note the problems inherent in a walk as the ultimate cure for what ails us. The art happens during the act of moving as well as in the turning of the movement into later-made art: our poems and stories and songs and wrestling with the contradictions contained in the walk as a pleasant but unproblematic pastime. Make no mistake: moving on land is loaded. Ableism reminds us *ad infinitum* that there are “good” bodies and “bad” ones. What if our instruments play songs that everyone may not be used to hearing? What of songs of the need for access, for helpful prostheses, for justice, for a politics of movement, for pushing back against idealized athleticism, for understanding that not everyone is welcomed to every public space?

It is ironic, to say the least, that the work of writing about moving on land can be harmful to my chances of actually moving on land, and maybe the time will come when I won’t write about the pleasures and problems of moving through space. But for now, I think about what Jessica Cory writes in her essay in this issue, that staying in and watching nature videos is not the solution: “watching *A Walk in the Woods* or *Wild* makes me crave the outdoors more,” she notes, and asking anyone—racialized people, women, people who identify as LGBTQA+, refugees, Indigenous people, disabled people—to stay in or stay “over there” is ridiculous.

In this issue, you’ll find writers who write about what walking is really like in our bodies, what it is to have sometimes terrible, sometimes great, sometimes frustrating or anxious, sometimes scary or hilarious or sad or hopeful encounters in moving. Like Amy Neufeld, many of us walk to manage the unmanageable, or to connect with people caught in global crises, as Stephen Collis does. We have chosen our instruments; we’ll play them while moving.

**ARIEL GORDON** (she/her) is a Winnipeg/Treaty 1 territory-based writer, editor, and enthusiast. She is the ringleader of Writes of Spring, a National Poetry Month project with the Winnipeg International Writers Festival that appears in the Winnipeg Free Press. In 2019, Wolsak & Wynn published *Treed: Walking in Canada's Urban Forests*, a collection of essays that combines science writing and the personal essay, to walk readers into the trees. *Treed* received an honourable mention for the 2020 Alanna Bondar Memorial Book Prize for Environmental Humanities and Creative Writing. Gordon's sixth book, *Siteseeing: Writing nature & climate change across the prairies*, written in collaboration with Saskatchewan poet Brenda Schmidt, is newly out from At Bay Press.

**TANIS MACDONALD** (she/they) is a Waterloo/Haldimand Treaty territory based-author of seven books and the General Editor of the Laurier Poetry Series. Her latest book, *Straggle: Adventures in Walking While Female* (Wolsak and Wynn, 2022) received an Honourable Mention for the Betsy Warland Between Genres Prize. She won the Open Seasons Prize for Nonfiction from The Malahat Review in 2021, and her writing about walking has appeared in *The Fiddlehead*, *Atlantis*, *Prairie Fire*, *Canadian Studies in Literature*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, and *Understorey*. Tanis is a Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University.