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## Brushfire

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# Bushfire

by

## Ariel Gordon



I want to go walking in Winnipeg's Assiniboine Forest.

I want to go walking in the Forest—a parcel of land in the middle of the city that somehow escaped development—whenever & however I can. It's hard to explain without sounding like a dirty-hippy, a back-to-the-lander, but over the years, I've come to the conclusion that the best version of myself lives in its 287 hectares of aspen/oak parkland in southwestern Winnipeg.

This best-version thing is hard to explain. But let me try.

When I sit down to write, my goal is to write something. Something worth all the sacrifices of the writing life. Which means I am inevitably & irrevocably disappointed, even if I wind up with a coupla poems or even this essay. But when I go for a walk in the Forest, my goal is to go for a walk in the Forest. And so, having met my goal the moment I get under its trees, I'm content to spend two or three hours wandering around, getting sort of lost-in-the-woods. Sipping my tea & holding my partner Michael's hand & trying to find mushrooms to photograph.

And if I fall in a puddle or can't find any mushrooms or get swarmed with bugs, I've still been for a walk. To borrow a Japanese concept, I've forest-bathed, which is to say that I've absorbed every beneficial molecule that the plants & trees exude & I've gotten some exercise.

But here's the trick. The kicker.

On walks, I spend a few hours looking at things. Feeling things. But since Mike is seeing/feeling the same things, so there's no need to instantly acknowledge these sensations, to respond, except maybe with an extra squeeze of his fingers. Which means that walking in the forest is a largely non-verbal experience for me. Which is important, given that I've built a life around responding-to-things, out loud or in my journal or even on-line.

The quiet of these walks has an additional benefit: we see more wildlife because we're not jibber-jabbering all the time.

And because walking in the Forest feels like walking in a provincial park in the middle of nowhere, Mike & I do all we can to preserve this illusion. So we actively avoid other people, their children & their dogs, so that we can be alone together.

That can take some work, as people insist on acknowledging other people in the Forest the way they wouldn't on the sidewalks in front of their houses. They insist on meeting your eyes & saying hello. They warn you about mucky sections or about the cop issuing fines to people with off-leash dogs. I find this urban/rural dissonance, this we're-all-in-this-together feeling interesting, but it somehow doesn't affect me. Which means that I'm not the friendliest person in the world, should you encounter me in the woods. But I'm *awake*, both full & empty, quiet & quieted. And that's the best way of being-in-the-world I can imagine...

So I've pledged to periodically visit this best-version, on good days but also on rainy days. In seasons when most of the Forest's paths are under water. Hot weekday mornings.

\* \* \*

Dead deer near the train tracks along the Forest's southern border, come spring. Imagine the deer charging across, afraid of the train's noise. Wanting in/out of the trees. Imagine the body frozen all winter, overlaid with snow. Another year, in that same spot, a monarch emerges from its jade pot, wet wings unfurling.

\* \* \*

I wanted to go for a walk but Mike had the car, so I called my mother, who knew *of* but had not spent much time *in* the Forest. (The forest is a good half-hour drive across the city from my house. Also, I don't see my mum as much as I should.)

As we approached the intersection of two mulch paths not far into the Forest, we startled someone. Someone who was wearing hiking boots, socks & nothing else. He had his hand on his penis, of course.

I suppose The Forest Perv liked to be the one startling people instead of being startled, because he quickly ran away. Semi-erect.

My first reaction was shock. My second? The desire to unearth his cache of clothes & take them with me, so that he'd have to walk/drive home naked too. I also sort of wanted to apologize to my mum for introducing her to The Forest Perv.

But instead of articulating any of this, I just kept on walking & we had a conversation that went something like this:

"Was *that*..."

"Yes."

"Why *ever* would someone..."

And then we laughed at having seen a naked man *together*. At how foolish he'd looked as he trotted off.

Forty minutes later, as we were leaving the Forest, a pair of uniformed police walked up the Forest's main path. They stopped us & asked if we'd seen the naked man, as they'd had several reports.

We acknowledged that we'd seen him. The police then asked if we were okay. We glanced at each other, both startled for a second by the idea that we could *not* be okay & said we were fine. (I didn't know at the time that this wasn't The Forest Perv's first jaunt. Apparently, he sometimes chases the young women who come to the Forest from their adjoining residence at Canadian Mennonite University. This has happened often enough that women taking up residence are warned about him...)

As we walked away, I told my mum that they'd never find The Forest Perv, given the Forest's size & all the ways you can enter/exit its patchwork.

When we got to her car, my mum looked at me, wry smile on her face:

"Nice walk."

\* \* \*

Lobster mushrooms growing alongside the mulch path. Bright orange & red blobs of *flesh* that seem to *rest* on the ground instead of grow *out* of it. How I only saw one or two here & there for years until THIS year I found a spot where there were dozens of them, most too mushy & bug-infested for picking. I tucked a handful into my bag, knowing that in a day they'd be gone. Knowing that they were the product of one fungus parasitizing another...but still feeling like a thief. Washed, trimmed & sliced, the lobster mushrooms browned in butter. Five heart attacks, strangely diminished in the saucepan.

\* \* \*

I wanted to go walking in Assiniboine Forest. But I'm not sure I wanted to see that deer leg in a tree at the intersection of two paths.

How the humerus or upper portion of the leg had been cleaned to the bone & the lower, containing the radius & ulna, was intact, still covered with fur. How the limb had been hung in the trees, at eye level, where people would see it.

After years of coming upon similar deer legs, I still haven't decoded what the person who did it intends. Am I supposed to think that s/he is culling deer from the Forest's resident herd, which would make these displays of her/his trophies?

Or are the legs taken from train &/or winter-killed deer or even deer taken in legal hunts somewhere else? And if so, why? Are they part of an art project, a forest-y *memento mori*?

To me, the half-cleaned half-intact legs, crooked around tree branches, feel slightly sinister. They feel like an incoherence in a place that I go to for pattern & order...so I call whoever hangs them The Poacher.

\* \* \*

The stretch of woods where a small plane en route from Flin Flon went down, all eight passengers surviving, somehow staggering out of the trees. It created a burnt-out clearing, with blackened trunks that fell in a crisscross pattern. Ten years on, the crash site is filled in with blonde grasses but the hardened trunks lurk below, like a pond filled with deadwood. Ten years on, we spotted a duo of lost moose there, their dark flanks disappearing into the trees.

\* \* \*

I wanted to walk in the Forest but I had to go to work. I got an email from Mike mid-morning, saying that there was a fire nearby. And then another, saying *never mind*, false alarm. A few hours later, he emailed again, this time about a fire in the Forest. And this



was no false alarm. Like other recent fires, it was a grassfire at the far end of the Forest, near the CMU residences. Last time, we'd driven to the Forest right away, worried that a large swath was gone...but this time it was mid-week & we were overbooked as it was.



If I had to guess, I would say that the fires near the residences are caused by people having bonfires in a field near that entrance to the Forest, as I've come across a make-shift fire pit there before. I get that people living in tiny cinderblock rooms, people living far from home, would find a bonfire comforting & that cinders blown from their bonfire were probably what started this fire. But I also knew I should be preparing myself for the idea that people are burning the forest on purpose, that these are just arsonists with varying degrees of success/experience.

Neither of these ideas assuaged my the-Forest-is-burning anxiety, so I scoured local media websites. The articles were short & illustrated by strange pictures of firefighters

with brooms & heavy backpacks full of water. And no obvious flames, just smoke & people in bulky suits, 'cleaning up' the forest. (This fire, as it happened, was relatively close to the Forest's one fire hydrant, but others have been too far for the hydrant & its attendant hoses to be of much use...)

It was Sunday before we finally managed a visit. In our headlong rush out of the house, I'd forgotten my camera, so I borrowed Mike's camera & its BIG macro lens. I'm used to my own camera. I can make it see what I see...and using Mike's camera was like trying to look at the forest using only my peripheral vision.



Mike waited at the edge of the fire, standing amidst the yellowed grasses & downed trees while I walked between the trembling aspen trunks, raising small puffs of ash & soot.

I spent a lot of time photographing mossy tree trunks, specifically the boundary between burnt & green. It reminded me of the depth marks you see on bridges after a flood recedes, except here it marked the height of the fire & the heavy steps of firefighters between trees.

I had a bath when I got home five or six hours later. I had been pleased in a middle-aged sort of way that I hadn't gotten too dirty while tromping around, but when I climbed into the tub, I saw that my leg muscles were outlined in soot.

It was like a charcoal illustration of a leg ON my leg. So I carried the fire home in Mike's camera & on my skin. And somehow that seemed right...

\* \* \*

The harbingers. Yellow lady's slipper orchids or those white mushrooms that look exactly like teeth. The variety of native violets, strawberries & other low shrubbery in bloom. And then there's that corridor where you're surrounded by wild roses. And the smell of being surrounded by wild roses. Both of us wet & mucky practically to the knees when we got back to the car. But we still kept a keen eye out for the woman & her leashless dogs-as-big-as-ponies we'd seen entering the forest just before us, Mike muttering, "I'm sure they chased down a deer..."

\* \* \*

It should go without saying that I'm angry that someone might have set a fire in the woods accidentally-on-purpose. And I *hate* that the Forest Perv & the Poacher haunt the

Forest. That their responses to urban nature are, respectively, wagging their penises & disrespecting the bodies of the deer they take.

But this is a multi-use space. It is a *public* space. Which means people bring to the Forest what they've got: Dogs. Children. Inappropriate nudity.

And I have this idea that having access to the Forest probably keeps The Forest Perv from doing *worse* things in school playgrounds & mall concourses. It probably keeps him healthy. Or at least healthy-ish.

So I resist the impulse to boomerang The Poacher's deer legs into the woods.

I try to forgive whoever burnt the Forest.

And I walk.



**ARIEL GORDON** is a Winnipeg writer. Her second collection of poetry, *Stowaways* (Palimpsest Press, 2014), won the 2015 Lansdowne Prize for Poetry. When not being bookish, Ariel likes tromping through the woods and taking macro photographs of mushrooms.

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