

FLYWAY
A Long Poem

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing
In the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By
SARAH ENS

PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an MFA in Writing degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make its Preliminary Pages freely available for inspection as outlined in the MFA in Writing Thesis License/Access Agreement accepted by the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in June 2013.

Requests for permission to make use of material beyond the Preliminary Pages of this thesis should be addressed to the author of the thesis, or:

Coordinator, MFA in Writing
University of Saskatchewan
Department of English
Arts Building, Room 319
9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A5 Canada

OR

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada

ABSTRACT

Flyway is a long-poem articulation of home set within the Canadian landscape and told through the lens of forced migration and its corollary of trauma. Tracing the trajectory of the Russian Mennonite diaspora, *Flyway* examines how intergenerational upheaval generates anxieties of place which are mirrored in the human-disrupted migratory patterns of the natural world. Drawing from the rich tradition of the Canadian long poem, from my roots as a third-generation Mennonite immigrant, from eco-poetics, and from ecological research into the impact of climate change on the endangered landscape of Manitoba's tallgrass prairie, *Flyway* migrates along geographical, psychological, and affective routes in an attempt to understand complexities of home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude to the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Dene, Nakota, Saulteaux, and Métis Nations, on whose homeland I live and write.

Flyway follows my Oma's immigration to Treaty One Territory in 1948 and is set in the tallgrass prairie of that place, the homeland of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene, and Métis Nations.

My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Sheri Benning whose generous insight and keen editorial eye guided the writing and revision of this project. Many thanks as well to Dr. Jeanette Lynes, Program Director of the MFA in Writing, for her unwavering encouragement, wisdom, and support.

I would also like to thank my peers: Hope Houston, Tonia Laird, Jameson Lawson, Cameron Muir, Kate O'Gorman, and Doreen Stumborg. Their companionship and feedback were and continue to be greatly appreciated. To Susie Hammond, Tea Gerbeza, and Kathryn Shalley, especially: thank you. Sharing poetry with Susie was inspiring and instructive, Tea's generosity and acuity extended far beyond the page, and Kathryn fed me baked goods and dinner more times than I can count (and she fed my soul doubly).

Thank you to my mentor, Laurie D. Graham, for walking with me during the first shaky steps of this long poem. Her perceptive questions, thoughtful and clarifying observations, and excellent reading recommendations taught me much about rendering emotional landscape, threading symbolic image, and developing poetic voice. It was a privilege to learn from her.

I acknowledge the support of the University of Saskatchewan's College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate SSHRC Master's Program. The scholarships from these institutions enabled the completion of my degree.

Finally, thank you to my family—Mom, Dad, my siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I am incredibly grateful for their love, support, and shared stories. And to my grandparents, Abram Loewen, Sarah Loewen, Gerhard Ens, and Anni Ens: you are my resting place.

DEDICATION

for my family

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE..... i

ABSTRACT..... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... iii

DEDICATION..... iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS..... v

ARTIST STATEMENT..... vi

WORKS CITED xxiv

FLYWAY..... 1

NOTES..... 98

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 100

ARTIST STATEMENT

Flyway is a long-poem articulation of home set within the Canadian prairie landscape and told through the lens of forced migration and its corollary of trauma. At a time when governmental and humanitarian bodies worldwide are grappling with the crises of seventy million forced migrants (Tran), I believe it imperative that we tell stories that make space for the processing of trauma. Tracing the trajectory of the Russian Mennonite diaspora, *Flyway* examines how intergenerational upheaval generates anxieties of place which are mirrored in the human-disrupted migratory patterns of the natural world. Drawing from the rich tradition of the Canadian long poem, from my roots as a third-generation Mennonite immigrant, from eco-poetics, and from ecological research into the impact of climate change on the endangered landscape of Manitoba's tallgrass prairie, *Flyway* migrates along geographical, psychological, and affective routes in an attempt to understand complexities of home.

When embarking on this project, it became clear to me that the long poem form would best suit the expansive narrative I wanted to explore in *Flyway*. In "Rereading the Long Poem," Uri S. Cohen and Michael Golson claim that "long poems handle long events" (2). *Flyway*'s events—the displacement of refugees, the reverberating violence of intergenerational trauma, and the ongoing environmental collapse—are events of immensity. Most critically, however, the long poem form provided a way for me to enact the idea of migration on the page.

The long poem can be challenging to define as a genre. In "Pushing the Limits of Genre and Gender," Lynn Keller makes a "partial list" of the form's varieties, including: "narrative poems, verse novels, sonnet sequences, irregular lyric medleys or cycles,

collage long poems, meditative sequences, extended dramatic monologues, prose long poems, serial poems, [and] heroic epics” (3). Despite its broad categorization, however, the long poem has, from its inception, been a vehicle for mapping the journeys of specific peoples and histories. From *The Odyssey*’s ten-year-long homecoming to *The Divine Comedy*’s pilgrimage, long poems provide the space and time to depict transformative trajectories. A long poem’s journey need not be geographical or even physical—Gjertrud Schnackenberg’s book of six long poems, *Heavenly Questions* (2010), follows the path the bereaved embark upon when at the bedside of their dying loved one. Additionally, the voyage need not be linear or arrive at a conclusive “home.” Grappling with his worsening mental illness, the speaker of Stuart MacKinnon’s *The Intervals* (1974) admits that he is “an uncontrolled wanderer in [his own] body” (49). For MacKinnon, the long poem was the form best suited to wending along the path of a roving mind.

In *Flyway*, I aim to make explicit that the long poem is itself a migration, a corridor that can move both readers and writers “from room to succeeding room” of ideas (McLennan). In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Anne Carson describes the poem as “an action of the mind captured on a page,” suggesting that the reader enters into that action through the process of reading and that “by the time [they] get to the end, [they’re] different than [they] were at the beginning” (Aitken 203). It is my hope that *Flyway* engages readers in this kind of metamorphosis as they migrate with my Oma, Anni Niebuhr, from Ukraine to Manitoba, witness manifestations of home via shared and individual memory, and follow the pendulation between call and response throughout “Tallgrass Psalmody.”

The long poem also denotes significance to its topic or subject by way of its length, its interest in documentation, and its impulse towards citation. Ezra Pound defined the form as “a poem including history” (86) and in “The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre,” Dorothy Livesay argues that “the Canadian longer poem is not truly a narrative at all” but rather “a *documentary* poem, based on topical data but held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements” (269). The Canadian long poem, then, suggests that Canada is a place with significant histories and stories, worthy of discourse and documentation. In seminal Canadian long poems such as *Steveston* (1974), *Seed Catalogue* (1977), and *Long Sault* (1975), Daphne Marlatt, Robert Kroetsch, and Don McKay parody the idea of the traditional, heroic epic (Brandt 250). However, they simultaneously assert that BC fishing villages, rural Albertan farms, and small towns along the St. Lawrence Seaway are each worthy of a long and epic attention. *Flyway*, too, focusses on an overlooked place: the Manitoban tallgrass prairie and, particularly, the rural villages created in that prairie landscape by Mennonites seeking to live apart from the world. As a settler who calls these prairies my home, *Flyway* was an opportunity for me to “explore place through the lengthening line” (Marlatt 316). By taking “a longer look at [myself] and [my] landscape,” I was able to better perceive my relationship with this land (Ondaatje 12).

Canadian long poems, especially those “multi-genre multimedia disjunctive poetic narrative dream text[s]” written from the mid 1970s onward, tend towards the subversive and ironic (Brandt 250). Kroetsch identifies two key and contradictory elements of the contemporary Canadian long poem: “the temptation of the documentary” and “scepticism about history” (81). In offering multiple, fragmented, and contradictory

historical accounts from an array of voices, the form can work effectively to undermine and resist cultural systems of power. Susan Stanford Friedman draws attention to the exclusionary politics at work in the genre, writing that “big-long-important poems have assumed the authority of the dominant cultural discourses” (10). By taking this “big-long-important” form into their own hands, marginalized writers have radically challenged and re-centred Canadian discourse on history and place. Louise Halfe’s *Blue Marrow* (1998), for example, rewrites the “Lord’s Prayer,” translating the religious words of the colonizer into Cree and invoking the voices of her grandmothers. In *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), Lisa Robertson upends expectations of the heroic subject, “dispers[ing] the tropes of the traditional epic so that the ancient male politics of Virgil’s *Aeneid* undergo a female subversion” (MacEachern). In a similar vein, Sue Goyette retells *The Odyssey* from Penelope’s grieving and rage-filled perspective in *Penelope in First Person* (2017). Throughout *Flyway*, but particularly within “Settling,” I allude to and mimic the Canadian long poem canon in an effort to demonstrate the ways in which these poems both document and address overlooked places as well as challenge understandings of home.

The references within *Flyway* to other Canadian long poems are also meant to echo the ways those poets understand the form as a demonstration of passage and process. The two major anthologies of Canadian long poems, *The Long Poem Anthology* (1979) and *The New Long Poem Anthology* (1991), include statements from their authors, and many discuss the long poem in relation to movement. According to Michael Ondaatje, long poems “show a process of knowledge, of discovery during the actual writing of the poem” (13). Kroetsch suggests that this process depicts the passage of “the

self returning from the self” (312). Both writers imply here that the experience of engaging with the long poem, as reader or writer, is frenetic and ongoing—“not the having written, but the *writing*” (Kroetsch 311). To McKay, “the long poem is an imaginative space... a time for meditation, travel, metamorphosis, loitering” (321), while Marlatt describes the form as “a movement around, based in return” (317). The emphasis these poets place on the long poem’s peripatetic nature solidifies the ways in which the long poem can invite readers into a metamorphic process or migratory journey.

By moving through a narrative of loss and displacement, of self-reflection and shared expression, *Flyway* traces a path towards potential healing, towards a place where healing might be encountered or made manifest. An integral part of this migration requires the speaking of the unspeakable, whether that be the articulation of one’s anxiety and grief regarding the environmental crisis or the naming of the long-reaching effects of individual and collective trauma. The unearthing of memory, I believe, provides a language for unspeakable speech; Marlatt writes that an “act of memory-speech translates us, carries us across, from there to here” (364). Memory-speech—that is, the excavation and expression of personal memory—is what brings *Flyway*’s speaker to Manitoba’s Tall Grass Prairie Preserve and allows her to reckon with herself and her life within that traumatized place. Though memory can become unreliable when impacted by trauma, an effect depicted in Anni’s ambiguous recollections in “Flight,” memory-speech still has the capacity to move both speaker and listener—unless, of course, it is excluded entirely by the reinforced retellings of hegemonic narratives.

In her article “The Memory of Violence,” Marlene Epp examines how this reinforced retelling or “shared memory” impacted Mennonite refugees as they

assimilated into Canadian Mennonite villages or *darps* following the Second World War (62). According to Epp, “shared memory is particularly relevant for a society or ethnic group such as the Mennonites, one that imbues history with religious significance” (62). After centuries of persecution and displacement, Canadian Mennonites built their communities in the prairies with the intention of isolating from the wider, secular world. Their collective trauma created manifestations of home with clear physical and psychological boundaries and their shared memory became an effective method of religious and cultural preservation (F. Epp 507). This shared memory valorized its lineage of Christ-following martyrs, but denied the ongoing reality of trauma and, in particular, diminished women’s memories and experiences (M. Epp 62). After once again enduring persecution in the aftermath of WWII, anything that did not “fit into the accepted Mennonite narrative of the trek out of Russia [became] submerged and even lost in the effort to preserve the ‘social memory’ of the group” (M. Epp 62).

One such narrative that did not fit into the Canadian Mennonites’ shared memory during the 1940s and 50s was that of the rape of German women by Red Army soldiers at the end of the war. Estimates suggest that between 20,000 to one-half million cases of rape occurred between 1944-45, and that number is likely significantly higher (Troeger 99). Mennonite women and children, around 35,000 of whom had been forced from Ukraine and into Germany over the course of the war (Regehr 80), were viewed as ethnic Germans by the Soviets and were therefore also the targets of sexual violence (M. Epp 60). However, the sexual violence perpetrated against Mennonite women refugees “received little attention from chroniclers of the Mennonite story during WWII” (M. Epp 60). It was understood that memories of rape “have no place in the framework of

meaning for the Mennonite community” (M. Epp 62). Because the trauma of these women challenged the Canadian Mennonite collective narrative, and because the male church leaders “were not trained or equipped to deal with the emotional trauma of these violated women,” the memory-speak of Mennonite women refugees was silenced (Regehr 99).

Flyway asserts that without the incorporation of trauma and its effects into a community’s shared memory, memory is rendered a faulty vehicle and an agent of anxiety rather than a method of movement towards healing and home. With this in mind, *Flyway*’s main narrative thread is semi-mythologized, multi-generational autobiography—an opportunity to voice what may have been the silenced memory-speak of my Oma and certainly that of many women like her. In her introduction to *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Sharon Thesen says, “long poems are frequently a form for charting a complex of stories that precede and inform one’s own” (15). By migrating through my Oma’s memories, *Flyway* enabled me to process my own understandings of self and place; in other words, “Flight” and “Settling” allow for the internal dialogue occurring throughout “Tallgrass Psalmody.”

“Flight,” the first section of *Flyway*’s autobiographical thread, tells the story of Anni Niebuhr’s displacement from Ukraine during WWII and concludes with a scene of her crossing the border to the British Zone with her mother and sister in 1945, en route to Gretna, Manitoba. I chose to write this section in the first person and from the perspective of Anni, which necessitated placing myself within the inherited familial story—the story of suffering and survival that is foundational to my family’s identity—in order to inhabit my Oma’s voice. This inhabitation required supplementing my primary sources—letters,

family biographies, and interview transcripts—with larger contextual research. I reimagined and reshaped some events to streamline divergent details, though the section’s structure and syntax is meant to reflect conflicting information, to suggest instances when trauma may have created memory gaps. The structure also illustrates Anni’s emotional and psychological state through her journey. Almost entirely comprised of couplets, each page describing a significant event or memory, “Flight” slowly disintegrates. The couplets come undone and words skitter across the page. By the time “Settling,” the second section of the autobiographical thread, begins, the poem’s lines have completely fragmented, and the first-person perspective is subsumed by an omniscient narrator, quotations from well-known Canadian long poems, letters from Anni’s long-lost brother Hans, and a collective choir—the voice of the “shared memory” whose refrain is: “the story goes.”

“Settling” explores how Anni Niebuhr and other refugee women assembled their new lives within these prairie *darps* built out of the trauma of a continuously displaced people, and how the generations that followed conceived of home and community. Polyphonic and sprawling, “Settling” moves away from the specific trauma of my personal family’s migration and into the shared but unspoken trauma of these communities, emulating the experience of the Mennonite refugees who had to alter their memory-speak in order to enter into a collective narrative.

An omniscient narrator guides the reader through the section in two registers. First, strewn across the page, the voice tells the broad Canadian Mennonite narrative in a tone that slips from tender to critical, ironic to reverent. Second, in parenthetical asides, the narrator reveals private, intimate moments and the inner, often shameful, thoughts of

Anni, her family, and other community members on the margins. I've left these phrases open, without closing parentheticals, indicating that the ideas expressed within these lines are ongoing and pervasive, resonating throughout the section.

The found text from Hans' letters, excerpted and translated from documents compiled in my family's archives, cuts through the section's many imagined voices. In the poem, Hans both calls Anni away from her new community and articulates remarkably clear ideas of identity and family. In 1962, when Hans was thirty-seven, he wrote to his mother:

Mama, when I left the family home, [you gave] me a homemade cloth for luck. On this cloth was the road to blossom and meadow and nightingales and your unchanging mother's smile and your disappointed eyes as well. I will take the cloth you gave me and will spread the cloth on the rustling grass under the rustling oaks. And all I have known will come to life on this cloth: my childhood, our separation, your motherly love. (Niebuhr)

Hans died shortly after sending this letter, making his desire to physically place a symbol of his life, his family, into the landscape of his home, among the blossoms and nightingales of his childhood, all the more urgent. Hans' perspective, that of a loved one left behind in a home that no longer exists, adds an essential layer to the questions "Settling" asks about memory, selfhood, community, and home.

Beyond integrating historical, ecological, and archival information, I also wanted to document the legacy of the Canadian long poem and its impact on Canada as a place. Following what Fiona McMahon names "the historiographic impulse embodied in the archive [and] the creative impulse amongst writers" (74), "Settling" interweaves quotations from several Canadian long poems such as *Seed Catalogue* and *Steveston*. The incorporation of lines from poems which grapple with concepts of home and identity within the Canadian context was yet another way for *Flyway* to make sense of those same

ideas, and through the “playful fragmenting of borrowed materials,” I was able to emphasize the ways in which the poems function as mythmaking texts that “form our consciousness of the past” (McMahon 74).

Finally, a chorus speaks the shared memory of the people and place depicted in “Settling.” The story the chorus tells is communal, passed down orally, repeated and transmuted, but potent. It is the story that functioned as the Mennonites’ homeland when we had no homeland, the story that allowed us to survive as a distinct people. In *Flyway*, it functions as both a faith story and a ghost story, as gossip and as gospel.

The many voices that spring up in “Settling” reflect the anxieties and values of a diasporic community and suggest that ideas of home are dialogic by nature. I focussed the section around the sites of conflict that occur at the meeting of individual and shared memory, aiming to transform the internalization of individual tragedies into speakable, collective experience. In his statement in *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Barry McKinnon writes that the long poem provides “the necessary range in which to articulate the poem’s central truth from various and variable angles and perspectives” (368). By invoking a multiplicity of voices, “Settling” both expands and destabilises the shared memory of this imagined Mennonite community to include memories of trauma, and in this way, come closer to articulating the central truths at the heart of this community’s experience of home.

Although the traumatization of the Mennonite people largely went unexpressed in Manitoban Mennonite communities from their first major settlements in the 1870s all the way to the 1950s, trauma had an overwhelming and divisive effect. Adherence to the main tenets of Mennonite belief (including biblicism, discipleship, pacifism, and

Anabaptism) helped to maintain the identity of the scattered diaspora throughout centuries of displacement due to religious persecution, war, exile, and famine. However, each wave of Mennonite immigration to Canada brought disparate church practices, biblical interpretations, and traumatic experiences, fostering so much ideological and theological confusion that by 1939, there were twenty distinct Mennonite conferences in Canada (Regehr 14). The land delivered a much-needed uniting force. At this time, “farming had become not only a preferred way of life but to many an almost sacred vocation, [providing] an ideal environment in which to carry out... church and family ideals” (Regehr 8). The importance of the family farm generated deep connections between the Mennonites and the prairie landscape; Frank Epp writes that “for some Mennonites, culture above all meant agriculture and land-based communities” (499). Of course, these land-based Mennonite communities were settlements on stolen land, part of the Canadian government’s deliberate displacement of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homes.

The aftermath of the Depression and WWII changed the Canadian Mennonites’ relationship to land; not only were these communities now home to some 7,689 recent refugees from eastern Europe (Regehr 79)—refugees who had “participated in questionable or worldly activities” (97)—but the displacement of many Mennonite men from their home communities to alternative service positions as a result of their refusal to serve in the military during the war meant that “modern urban industrial society was no longer an alien or hostile environment” (59). In fact, after decades of poverty and lost homes, “massive, land-consuming and automobile-dependent suburban sprawl... seemed a dream almost too good to come true” and those “uprooted by the war who had suffered

homelessness and statelessness particularly cherished their new homes (189). Farming, a labour-intensive but sacred extension of Mennonite faith and cultural values, became “market-oriented, mechanized, capital intensive, individualistic, and business-like, in spite of admonitions of Mennonite leaders,” and industrialization further encouraged Mennonites to migrate into cities and towns (108). This considerable movement—the 1941 census counted almost eighty-seven percent of Canadian Mennonites as rural residents, but by 1971, only fifty-three percent lived rurally and “only a little more than half of those actually lived on farms” (126)—resulted in a forgetting of shared memory maintained over centuries of turbulence and displacement. *Flyway* suggests that this loss did not result in new space for shared stories of trauma or make way for healing. Rather, because individualization and modernization “unhooks individuals from the confining grip of custom and kin” (172), the migration from family farm to city suburb also served to unhook people from the land.

“Settling” mimics this shift from community to individual, cohering in terms of both voice and structure towards its end. However, the final lines of the section depict Anni’s descendant visiting the last stand of tallgrass prairie in Manitoba in a return to rootedness and towards an invested relationship with the land. Pulling together the threads of human and ecological trauma due to forced migration, “Settling” concludes by coalescing the voice in “Tallgrass Psalmody” with the identity of Anni Niebuhr’s granddaughter. Hans’ dream vision of laying down his life’s cloth in the grass blends into his great-niece’s instinct to do the same; by journeying with Anni and exploring expressions of trauma and home through “Flight” and “Settling,” Anni’s granddaughter

begins to understand how she too might spread her cloth, her life and its inherited trauma, in the grass and trust the land's capacity to take her in.

“Tallgrass Psalmody” weaves between *Flyway*'s two autobiographical threads. In a cyclical conversation with herself, the speaker interrogates her intentions, tries to “tell the truth of [her] despair” (92), and ultimately comes to the realization that the healing of trauma may be possible if she can learn to pay attention to the place she is in, if she can quiet the dominion of the self and, without abstraction or the desire for possession, follow the “land bridge of the deer's stare into the world of things” (Lilburn 3). The setting of the tallgrass prairie, a habitat imperative to the survival of grassland bird species, is what enables the speaker's psalmody—her call and response of anguish and praise—and as the three parts move from demanding questions, directives, and accusations to more tender instruction, inquiry, and invitation, the speaker finds stillness and the landscape becomes more carefully seen and rendered.

The text along the left side of the page is in the second person and presents the speaker's self-questioning. Berating at first (“How/ many bright shells/ did you crush,/ thin, cool in/ the bluestem?”[6]; “some/ malice uplifts you” [11]), this text also guides the speaker towards reassurance (“slosh/ in to shore/ as though/ reborn” [58]; “here/ is still something/ of home” [98]). The text along the right side of the page portrays the speaker's self-conscious self-doubt and provides a slight narrative through-line for the series. Though unable to atone for or articulate clear answers to the questions she is demanding of herself (“I don't know what I'm listening for” [7]; “Wrong, again, about prayer,/ I cool my tongue,/ bite the soft end” [52]), this voice depicts a grateful integration of the self into the landscape over time (“Once, I held out my hand/ and a

nuthatch picked a peanut/ from my palm” [97]). A third piece of the conversation falls in italics in the middle of the page: lists of birds and plants drawn from texts like the *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Western North America, 4th Ed* (2010). These lists reflect the necessity of naming, of sustained attention, and of immersion into environment in order to reach a space of healing.

“Tallgrass Psalmody” is deeply and necessarily rooted in the work of eco-poetics, defined by Suzanne Wazzan as “poetry with a strong ecological emphasis or message” (2) which recognizes “the interdependence of all life on earth” (3). So how, asks Forrest Gander, might eco-poetry “register [this] complex interdependency that draws us into a dialogue with the world?” (2) How might a poem represent and recognize the interdependence of life? And further, how might it call humans to change our behaviours to better care for that life? In her review of Don McKay’s *Strike/Slip* (2006), Catherine Owen suggests that one method may be to replace the human ego with devotion and attention to non-human life. Following in this vein, the speaker’s dialogue with herself in “Psalmody” focusses around ideas of perception and attention, reciprocity and self-reflexivity, as much as it does memory and trauma.

The syntax, sounds, and shapes of “Tallgrass Psalmody” are an attempt at depicting what this kind of listening and reflecting, this self-stillness and self-lessoning, might look like; I wanted “the poem on the page [to] express an ecological ethics” (Gander 1). For this, I drew inspiration from Alice Oswald’s long poem *Dart* (2002). Echoing the sounds and shape of the river, Oswald’s poem is fluid, jumbled, a polyphonic stream of words tripping along the page. “Tallgrass Psalmody” similarly draws from a vocabulary rooted in specific prairie elements and images. The “sh” sounds

are meant to evoke wind through grass, the open vowels meant to conjure prairie sky. And the conversation the speaker has with herself is full of repetition and feedback loops, modeling patterns found in ecological processes like, for instance, bird migration. The effect, I hope, is to push the speaker away from her own consciousness and ego and into a more liminal space, one in which the prairie itself might be heard.

As the arc in “Tallgrass Psalmody” moves from mercilessness to mercy, and as the speaker’s mind settles from its state of fragmentation into one of peacefulness, the text centres more securely on image: “Storm brewing, I slouch against a hollow./ Nearby, sparrows cluster in the brush,/ tremble their tails, dig in the dust” (58). The speaker must “hold [her]self still, stay close” in order to take in this image, to truly see it (58). These moments in “Psalmody” demonstrate how solace from trauma, both human and ecological, might be found through quiet listening and witnessing. “I think,” the speaker says, “if nothing else,/ I can hold myself still enough to brush/ even briefly/ against this grace, airborne/ and tipping/ my whole face/ to the rain” (97).

It was important to me that the “Tallgrass Psalmody” be split into three parts and placed at *Flyway*’s beginning, middle, and end so that the series’ arc depends upon and reads alongside the autobiographical migratory thread. It was equally important that by weaving “Psalmody” through the poem, the damage done to Manitoba’s grassland ecosystem would be a haunting, elegiac presence throughout the entirety of *Flyway*, a reminder of our predicament as a society that has broken the emotional ties to the land on which we live.

To render *Flyway* as elegy, I applied Robert Hass’s definition from *A Little Book on Form* (2017). Hass describes the elegy as “a formal lament for the dead,” a poem “of

both mourning and consolation” (293) that includes specific elements and practices such as “pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity, the use of repetition and refrain, the reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger and cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection” (295). The speaker of “Psalmody” is grappling with the notion of how to grieve for the endangered landscape, and in employing those practices—of pastoral contextualization, repetition and refrain, reiterated questions, outbursts of anger, a journey towards consolation, and images of resurrection and redemption, specifically baptism—her psalms become elegy. “It’s another thing we do with grief,” Hass says: “[we] marry it to local earth” (308). However, if the elegy’s passage towards hope relies on pastoral contextualization, is orientation possible when the place that roots us in understandings of death is itself gone or dying? How might we find consolation through elegy if the natural cycles of rebirth and regeneration are broken? In “As the World Ends, Has the Time for Grieving Arrived?” Sue Sinclair suggests we “engag[e] fully with the dying [earth] in a palliative spirit” by being “fully present and available”—by keeping vigil. *Flyway* aims to keep this vigil, and in doing so, to “reach[...] for some principle of transformation” (Hass 315) by bearing witness to the trauma of the landscape. Jonathan Skinner, in an interview for *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, describes eco-poetics as “the pursuit of connections that reach beyond the human sphere of interest” (Hume 754). Skinner adds that “at the same time, eco-poetics acknowledges disconnection—how we are both connected to *and* disconnected from the environment” (755). *Flyway*, and in particular “Tallgrass Psalmody,” needed to delve into

this disconnection and its corollary of human-caused environmental destruction in order to enter into any kind of expression of healing.

Canada's prairies are the world's most endangered ecosystem (Kraus). Less than 1% of Manitoba's tallgrass prairie remains (Chliboyko) and one-third of migratory grassland birds are nearing extinction (Hoye). The Manitoban prairie is, therefore, a traumatized place: a place that has undergone fragmentation, industrial farming, urbanization, residential development, and resource extraction. The speaker of "Tallgrass Psalmody" must examine the ramifications of her peoples' settlement and then abandonment of the Manitoban prairie, and recognize what she herself has brought to this place and her own complicity in its destruction, if she is to say anything about trauma—human or ecological.

The traumatized landscape of the tallgrass prairie is, too, what invites the speaker's conversation. The speaker notices the environmental stress evidenced around her which sparks her punitive, even wrathful self-admonishing. However, she also senses the prairie calling her to listen and look, to spread the cloth of her life in the grass. This shift in tone "evokes one of the most important reconnections to the body's innate wisdom: the experience of pendulation," a trauma therapy that involves intentionally moving between states of stress and states of peace in an effort to regain homeostasis or "the body's natural restorative rhythm of contraction and expansion that tells us... that suffering will not last forever" (Levine 79). The landscape of the last remaining stand of Manitoba's tallgrass prairie is what draws the speaker in, providing a non-human space for her to understand her own anxieties of place as she links the involuntary displacement

of humans and birds and considers possibilities for more meaningful human migration and home-making.

In *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Louis Dudek describes an “epic element... this big wind” that runs through the long poem (356). The natural migration of grassland birds was, for me, this “big wind”—an undercurrent of energy present in both Anni’s and the speaker’s desire to come home. The *forced* migration, then, of grassland birds, and the destruction of habitats along these birds’ flyway routes which prevents them from “coming home,” provided another driving element in the form of urgent elegy.

By tracking personal recorded and oral history as well as observations of the natural world, *Flyway* mourns declining community and environmental health, explores Western society’s trend towards transience, and traces the far-reaching effects of trauma due to displacement. At the same time, *Flyway* suggests that, in the midst of massive climate upheaval and global migration, we might use story and poetry to speak what is unspeakable. In his *New Long Poem Anthology* statement, Barry McKinnon writes that “the poem helps us build up ‘new little habitats’ in the detritus and helps us live because it also contains our affirmation, hope, and joy” (368). *Flyway*’s hopeful little habitats are found and lost, left and returned to over the course of the poem’s migratory route; they are stories that speak to the ways we might expand our shared memory, reconnect with land, find ways to heal, and finally come home.

Sarah Ens
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
August 2020

WORKS CITED

- Aitken, Will. "Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88." *The Paris Review*, no. 171, 2004, pp. 191-226.
- Brandt, Di. "The Multi-genre Multimedia Disjunctive Poetic Narrative Dream Text: 'New Epic' Attentions in Contemporary Canadian Experimental Writing." *Green Matters: Ecocultural Functions of Literature*, edited by Maria Löschnigg and Melanie Braunecker. Brill: Leiden, 2019.
- Chliboyko, Jim. "A Prairie Still Standing Tall, Barely." *Canadian Geographic*, 1 June 2010, www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/prairie-still-standing-tall-barely.
- Cohen, Uri S., Michael Golston. "Rereading the Long Poem: Introduction." *Dibur Literary Journal*, no. 4, 2017, pp. 1-3.
- Dudek, Louis. "Statement." *The New Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Sharon Thesen. Talonbooks, 1999.
- Epp, Frank H. *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival*. Macmillan of Canada, 1982.
- Epp, Marlene. "The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1997, pp. 58-87.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. "When a 'long' poem is a 'big' poem: Self-authorizing strategies in women's twentieth-century 'long poems'." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1990, pp. 9-25.
- Gander, Forrest and John Kinsella. "Can poetry be ecological?" *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics*. University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Goyette, Sue. *Penelope in First Person*. Gaspereau Press Limited, 2017.
- Halfe, Louise. *Blue Marrow*. McClelland & Stewart, 1998.
- Hass, Robert. *A Little Book on Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry*. New York City, HarperCollins, 2017.
- Hoye, Bryce. "North America's migratory birds are in 'real trouble,' report finds." *CBC News*, 18 May 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/north-america-birds-ottawa-meeting-america-canada-mexico-1.3585785.

- Hume, Angela. "Imagining Eco-poetics: An Interview with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2012, pp. 751-766.
- Keller, Lynn. *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*. University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Kraus, Dan. "Why Canada's prairies are the world's most endangered ecosystem." *Nature Conservancy Canada*, 24 October 2016, www.natureconservancy.ca/en/blog/archive/grasslands-the-most.html.
- Kroetsch, Robert. "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem." *Sagetrieb*, vol 7, no. 1, 1988, pp. 79-97.
- . *Seed Catalogue*. Turnstone Press, 1979.
- . "Statement." *The Long Poem Anthology*, Michael Ondaatje, ed. The Coach House Press, 1979.
- Levine, Peter A. *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*. North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Lilburn, Tim. *Living In The World As If It Were Home*. Cormorant Books, 1999.
- Livesay, Dorothy. "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre." *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, edited by Eli Mandel. University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- MacEachern, Jessi. "On Lisa Robertson's 'She Has Smoothed Her Pants to No End.'" *Lemonhound*, 9 April 2011, www.lemonhound.com.wordpress.com/2011/04/09/jessi-maceachern-on-lisa-robertsons-she-has-smoothed-her-pants-to-no-end/.
- MacKinnon, Stuart. "The Intervals." *The Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Michael Ondaatje. The Coach House Press, 1979.
- Marlatt, Daphne. "Statement." *The Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Michael Ondaatje. The Coach House Press, 1979.
- . "Statement." *The New Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Sharon Thesen. Talonbooks, 1999.
- . "Steveston." *The Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Michael Ondaatje. The Coach House Press, 1979.
- McKay, Don. "Long Sault." *The Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Michael Ondaatje. The Coach House Press, 1979.

- . "Statement." *The Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Michael Ondaatje. The Coach House Press, 1979.
- McKinnon, Barry. "Statement." *The New Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Sharon Thesen. Talonbooks, 1999.
- McLennan, Rob. "The Penultimate Long Poem Anthology." *Rob McLennan's Blog*, 21 October 2011, www.robmclennan.blogspot.com/2011/10/penultimate-long-poem-anthology-edited.html.
- McMahon, Fiona. "Robert Kroetsch and Archival Culture in the Canadian Long Poem." *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies*, vol 74, 2013, pp. 73-85.
- Niebuhr, Hans. "Letters to Anna Niebuhr." 1962. Translated by Gerhard Ens. Family archives.
- Ondaatje, Michael. "Introduction." *The Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Michael Ondaatje. The Coach House Press, 1979.
- Oswald, Alice. *Dart*. Faber, 2002.
- Owen, Catherine. "Four Canadian Eco-Poets: Don McKay, Di Brandt, Don Domanski and Dionne Brand." *Brick Books*, 16 June 2008, www.brickbooks.ca/reviews/four-canadian-eco-poets-don-mckay-di-brandt-don-domanski-and-dionne-brand-reviewed-by-catherine-owen/.
- Peterson, Roger T. *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*, 4th Edition. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.
- Pound, Ezra. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. New Directions Publishing, 1954.
- Regehr, TD. *Mennonites in Canada, 1930-1970: A People Transformed*. University of Toronto Press, 1996.
- Robertson, Lisa. *Debbie: An Epic*. New Star Books, 1997.
- Schnackenberg, Gjertrud. *Heavenly Questions*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- Sinclair, Sue. "As the World Ends, Has the Time for Grieving Arrived?" *Literary Hub*, 8 Apr. 2019, <https://lithub.com/as-the-world-ends-has-the-time-for-grieving-arrived/>.
- Thesen, Sharon. "Introduction." *The New Long Poem Anthology*, edited by Sharon Thesen. Talonbooks, 1999.

Tran, Mark. "Forced migration in the 21st century: urbanised and unending." *The Guardian*, 16 October 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/globaldevelopment/2012/oct/16/forced-migration-21st-century-urbanised-unending>

Troeger, Annemarie. "Between Rape and Prostitution: Survival Strategies and Changes of Emancipation for Berlin Women after World War II." *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change*, edited by Judith Friedlander, et al. Indiana University Press, 1986.

Wazzan, Suzanne. "Canadian Eco-poetry Between Terror and Delight." *Journal of Faculty of Languages and Translation Studies*, vol. 49, no. 25, 2011, pp. 1-32.