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Migrations: On Breaking Isolation and the Trauma of the Familiar in a Pandemic

D. A. Lockhart

I am sitting on the forward deck of the *Pelee Islander II*, in the now not-so-odd warm day in the early part of Falling Leaves Moon, and we are approaching the large federal dock for Pelee Island at Westview. Cormorants slingshot themselves southward toward Middle Bass Island, across the even surface of Lake Erie, crisscrossing the imaginary border between nations. My wife points out the string of cars and work vans heading to the dock. It is rush hour on the island and a small cadre of vehicles move past closed-up shops and restaurants, wave-eaten shoreline, and lifeless houses. This is Pelee in hibernation for humans. Or damned near it. Midpoint of autumn and the summer luster of the island, already faded in the tint of a global pandemic, and it is easy to sense the tiredness of a slow crawl to a blanketed slumber. The slumber, the hibernation, a fact driven by our established human calendar. A calendar that has locked us in with its familiarity. A calendar that most of understand has come to be broken as we limp through a dramatically changed world. We've come for the first time since the pandemic grabbed hold of creation and strangled the familiar from it. Except here. Except the quiet of this island at the edge of Canada. We've come in search of, or perhaps despite the familiar. This is not the usual time to visit the island for mainlanders. Or so our everyday has told us.

For those that know Pelee, they know that it is high migration season for the birds here. That is nothing of a surprise. Perhaps acting on that very impulse ourselves, we have left our isolation and home-bound life for the first time in months to visit this, our island. Migrations, no matter the distance

covered, requires a departure and a coming together. This island of solitude at the center of Waabishkiigo Gchigami marks the first time we've spent more than a few passing moments with strangers. On the ferry, during the one-and-a-half-hour transit, we break our isolation with face masks and arbitrary distances. We are more aware of others by their mere proximity; the photographer, the crew members moving between forbidden spaces, the families huddled together in the forward lounge. Their presence, their movement, makes the brief window of our time together more real and tangible than any of the previous months or moments or afternoons or evenings that have passed over the last year. In this shared time, all of this is tentative. None of us move with any certainty. The familiarity, the comfort of repeated transits, is gone. Each of us wants to move as if by memory, yet hold back these motions out of the reality that has settled atop us. Fear of connection that may ultimately kill us. Our world has changed, we all know it, but all desperately push on in the way that news media, government officials, and business owners have told us to. And the ferry cuts the waters beneath us like it always has. The flag before the township hall still sways in the persistent westerly winds. There is one person standing on the deck of the Westview Tavern, likely smoking, taking in the sudden business before them. Before us is the departure part of this migration.

But what of the coming together?

Aren't there too few of us to count a coming together? We shall remain as isolated as before. Is this what generations of bird migrations have come to experience, too? We recognize how little has changed in our absence. We, also recognize how the fabric that holds those things in place has frayed and is a continual process of unwinding.

We are called to our cars below decks as the ferry comes into dock, stopping broadside to the island, then reversing into its spot on the federal pier. We move through the three stories and sparsely peopled ship. In our well-worn Subaru we wait, separated by steel and plastic and glass from the belly of the boat and our fellow travelers. Our landfall is marked by the ever-so-slight shifting of our weight,

the jarring chirp and grind as the *Pelee Islander II*'s skin rubs alongside solid footing. Our safe passage ends in the pregnant pause between stillness and the opening of the ship's loading ramp.

Car taillights and engines spark to life.

The cold metal shadow of the car deck is flooded by the sunlight afforded by the lowering of the ramp.

One by one, we and our fellow travelers are guided from the belly of the boat.

We burst into the brilliant fall afternoon light. The whole process is a momentary blur of motion and land. Even in passing, none of this feels as it should. Not familiar, not strange. It is all mechanical, but there is something askew. Isolation in hermetically sealed cars, all of us. We don't celebrate this arrival. Instead, we dissipate into the tree cover and farm fields like the other flocks passing through the island.

We can talk about isolation again. Not because of the raging pandemic. But because islands can isolate and merge. And how medicine for what ails us is often found through the gifts provided by being alone. We speak of it in negative terms, of how isolation is the second scourge of this apocalypse. We are awash in half-truths wielded by capitalists that want nothing of our world to change from its current course. This wave breaks in unending opinion pieces about shadow suicides and the type of long-term psychological damage that settlers forced on First Nations through residential schools.

It's all hyperbole.

The sort of thing politicians and propagandists build careers upon. But those half-truths have no footing in a place that has failed to garner the capitalist's eyes. A reservation against the world around us, we are afterthought here to those on the mainland. An afterthought that means no island-wide viable drinking water system, spotty internet, dirt roads, and intermittent power. And in that afterthought is an act of salvation, a lapse that lets truths of the world pour in around weekday grocery

fliers and media predictions of housing values and new farm-to-table eateries. Pelee is the world striped down to its bare essentials: dry land, sun, wind, bird song, the cries of distant foxes. We have merged then surged forward, alone from the murmur of the other cars, along the roadway we see the cars hustle down toward the ferry.

This island, a shallow-lake mountain top, an anchor of terrestrial life in a fresh-water sea, stretches out before us in canyons of some of the oldest trees in Essex County. We've come home here, surrounded by relations that breathed the same air as our ancestors, felt the steadily warming sun and air against their bodies. The living memory of the western Lake Erie basin in the form of Carolinian trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers embraces us as we drive with windows open to the island air. We make our way to a rental cottage for the weekend, our land here in no shape for our tipi. Pelee surges in waves of starlings, killdeers, guided by herons, sung into motion by wrens and kinglets. Trees, mostly still green and late-summer lush, hold fast against the fall that the rest of Canada has already mostly descended into. Pelee breathes out, and it surrounds us in the warm embrace of a family reception.

During the first months of this pandemic world we felt it shrinking to something no further in perimeter than our small urban encampment in Pillete Village at Waawiiyaatanong. The world had slowed to a quiet crawl. Our lives mirrored the isolation that we heard about through radio and nightly news broadcasts. Perhaps there were truths to their stories. The absences that ran through our new reality made it hollow, without air traffic, trains, the arrival of relations, the quiet of life without the familiar, the expected. Isolation perhaps exists only in the familiar. Or in light of its absence. It is what we believe and understand that we are missing. Our lives conceal from us the manner that we are rarely physically alone. Once the news and radio are turned off, our smartphones hidden from sight and retrieval, this realization nestles itself down. How creation creeps back into the spaces stolen from us by tight-packed urban housing, suburban tracts of neutered earth, crash of a wide-freeway, it all

becomes apparent. Creation promised to us by our ancestors returns in slow-tentative starts; wild turkeys in back allies, foxes sleeping in tulip beds, eagles dancing between skyscrapers. We are still close enough to others, there are at least hundreds of other people within a few blocks of your fortress of solitude. One is alone only in your mind. Even here on this island, with a fraction of the city's population, that notion of alone is at best wrong.

We pull up to the small yellow cottage surrounded by farm fields and an active (or as active as Pelee ever gets) quarry as neighbours. The gravel road that runs alongside the house is an afterthought. There are no people around us for at least a kilometer and yet we feel more embraced and welcome than we had in the previous half-year. Here we rest in the outskirts on an island on the outskirts of a nation. It is alive and full here despite location. Isolation is a word best suited to the world it can't possibly describe. It has no place here. The elm and sycamore branches chatting in the persistent wind. The woodpecker catching bugs from the sunroom walls, the persistent motion of startling and cowbirds. One is welcomed into a family, into a home that you've forgotten. The scent from the lake drifts in through the hedgerows, brought on the cooling air, thick with the dust from pickups floating in from distant traversed roads. There is no absence here. You know because you instantly forget about that half-life you've been sleeping through, big-box store parking lots, tight-packed dining rooms, the anger of customers required to wait more than the thirty seconds they envision as proper. Here, the dance of a chickadee from the shed to the sugar maple to car's roof-rack is all that matters. It is that very thing you know you've been missing. Since well before the pandemic shattered the world.

In isolation, this type imposed by the act of crossing a great lake and found on islands in their midst, we find a connection. We are part and parcel of the world around us. You feel it, you breathe it in through the cutting western wind. You feel it in the heavy thuds of waves crashing against the nearby northern shore. This is the world, the living breathing part, that you've missed while locked up

inside your home since late winter. It's one you've missed being locked up inside for the better part of three decades. Where I stand is relatively empty of people, yet full of life. The very antecedent of what we are told we must feel when we hear the word isolation or alone. In fact, our singular physical bodies are never alone. We are Blake's universe in a grain of sand. Our existence touches an endless array of living beings. We touch creation, feel welcome in it, because we are creation. We feel our relations through the rustle of leaves in the wind, the call of flickers as they dance through ash trees, the scraping of squirrel claws in bark as they run up the nearby sycamore. This is world that actually exists beyond marketing campaigns and nightly news briefs. It is the one that embraces us, invigorates our senses, draws us to the gift of life, of the lives we've been afforded in its presence. This reminds that there is past, a present, and a future and we are all part of it.

It has taken a migration to arrive here. The natural process by which living beings connect to the rich tapestry of a gift the land itself has always afforded us. Walls and borders have no place in the world we were gifted. One can witness the blue jays, the orioles, the cormorants move as our ancestors; at will and as required. Isolation, in its honest form, is the prison that has been crafted by distant men wishing nothing more than to squeeze each bit of power and material from the world for their own gain. One of the first moves of the torturer is isolate the victim. One of the first rules of survival is to break that isolation. Migration is that step. In motion we break those loose connections. At rest we rediscover the world unburdened by that thin-shallow understanding of life itself. To migrate is to reconnect. To rest upon the land is to contemplate and understand that connection.

Standing upon the deck at this cottage on the north side of Pelee Island on an early autumn day, I am well nestled in that second part. And this second part is the first truthful view of the pandemic world. This is the realization that any sense of isolation is misinformation, grown out of a blind comfort that has been shaken by a ripple in the fabric of how we have come to engage over time. We were tricked into a sense of comfort by Black Friday sales, smart homes, the warmth of flat-

screen televisions saturated with Netflix shows. The pandemic shattered that comfort, illustrated the hard truths of the world. We have been forced to change and then sit in the ruins of the thing we've been forced to leave behind: crowded craft beer festivals, sold-out sports stadiums, people watching from downtown café patios, sardine can airline flights. From this angle all we can see is the shattered bits of the familiar, the parts that brought us joy in lieu of trading our finite time for money. We love and miss them because they have become familiar, the things that we have always simply done to be happy and have been unwilling to see the faults of our ways. The very sort of faults that have led to a destabilized ecosystem, massive income disparities, and a raging global pandemic. We were failing Creation and each other. And must change the familiar. We must defamiliarize our place in this moment. A difficult task either to accomplish or to set out to accomplish with the bubbling trauma and disease that surrounds us. Yet we must because it is critical to survival. And survival is difficult in the best of times. That act or attempt has landed me here. A migration of sorts.

This is not to say I am unfamiliar with Pelee. We've been coming to the island for years. But it still lacks the familiarity of the everyday I've come to experience in my "home" back at Waawiiyaatanong. The old, ordered sense of movement, along numbered highways, streets named for rich colonizers, and the big-box stores that take root alongside them. The way we have come to expect our time and lives to unfold. Measured by the market economy calendar anchored by "Black Friday" and "Back-to-School Sales." An order that has gifted us with a simultaneously burning and sinking planet we've come to witness around us. And while it was always there, it was that we were far too exhausted in our old wrong ways, we could not see outside of its detritus. Our world and our lives are stratified, dramatically, and the view from afar, from the common ground beyond, was the only true manner to examine the damage. Here on Pelee there is one co-op, a bakery, a LCBO, two restaurants, and winery. Nature controls who those people are and when they arrive by the sheer force of the lake and the changes between seasons. Our calendars are set to migrations, both avian and human. As

such, our time here is measured in arrivals and departures. Those arrivals and departures are measured by seasons. Our sense of being, our sense of measurement, our connection point becomes tied to creation itself. We are no longer alone with the mechanical time-out-of-mind measurement of lives.

It is the next day as we make our way through Nature Conservancy land on the east side of the island that these thoughts come back to me. As the afternoon slides into evening, we visit the old farm field the Nature Conservancy has rehabbed into pathways of wild echinacea, naturalized tall grasses, and ponds. Before us the ultimate act of reclaiming creation from the darkness of a mechanical disconnected world. It is a breach from the common, the expected even on this island. Healing looks like this. It is a reconnection of species and ecosystems, an answer to isolation. We wander through this crack from the work-a-day soybean farms, the vineyards, the towns of cottages. Here is the island as it was engendered by Creation to be. The island before the McCormicks and generations of settlers to follow them. In the sweetened air above the restored habitat, it is easy to sense the warm buzz of space filled with life. This is the ancient honest feel of the land, from when Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee set up camp here generations before settlers plied the lakes with their migration of ferries. This feeling, too, was familiar, common. It gets at the lie of the isolation of the pandemic. Illustrates the extent to which our own choices have led to majority of loneliness in this pandemic. This restored portion of Creation is the break in our common. As our common was the result of shrinking three islands into one through the draining of marshland, reshaping the ancient familiar, making an island in this archipelago resemble the farm fields of the distant mainland. This is the island of our dreams, of our past, the must be in our future.

We walk through the field, following the trampled down portions of wild echinacea to the distant man-made hummocks, encrusted with prairie grasses and desiccate flowers. The quiet here carried by wind from the far side of the island. Only the intermittent clatter from distant vineyards chasing off hungry birds breaks it. This is the land as dreamed. This is the survival that we all wish

possible. We are alone with everything. Isolation, quiet in its means solitude, compiled in several world flowers, cloudless blue fall skies. He we are reborn into our ancestor family with each step though the field. Unfamiliar only to our recent generations, learned through urban indoctrinations of late capitalism, the life before us. Each step atop this reclaimed flower carpeted path is an homage, a healing, and return to the ancestral meaning of what it is to be alive in the vibrancy of creation.

And it is at a break in the paths that we spook from the thicket at that path's edge a flock of turkeys. They burst into daylight, the same mottled colours and texture of the Earth itself. Sprung free from a dormant earth, it is both a sharp alarm to their presence, followed by the excitement of proximity to another living, breathing, creature, and one that a great many us would not be able to call familiar. Whatever notions of isolation we still harbour are obliterated in that moment. Even in the invisible here there is life, there are our relations. In migration, we've returned home to this reclaimed field on the east side of Pelee Island, and we can witness the truth that lies ahead, that shall always lie ahead.

Our world in flux, in illness, in the quiet between greater things, is temporary.

Our isolation an imagined emotion.

Our isolation another self-imposed sickness.

And what lies ahead, through all the migrations that await us we shall behold the promises that have always been here. We are never alone, so long as our bodies touch the warmth of Creation beneath our feet.