

A DISTINCT AGGREGATION / A DYNAMIC
EQUIVALENT / A
GENEROUS ETHIC
OF INVENTION:
SIX WRITERS
RESPOND TO
SIX SCULPTURES

A project by Aislinn Thomas with Anna Bowen,
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Laura Burke, Catherine Frazee,
Nicole Kelly Westman, and Shannon Finnegan

Let's
imagine
for a
moment

1

CATCH

Anna Bowen responds to
Peter von Tiesenhausen's *Vessel/Enclosure*

This sculpture has a twin, placed in a field near Demmitt when I was a teenager, the yellow grass covering it like a sun-bleached bone worn into the ground by the wind.

In the woods about a quarter mile away there is an old lynx trap used only once, the memory of a skinned wildcat shutting the book on its use.

This twin vessel rests on its side here in the mountains, closer to cow elk now in their shaggy-necked calving season—it's sheltered in an enclosure, a small, wild courtyard.

This small wild courtyard is a pocket, is a sixteen-sided outdoor space formed by the windowed walls of this building. Part of the enclosure

is fenced and open. Behind the building, a mountain's peak is slate black and slivered with snow.

Outside of this enclosure are visitors with rolling suitcases and hosts with rolling luggage carts—out beneath the fir trees, human voices become part of the soundscape.

The fence and windows are for encouraging a certain kind of look—you can see the vessel from all sides if you follow the windowed hallway indoors or visit the third floor and look down on it from above, the hull resting on its hip.

The vessel has been here for nearly a quarter century but from a distance, in photographs taken once a year on the same day, has changed little. The thicker framing branches, once yellow and young have become silver. The weft too is silver now, was once the blackness of moisture and flexibility, a deep still lake on an overcast day.

The vessel bends the way the willow wants to bend. It's eight paces long by my stride and three paces wide. Big enough for six people—or two people and a pile of glistening fish.

Like a Viking faering, the vessel has been hauled onto this shore and rests on its belly. The seven ribs and gunwale are stripped willow the width

of a rake handle; the strake or planks are woven from finger-thick coppiced willow shoots. The center thwart is three branches secured roughly together with wire.

The vessel catches pinecones, fir needles, bug carcasses between its branches. The woven branches are far enough apart that in some places a person could put their hand through, a finger, a foot.

What does it mean for someone to construct a skinless boat, a leaking vessel, a basket? This boat is cupped in the hand of the mountains, in a small anthill of activity in a crux of angular land.

You can cure a toothache with willow bark. The artist's hands ached with the weaving and the willow bled its salicin into his fingers like numbing medicine.

The skinned willow boughs are worn and peeling like soft cedar bark, the type you might rub with your hand to make tinder. The willow strakes are brittle and soft—bark peels off the branches and hangs suspended like untouched strips of cloth—and heavy with lichen.

Above the structure there is a magpie struggling in the fir branches to extract the perfect twig. He turns, his wings open clumsily in the tight space

formed between the boughs and the tree's trunk.
He pulls with his black beak and tumbles out into
the air.

The lower side of the hull which rests on the
ground is spread with juniper, enacting a
decades-long embarkment of this vessel. The
boat's ribs extend another one or two feet high
beyond the side, probing the air, a memory of
livingness.

An Oregon junco hops through bright blue forget-
me-nots like sugared confetti.

The vessel holds a witness to wind, to rain, to
snow, wild rose, thistle, daisy, rolling suitcases,
tussling magpies—their flap the sound of an
unfurling flag.

Pinecones in bright rust and weathered grey
gather around its hull, have fallen here over a
thousand days. Its mouth is open to the sky and
when it drinks, the rain falls through it to the
ground and it's always thirsty. If you lay down
here on your back the juniper would swell and
lean into you with its berries as if you had always
been there.

Inside the vessel:
3 sprigs of long grass
14 spring sprouts of ragwort or goldenrod
a carpet of decaying pinecones from last season
a catchment of neatly dropped twigs
emptiness.

Outside the vessel:
The Douglas fir, with its grey bark bleeding resin
like an old candle
the resin is yellow as beeswax, so thick it
becomes white, a waterfall, frozen or rather, set.
Orange lichen blooms and cracks along the root's
thigh.

Don't forget the view from inside:
*—Are you checkin' in? Just up the stairs to your
right. Go ahead.*

Water glasses, public transit maps, a pile of
Rocky Mountain Outlooks.

Outside, the ants come to drink the sugar from
my paper cup.

OF ALL
POSSIBILITIES,
THIS ONE
HERE,
NOW

2

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Angela Marie Schenstead responds to
Brian Jungen's *The ghosts on top of my head*

ᑭᑦ
môswa
moose

Balancing one foot in front of the other, I walk
along the steel rail beam.

This particular railroad was laid down in 1930 in
north central Saskatchewan,
a make-work project to move goods, grain, and
people.

It ran through my grandparents' land—farmers,
who resented the imposition of the track cutting
through their fields, impacting yields.

My ancestors' land—nêhiyawak, who once moved freely without the imposition of fences and “no trespassing” signs.

When I was ten years old, the railroad was pulled up, the bridges that crossed sleepy streams and slews, dismantled, grain elevators, destroyed.

In place of the railroad, a wide walking path remained, winding through forest and field.

As children, my brother and sister and I would follow the path westward for several miles, to what was once our great grandparents' home—the humble structure now slowly being overtaken by the land.

The land is taking back the track too.

The walk has become a bushwhack.

Bending down, crawling under, stepping over, overgrown bramble and fallen deadfall.

The streams that the train bridges once crossed have evolved into impassable bodies of water.

The beavers have moved in. And they have been hard at work, building dams, creating homes, and providing for their families.

Flooding hay fields and muskeg.

It has become a migratory resting spot for many waterfowl, pelicans and great blue herons, where they feast on little silver fish.

The old train bridge used to cross the stream here, and when it was taken out, we hopped from rock to rock, log to log... sometimes we fell in, but it was a great adventure full of fun and laughter.

But the water is high now and there is no way to cross. At the bank where I stand, there is a section of depressed grass that suggests a large bear bum has rested and looked out over this new lake—much as I am doing now.

In the winter, the water is frozen, the impassable becomes passable.

I follow the moose tracks.

My grandfather recalls that the moose never used to be in these parts, but they are here now...

In the snow, the animal tracks reveal a healthy active and alive ecosystem.

The moose tracks are large, clearly defined hoof stamps, with wide stride.

Moving northeast, their tracks lead me for miles and miles along the path to a clearing, a marsh, where mounds of yellow and brown grass reeds poke up through the snow and heavily lean to the side in rest.

Caribou value family and community—they are stronger and safer together than apart.

Inter-dependence rather than co-dependence.

They live with awareness, in relation with the land.

So they move together, through forest and fauna, foraging and finding their way, away from humans.

A few years ago when I first moved to Banff, I swear I saw a herd of caribou at the side of the highway. As the car sped on by, I quickly snapped my head back for a second look, not believing my eyes...

A ghost sighting.

Where past and present collide.

Quantum physics bending space and time.

The last remaining caribou in Banff National Park perished in a snow slide. An avalanche on Mount Hector in 2009.

An
acquisition
and
sloughing
of details

3

IN TIME

Crystal Mowry responds to
Barry Cogswell's *Dolmen Structure #5*

You are the same colour as the lichen that grows on the nearby rocks. It is hard to imagine that is by sheer coincidence. Your low-slung posture and covert placement tell of where you believe you should be, and whose company you would prefer to be in: with the woods and in the bowl of these mountains.

Did you know that lichen is not one species, but a composite of different growths? A bloom of algae and bacteria. Often described as "mutualistic," this relationship can yield a life form that far exceeds anything you might measure on a human scale. Here, by this path, someone once told you that lichens don't age and you were forever changed by this statement. How could a life so different from yours be so audacious? Years would pass before you began

to understand what it might mean to be alive and yet untouched—by time and by hands—for years.

You once thought of yourself as a monument, though to what you were never sure. To war? Some other inconceivable loss? Or possibly the contours of the land? You lose interest in the specificity and instead conceive of yourself as a memorial to prehistory: a period whose end overlaps with the invention of writing and the age of the oldest known lichen. In your repose, you have time to imagine a future when your angles are softened and your lines become irregular. In this less rigid future, you will no longer be an armature for the land. The snow and sun and freeze and thaw from all of your years will change you too. Your paint will flake and your green will take on a rusty bloom. Your bones, like others before you, will sink into the earth and you will settle into place.

A
DISTINCT
AGGRE-
GATION

4

BRIDGING

Laura Burke responds to
Hugh LeRoy's *Papillon*

Softness
Arches
An arm extending
from collar bones
Compiled of stone,
At first glance, a feat of
Industrial satisfaction
Yet, no feet traverse this quiet path
It instead belies a beam
A rainbow
Gleaming in all of the
nuance
within the greys,
In between
Held tight by tender fingers
Cradled, suspended over dreams
that dance with whimsy

Among the spaces in and around
Humans and nature
(As if we were separate!)
An isolated rib bone of careful stone
lodged firmly in the earth's wet soil
Birthed on one side, returning
on the other
A life cycle
Resting, unassuming among mountains
like a fountain of firm, hard, smooth and jagged
little particles of evidence that this land
Once connected across tides,
on all sides
Together
Now no one walks atop these rocks
But eons ago
Ancestors tread their strong touchstone faces
Pushing out of the earth's crust
Amidst dust and wind and rising seas
A bridge between the origins
And becoming
And becoming
And becoming
And holding fast
A memory of soft curvature of land
made of pieces, crumbled into illusory
Separateness
By time
Held back together
by a knowing
A deep knowing
that each rough surface
Is formed from the same rock face

Many faces
Born of one reflection
Each piece an atomic memory
of the living, breathing land
that has refined its contours
with its gentle hand
And our hands
Mobile, tactile, warm and soft
with posable thumbs
can rebuild the pathways
from which we have come
Across rivers, ravines, mountainous ranges
which dwarf our valiant attempts
to halt these movements, these changes
of landscape
So here: a memory
of all parts,
Standing, settling, flowing
An earthen rainbow of stone
Assembled to resemble
the muscles, sinews, and bones
that compiled its soft body
Grey and firm
but beyond utility
A modest agility across
The softness
Of time

A
dynamic
equivalent

5

WELCOME

Catherine Frazee responds to
Stelco's Cabin by John McEwen

One.

If you want to know the sound of rain on *Stelco's Cabin*—for a place this lush with tree and grass and bramble must have rain—then you require a blind guide, someone like my friend Patti, who would enter a room and click her tongue and listen, and know the shape and form of her surroundings. For Patti, space was palpable.

Patti would tell you that a stiff rain strikes differently upon needles of pine and spruce than it does upon the thick fur of an animal's back.

A stiff rain will pummel the solid trusses that shape the pitch of this cabin's aspirational roof, and the raindrops will cackle their surprise to crash into steel as tall as limbless hemlock, harder than rock, colder than mountain water,

impervious to their raucous assault.

Timbers not forest-hewn, but foundry-forged.

Rain will cascade through the negative space of what the eye expects as roof, and the raindrops will leave their streaks on the flank of the slim and motionless canine perched on the cabin's sole floor joist, just as hard, just as cold, just as impervious. No fur, no back, no breath—only flank and perfect profile, marbled red with rust.

And rain, persistent and thorough, will pass through the roof that is no-roof, and the floor that is no-floor, and travel the full distance of the uncanny stilts that bring this cabin into view, and the raindrops will land, softly and finally on green ground, where slowly but surely, even *Stelco's Cabin* must settle in.

Uninformed, and without Patti to guide us, we might hear all of this, vaguely, as the sound of rain.

Two.

Of course if it rains, you might avoid the trek to *Stelco's Cabin* altogether—wherever you are headed, it likely won't be on your way. Without intention, you might never visit *Stelco's Cabin*. But you'd be missing out.

There are no markers, none of the usual

enticements. Just a lonely narrow path of no apparent promise, a dying stream of a path that seems to trickle away from the mighty magnet of creation and camaraderie at the heart of campus.

Locate that path and commit to it. You will witness *Stelco's Cabin* rising from the ground, and you will know that this is your path. Add the length of this short detour to the distance you have already travelled to be in this place, and move forward until the path surrenders itself at the edge of a ridge.

Stop.

It's a long way down, I'm told. Unless you are as surefooted as the sentinel canine who stands on the overhang, alert and confident, taking it all in—you had best stay back. Look, reach, but do not touch. Imagine the view from there, the perfect geometry of framing, this way mountain, that way village, this way endless forest. Imagine it all, but settle for the view from here.

The clearing carved for this fine homestead must suffice for your hungry eyes, for you will not, cannot enter *Stelco's Cabin*.

What cruelty is this, when you have so earnestly committed yourself to pay a visit? Perhaps a sermon on injustice? Perhaps immersion into the world of those who know the sting of baited invitation, "Come inside, join us here, be a part of

this scene, all are welcome!” Only to be reminded that “all” does not mean all at all.

A cabin calls to you from atop its stilts, impenetrable. A seeming fickle gesture, and yet not taunting, not polemic. Instead, from *Stelco’s Cabin*, a different kind of welcome. A welcome that beckons you to find another way in, another way to touch, to feel, to listen, to know... To know what welcome means.

I’ll never visit *Stelco’s Cabin*. But I have sniffed the alpine air and felt the soft dense crush of winter’s needles under my wheels. I have startled my share of marmots, yes, but the elk has also seen me, once or twice, and kept on grazing. That’s how I know that I belong.

Three.

How do you claim space?

Viking-like, in stormy bluster? As interloper, furtive and wary, cringed against discovery? Or as a settler, for many we are, mindful of our hosts here in the lands of Stoney Nakoda, Blackfoot and Tsuut’ina Nations? Do you kneel, abject beneath the weight of history’s dark booty, holding out your naked heart in quiet gesture of atonement?

Having no title, are you yet certain of stride and purpose? Do you stake your claim in flame-cut steel, demanding vista and dominion? Or like the

wolf, do you plant your scent and fill the air with exuberant chorus... at times... all the while as you study every sign for boundary, presence and history.

Are you the invited, or “plus one”?

Do you name your baby girl Stelco? So that people will ask, not quite hearing, “Her name is Stella?” So that you will say, “No. Stelco. Strong as steel.” And proudly, she will say, years later, “Forged by fire.” Thus claiming space. Just try to build a world without her.

There are many ways to claim space.

Just ask Stelco, the canine, eponym of this cabin. He moved east, I am told, decades ago. This, a true story. Stelco moved east and grew old, and his spine disintegrated but his life force did not. So the artist gave him wheels like mine. And on those wheels, for many seasons, he navigated the sidewalks of a great settlement.

Along the way, I expect he learned the deep lessons of wheeled peoples. That oddity and stares are at times the price to be paid for claiming space... But that the love that lifts us onto wheels and over ridges is a sacred and ennobling love.

Patti is gone now. Stelco too. Sooner or later the rain will pass through all of us like shadow. But *Stelco’s Cabin*, for now, is here to stay.

A
GENEROUS
ETHIC OF
INVENTION

6

I AM SORRY I DIDN'T
CALL - A POEM FOR A
NOW-VACANT SITE

Nicole Kelly Westman responds to Sharon Moodie's
I don't want a massage, I want a miracle (1989-2017)

In the days when she stood here,
she was bathed in golden hour dappled light
from fluttering shadows of swaying pines
coniferous limbs dancing into an ever-exuberant
setting sun.

she stood beneath full moons
and disappeared in the murky fog of forest fire
smoke.
she was cloaked in blankets of snow for many
blizzarding winters
and again
and again
and again she was revealed by the melting of
spring.

but, now the only remnants are faded fraudulent
rocks
camouflaged in a mesh of grass and gravel.
scattered amongst complimenting severed
shards
detached from their binding collage.
like boulders balanced between glacial currents.
no longer a part of the mountain that once held
them.
no longer so rigid with identifiable edges.
no longer holding the purpose they once had.

she weathered many tenuous storms
resting upon a terrain of severe extremes.
while she stood she held her space without the
support structures bestowed to those around her.
without the didactic
without the curatorial context
without the records of maintenance in the
addendum of condition reports.
so, slowly and subtly she relinquished from her
pebbled bed foundation.
until her precariously ephemeral lifespan abruptly
concluded.
all that stands here now is impermanence
as a question to the relevance of permanence
permeates this site.

a binary begins to form
to segregate the alumni that remember her from
the new residents that may never know she was
here.
for me, she became a marker for a moment in

time recorded by a field of memory.
a metaphor for the political capacities of resisting
from the outside.
a visual critique poignantly critical of the
continuation of systemic inequalities
an overtly feminine passageway that lasted only
long enough to embrace some of us.

she was once embossed with Venus of Willendorf
replicas
and Barbie busts.
inscribed with text-based sentiments like 'punk
junk'
and curt curses like 'fuck face'
slotted amongst ceramics scribed with concerns
like
'sentimentality is a superstructure covering
brutality'
or
'hierarchy is just their control device against free
spirits.'
you must trust me as I attempt to describe her
aesthetic appeal
as she is not googleable now
just as she was not commissionable then.

I suppose for some she lost her lustre
after twenty-nine years of remaining as
a mosaic,
a memento,
a site marker.
a signal of resistance
until finally she was but a resignation.

she was a visual balance of rhythmic chaos.
in complement to the complexities of ever-
evolving theories relational to feminism.

recorded in recent archives,
are documents depicting her final celebration.
under the moon and amongst many friends
she was gazed upon and rested on.
as they gathered together to sit on blankets
they talked of gossip and then of art
with the origins of their quest
to share in a love for the poetic
to sit with her and wait in these moments of
finality
to praise her for her long-standing commitments
to feminism
to learn she had a name we never knew and
never used.

colloquially she was known as the feminist arch.
but her truest name was,
I don't want a massage, I want a miracle.
in thinking of this naming
I lust for an era that desires considered consent
one that is mindfully cognizant of the overt
consolation in offering touch over tangential
change.
I too await this forlorn miracle as I fend off
mediocre offers of suggestive caress commonly
exchanged in the prowl of power.

I sit where you once were
in an area now sanctioned off for construction
supplies.

I begin plucking from the earth what remains,
assembling
a constellation of ceramics in my palm.
a faded yellow
a brushstroked orange
a swirling lilac
a black wave jutting onto a sunset pink
an oscillation of sage and evergreen.

I think of this modest foraged collection
finding its way into a new arch.
an arch with varying intersections
an arch built by the hands of many
an arch depicting the temporality of listening
an arch that resists the monumental.
what I want is a miracle but what I've got is a
mirage.

The text drawings throughout this publication are a collaboration between Shannon Finnegan and Aislinn Thomas. The ongoing series, titled *A seat at the table, a slice of the pie*, is the result of a dialogue between the artists about the practice of visual description.

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A DISTINCT AGREE -