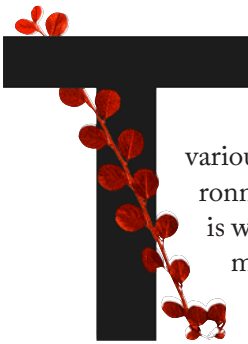


Poems from *Ravine: An Urban Field Guide*



These poems are from my most recent poetry manuscript, *Ravine: An Urban Field Guide*, which is a creative exploration of voice as it navigates the various perspectives of flora, fauna, weather and built environment that appear in an urban wilderness place. *Ravine* is written in the style of a field guide, where the left-hand margin poem writes to, for and in the voice of the many maligned culverts, weeds, grasses, small insects, elements of weather and of the built environment that populate urban ravine parks across Canada. My hope is that readers who have encountered ravine parks such as Mill Creek in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada – or one of many other such locales – might connect to the various contemporary dynamics at play in these places. In the right-hand margin, I've included poetic notes-to-self written in the manner of the marginalia many of us write in our own field guides. Three key quotations from disability scholars invested in the connection between disabled futures and urban ecologies introduce the three main sections gesturing to how rethinking what is 'natural' and desired versus 'unnatural' and maligned in these places creates a situation each of us might be invested in reimagining. The first draft of this project was funded by a literary grant from the Canada Council for the Arts for Professional Artists.

MANITOBA MAPLE

(Acer negundo)

Claimed disturbed bits of back lane,
parcels of railroad, powerline right-of-way,
from paired winged seed-fruit
to sprout to weed tree. Branches weak
and too easily broken. From so-called
nuisance calls forth a straight trunk
and wide wonderous crown for
shade, respite, nesting nooks. From floodplain
to roadside to backyard leafing out in ashy
compound fistfuls, timber declared soft, light,
too insignificant to be of value. But when
a simple wooden resting place is requested
there is box elder. This trunk, these
timbers now more than enough
to contain a spent frame.

*A cold spring,
death at every turn.*

LILAC

(Syringa vulgaris)

Suddenly bursting on the branches,
at every turn: mauve- waxy- rosy-
cream-coned mounds of unexpected

sweetness. To remain winter-secluded
in gulley and turn, those still empty
pockets of sticks, only to bring joy
out in the open, for all to taste.

*I learned young that caring too much
for my rescued kittens and backyard bunnies
would come at an incalculable cost.*

*Believed I was unable in so
many other ways.*

GIANT HOGWEED

(Heracleum mantegazzianum)

Always been taller than
the rest, wider too. Can pick me
out of a crowd. Towering stalk,

oversize leaves, huge umbel
full of smaller flowers. Bristles, purple
mottles, coarse hair too. Deep taproot.

Sap will blister skin, a rash
burning up arms. Yet at core
I'm hollow, not empty,
never porcine. Related to
carrot, once humble.

*To be prairie surrounded
by boreal forest.*

HIMALAYAN BALSAM

(Impatiens glandulifera)

Get nothing from being your exotic
other, reducing me to orchid-like
descriptions of annual ornamental?

Instead, tell me of my impact on riparian
areas. And touch me, I'm impatient—

my entire being, explosive.

*I find a question, blue ink mottled
on page, another I have yet to answer. What
makes aspen parkland unique?*

GARLIC MUSTARD

(Alliaria petiolata)

Spent half my life as a rosette
of heart-shaped leaves, waiting to help.
I am your antiseptic. Your anti-asthmatic
and anti-scorbutic. Your diaphoretic.

Haven't forgotten who brought me here.
This is why I keep the others from germinating,
why I keep them at bay, insistent and allelopathic.

Will ensure that I'm always self-fertilizing.
This silique, a time capsule loaded with 600, 700,
800 versions of the future. We will keep

watch over this woody patch, will
keep watch over you, will be here
whenever you need me again.

*These fine threads: fescue,
prairie and rough, needle-and-thread,
timber and oat grasses.*

GIANT BURDOCK

(Arctium lappa)

Caustic thoughts embolden me
 to be more of what I already am:
 tenacious lover of fur and wool,
 seed pods hooking into the most
 vulnerable of places. I came

into my own a fist of basal leaves,
 then ripened into flowers of ruddy
 over-embellishment. Bring spade, bring

fire I'm here amongst the disturbed sites
 you mostly wish no part of. Those epochs
 of back alley and ditch, lump and garbage.

*When alarms sound, fire
 or police, emergencies already
 in the making, coyotes chime in.*

Emilia Nielsen is the author of two collections of poetry, *Body Work* (Signature Editions, 2018) and *Surge Narrows* (Leaf Press, 2013), both of which were finalists for several Canadian literary awards. She is also the author of a scholarly text, *Disrupting Breast Cancer Narratives: Stories of Rage and Repair* (University of Toronto Press, 2019), recipient of the Elli Köngäs-Maranda Prize. Her latest book, *Wayfinding Disability: On Chronic Illness and Identity* is forthcoming with the University of British Columbia Press in 2027. Currently, she is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Science at York University where she teaches in the Health and Society Program.

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