

*Excerpts from*  
**City Disappearing**

KATHLEEN BROWN

*Calgary, Summer*

**The flood came while they were in bed,**

rain drops on the windows refracted the city lights on their covers.  
Their bodies were turned away from one another,  
the storm chucked torrents but the fight they had  
the night before was heavier water in the room.

*A redtailed hawk winging in the damp boreal forest.*

They sweated through the sheets, the summer night no cooler for all the moisture in the air. Hartland's breath was interrupted several times an hour by the damp tar settled in his lungs. Vera breathed through her mouth. They were sharing the same dream, a dream about a bird in a storm, though neither would remember the dream when they were woken that night. Reflections from flashes of lightning intersected the division in the bed between them.

*A hawk wing spiraling in the storm.*

Hartland stirred in his sleep, wrapped his arm around Vera's waist - his subconscious reconciliation. In the heat, his body was a soggy sleeping bag. *Heavy leaf mould on the forest floor.* He pulled at Vera's hair with his right hand in his sleep. His stroking screefed her night aside, she stirred, but did not wake. She moved her right leg between his, his thighs anchored her into him, his body attempting to erase the uncertainties that had surfaced the night before.

*Hawk slow dances over the bank of the river,  
the scent of the river disordering  
is heavy and thick, mud and pine and wet horse,  
the sweat of glaciers.  
Fish bark in air. The slick thrumming  
of slugs in the rotting layers of the wooden basement.  
The river soaks the underground.*

Hartland lolled in Vera's sleeper hold, and then a clutch in his throat triggered his nightly disruption. He coughed, a pack tonguing havoc - wolves, the bracket of his body coaxed to haunch into a straight line on his side. Vera, awake, rubbed his back, kissed him in the space between his shoulder blades. She licked the curves of his rib cage. Her spit glistened on his back, the rain fell and the shadows of the rain coursing down the bedroom windows played on Hartland's back: a shadow show of storm, his back became a mountain of rain. The dream tattered, loosened, dissolved.

*Feathers graze in air above the forest, below wet paper splits the story in two currents.*

The rain fell, and the city was a tent where they lay together with the others, all sleeping. The rain fell. The river was a caliper for havoc. The rain stalled, then fell faster. Vera's timid finger lipped Hartland's mouth. If only she could stop his cough and calm the spasms in his lungs.

Vera was coming to light. This storm not like any other storm. She forayed down a trail out of sleepiness, she studied the landscape of shadows on their bedroom wall. Her sinewy sigh. The rain gutted all doubts about her husband, about who they were to one another. If only she could lick his breath clean, erase their despair. Get pregnant. Hartland didn't care. Hartland wasn't going anywhere without her by his side, no matter what.

The future and the present collided, Vera swam up from dreams in the past tense. Hartland heard the alarm before Vera, or Vera heard the alarm before Hartland. It didn't matter. She remembered that he woke up, shot to sitting in bed, and in an instant pulled her into his chest, held her tightly against him while he listened and assessed. The chorus of the storm quieted his cough.

The sirens wound up from street level, seventeen floors through the doors and the windows. They were transfixed by the sounds of the city in distress, sat in the bed. Hartland had his arm around her shoulder, and Vera was looking at the man she loved and Hartland knew her, knew all of her. And they were right with one another but everything else was wrong.

The reliability of architecture and the consistency of routine were upended in seconds. Turmoil. The city could never be the same. The river had burst her banks and the river would touch everything, down to the core. The city would come to know submergence. Some of her citizens would not break the surface.

*The river is surging. She is a rapacious, seething wyvern.  
A skirmish into the flood plain.  
Over the banks the river flies  
below the pummeling rain  
forcing summer back to spring.  
A babble of purls, the river relaxes  
into a brutal gallop.*

The alarm clawed at their bedroom door no choice but to heed. Hartland scrambled out of bed, pulled on his pyjama pants. He ran to the window and glimpsed the surge and the swell of the Bow in the distance. A bathtub overflowing, no stopgap. Early morning workers were crowding and spreading at intersections, parting into lines, clusters, singularities. His gaze was riveted by the brown water - through the fly of the tent of the city: flood.

The streets and railtracks jawed at the edge of the river's deviation, the river ready to run her true course. The river was running away, running on, and on. She was endless. She braced herself at corners as though she had elbows, she forced the forest on Prince's Island to put its head between a copse of knees. No tree was ever bent like this from Chinook wind.

The river antagonized the city, crooning. *Thar she blows!* heaps of full garbage bags surfacing like a herd of pilot whales, lost Mustangs spyhopping rorquals. So wet this sudden and unexpected rush hour. *Shuuuuuuuuush.* Liquid tectonic.

The river finetuning destruction. Corrupting embankments, pulling up trees, coiling around pilings and pillars. She slapped at lumber as though matchstick cheeks, she shoved the weight of daily commute down Macleod Trail. The drag of debris. The river made this four lane highway into a rude, wet trench – a child playing in a backyard, playing god with toy cars..

Vera left the bed to stand beside Hartland. They looked out at the end of the world. Fire trucks made their way through half-flooded streets and stopped at building entrances to take on passengers. People were leaving apartment buildings with plastic bags full of belongings, half-dressed in yesterday's clothes. A group of female office workers waited in smart suits at a bus stop, heels and black flats. They waved at a fire truck, hoping for a lift. The buses could not possibly run on schedule. Water filled the dip in the streets that passed under the rail line between 9th and 10th Avenue Southwest. Vera would not be able to go to work that day, to drive through Mission by the Elbow. She knew she did not have to call in. This was disaster.

"We should get dressed. Turn on the news." Hartland's voice firm, certain.

Vera moved to the living room, and tried turning on the television set, but no image appeared. She switched on a lamp, then moved into the kitchen and opened the fridge, tried switching on the stove.

"The power is off! We can't stay here, H."

Vera went back to their bedroom to dress. Hartland appeared in the doorframe of the walk-in closet with the lilac pillar candle from their bedroom dresser. The flame quivered in the wake of his stuttering breath. The sun was rising by that point, Hartland outlined in an orange halo.

"If the power's out, the elevator's not working. I'll go. Let me go down and see what's happening. We're safe up here. The river isn't going to flood us out at 17 stories."

"Everyone's evacuating though. I'll come with you. We should stay together."

"You're safe here. Look, come to the window. There's no getting past 10th to the North, Macleod Trail is a river and there's no way to know what it's like to the south without going down, but if it is blocked then we'd be coming right back to the apartment anyways."

"Did you take your heart pill?" Vera stood her ground, decked out in moss hiking pants, and pink collared golf shirt. An outfit that Hartland would make fun of her for wearing under any circumstances. Vera pulled on a hiking jumper and turned to face Hartland. "I don't smoke and I don't have a heart condition. I'm going down and you're going to wait here. Our phones still work. I'll call you once I figure out what's going on."

She kissed his mouth quick, opened the door to the hall, the hall a gaping jaw.

"If I don't hear from you in thirty minutes I'm coming after you!"

The last of Vera visible in the dark hall is her pink shirt as she leaves Hartland behind.