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## Stray Thoughts and Desire Paths—A Dialogue

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## YVONNE BLOMER AND JENNA BUTLER

### *Stray Thoughts and Desire Paths: A Dialogue*

**M**onday afternoon. My son is at school for a fast three hours.

*I'm tired or filled with weltschmerz—world pain—or I'm full of open roads and longing, but the roads are short and hemmed in by ocean on every side. Don't get me wrong, I walk the beaches here and stand as close to the waves as I can. I walk in rubber boots along the wrack all winter long, throw a stick for my dog, my son in rubber boots or barefoot. I stand in awe of the vast globed horizon, the tidy clouds, the synchronicity of rolling waves thousands of miles offshore.*

*Most days, we walk from home or we drive to Island View Beach. These long months of hunkering in feel like eternal Wednesday or Wednesday again, though I know it's Monday and wonder why the day of the week holds meaning.*

**M**onday, or perhaps it's Tuesday or Thursday; I've lost track. I've lost time.

On the farm, we are in the thick of seeding after a late start, an end-of-May snow. We're flinging toward the solstice at a breath-hitching pace, sun in the sky until nearly 11:30 pm, coming up again at 3:30. The dark hours are short and precious, and we run flat-out into them after a fifteen-hour day in the fields, our bodies screaming as they hit the too-soft embrace of the mattress. I have lost track of time, just as I've lost track of what exactly hurts. It could be Monday or Friday or Sunday. The ache of my arms blends into the ache of my back, of my wind-burned skin.

*Ah, Jenna . . . we've had wind these late spring days and everything growing in rain and filtered sun, my garden of weeds and hydrangea. I am at my desk—it looks like Elizabeth Bishop's in the poem "12 O'Clock News," but with more modern devices and a pile of books rather than a landslide of a manuscript (that is held in my computer). I've pulled each book, piled and crowding this small desk, from my shelves for a class I'm teaching—these are poets my students have chosen to read and learn from: Anne Carson, Lorna Crozier, Seamus Heaney, Gwendolyn*

*MacEwen, Adam Zagajewski, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. In the upheaval of Black Lives Matter protests, in the midst of a global pandemic, I begin our first class with a video of Chantal Gibson reading, to ensure we as writers and students are reading broadly from the writing in Canada and in the globalized world. To remind us that poetry is part of the conversation, and that the conversation matters so much right now.*

I rise at 4:00 when the light through the upstairs windows becomes too much to bear. Perhaps it's also the clangour of anxiety: I am still teaching online, grading, and trying to answer what feels like a thousand daily questions over email. I am a woman of colour during the Black Lives Matter protests, walking as an ally and living in the exhaustion and anger of my own skin.

In the mornings, before my husband is up, before my work inbox starts pinging and the market garden demands tending, I reach for the words of other women. Téa Mutonji, Marilyn Dumont, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Claudia Rankine, Arundhati Roy, Joy Harjo. I reach for writing that speaks from within a caftan of coloured voices, that wraps me in familiarity. When my husband wakes, I will speak the words of the news, of politicians and protest; I will do the work of partnership, of negotiation, in a mixed-race marriage. But for now, with my cup of coffee by the woodstove in the pre-dawn cool, I can move into the day without the prickle of my guard going up. Meeting the morning in this way, in books whose voices and stories are a kind of home, has become an act of survival.

*Your reading sounds essential, that deep personal connection through others' written thoughts and words, knowledge. Conversations with my students over Zoom relate to how to write in a time of such violence. And the violence is not new, I remind them. We discuss in detail the idea of "master poet" and how I want them to think of skill and mastery, but how the idea of master carries patriarchy, old white poets, slavery, dominance of voice, and gatekeeping. Their choices are broad and expansive, though, I think. Women. Indigenous voices. Irish. Jewish.*

*And my thoughts wander to news clips, to . . . what to trust, where to send money, or how to put my body between this growing ocean of endangered lives, human and other, and what is ravaging them. Elephants are starving in parts of Asia because tourism is low, so handlers have no money to buy food. Police violence has escalated into mass protests around the world. We are still in the sixth mass extinction. We are caught in a global pandemic. I am relatively safe in my home. My students, for a few brief hours each week, will, perhaps, escape from these worries and create poems not necessarily inspired by these events and not wholly free of them, either. I think this kind of focused attention is good for the brain, the stress sensors in the brain. I also believe, though they will focus on the language, cadence, and rhythms of their chosen poets, their poems will nonetheless be located in the current, very real world.*

In the early hours before work begins in the market garden, I'm trying to teach my students how to write hard into their world, how to think clearly and argue well about what they stand for. It's not my usual Creative Writing class, it's not Ecocriticism; instead, it's a first-year essay-writing class, and these students (most of them barely out of high school) are making the jump into university at a time when higher education is utterly unrecognizable.

They come to know the wooden walls of the farmhouse from weekly lectures recorded on a laptop plugged into a solar array, and the sound of the wind in the aspens and the boreal birds. They know the name of the cat who sandbags me, without fail, every time I sit down to talk with them. Though we have never met in real life, and likely won't in these pandemic times, we draw desperate connections via email and telephone the best we can. Who are you? What matters to you? How will you stand up for your life? How will you speak your truth?

How will you choke down the fear that clatters against your teeth?

*Your fear and my own clatter like wind against a loose board here or there, garden studio or farmhouse on the open land. My fear is related to this specific pandemic, my son's health, my father's, a loose and orbiting shapeless worry. Yours is a worn satchel you've carried all your life, I imagine, remembering watching you being watched when we travelled last summer. My fear for you broils out of anger and despair, but what right have I to speak of your fear?*

*I am meandering between the flotsam on my desk and my thoughts. Between the piles of books, the empty lunch bowl, the coffee cup shaped like a beaker a friend gave me, and my own work. Ennui has taken hold of my thyroid, my pulse, my brow, and my left leg. My will. All one needs to do, I suggest to my class, is to give oneself permission to write for twenty minutes. Grab a line and go.*

*I actually do not say "all you have to do" because that sounds like I think it's easy, and I don't.*

*But.*

Until the new grass paths in the market garden grow in and fix the grid, the soil here is a tracery of desire paths. The quickest way to the rain barrel with the watering cans. The diagonal slash of the hose crossing the expanse to the big pond, and the fainter footpath beside it, made as we return tiny frogs to the water that have accidentally been sucked into the simple gravity-fed irrigation system. This path here indicates the quickest route across the garden from the compost pile to the farmhouse when it's time for a mug of tea; that path is the cutline from the outdoor shower, done at a racing clip while chased by marauding mosquitoes. They are desire paths, but made with intention: the best way to do this, the most economical way to do that. Conserving time, space, and energy for the long haul that is the running of a small farm. That is, right now, the running of a life during a pandemic. I think of the tracteries across our days, the

shortcuts and the lingerings of thought and fear, the eddies of overwhelm. The fitful forward starts as we push ourselves into momentum again.

*Desire lines are the paths we take, the informal paths. The trodden route from back door to garden studio, which I aim not to mark by stepping in new places each time. Nonetheless, the path is marked. The worn dirt line across a grass field. I'm on the path now—I'm in my many-times-patched jeans that will be a museum piece in the coming years. I'm veering off the path. It has become too worn, a deep cut in the earth, and I want my feet on level ground. I do not want to make so deep an etch, to trespass further on this one line. I walk alongside, I zigzag a little, as I've found my life not to be a series of straight lines but meanderings, writing as I go and rocking along on those perfect waves that do not always wash in where, offshore, they looked to be going.*

**YVONNE BLOMER** (she/her) is an award-winning poet and the author of the travel memoir *Sugar Ride: Cycling from Hanoi to Kuala Lumpur*. She has published three books of poetry and works as an editor, teacher, and mentor in poetry and memoir. *Sweet Water: Poems for the Watersheds*, the second of a trio of edited collections on endangered waterways, is now out with Caitlin Press.

**JENNA BUTLER** (she/her) is the author of six award-winning books. A woman of colour interested in multiethnic narratives of place, she is a professor of creative and environmental writing at Red Deer College and an off-grid organic farmer in northern Alberta. *Revery: A Year of Bees* is forthcoming with Wolsak & Wynn in Fall 2020.