

# the new quarterly

CANADIAN WRITERS & WRITING

**THE CASE FOR MIND WANDERING:** in which we:  
discover our father by working for him, get up at dawn to  
watch the birds, learn hard lessons from a snow storm, and see  
wolverines in the park.

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+ New fiction by Canisia Lubrin

+ New essays by Lorna Crozier, Robyn Sarah, and Vinh Nguyen

+ Falling in Love with Poetry with Mia Anderson

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# Roadways

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**GEOFF MARTIN**

**Route:**

noun \ˈrūt, ˈraūt\

1. A way or course taken in getting from a starting point to a destination. From the Vulgar Latin, *rupta*—literally, a broken way.

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The roads weave strange routes along the township borders that straddle my homeground in rural Ontario. They shoot straight enough across the bridges over the Grand River but then angle up the opposing banks and camber like a bow across long stretches of cash cropped fields. Some of them radiate out of certain villages that are not a crossroads so much as a hip joint, roads pivoting from the edge like lines on a protractor. Some roads end abruptly at the edge of a corn or soybean field. Or they yield their way into others and become subsumed, paved under. The place names that dot this asphalt and gravel network mark a rural hinterland, a heartland, a ghostland.

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I can give good directions now, even from 2,500 miles away, writing as I am on the west coast, but when I first learned to drive, I needed a map to get from town to town. Despite sixteen years as a passenger on those long bends and sharp corners, I didn't know how to get anywhere. My father would draw the roads out from memory—small, scaled pen sketches on quartered scraps of paper, handed to me at the door along with the set of keys.

I knew I was roughly an hour and a half west of Toronto, and an hour and a half

east of Lake Huron. Two hours from Buffalo. Three from Detroit. And yet I was, nevertheless, lost in situ.

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**Road:**

noun \ˈrōd\

2. An open way for vehicles, persons, and animals. Especially one lying outside of an urban district.

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The roads that cut through the countryside around the Upper Grand are packed with a historical cluster of traffic. A jam of overlapping time.

People drive from all over in summer to witness the spectacle on wheels. For the most part, they're interested in the Old Order buggies clipping by on steel wheels or rubber tires, depending on the congregational adherence of the family. The horses, girded with side-blinders to stave off panic, creak their buggies forward while vehicles snarl past their left flank.

In winter, blooms of frosted animal breath and short coughs of muffler exhaust dissipate up past iced wires.

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The traffic on these roads has been all addition, almost no subtraction. Past the horse and buggies roll the black-rimmed cars of Conservative Mennonite ministers and deacons and the black-painted minivans and cars of their church members. Most of the vehicles on the road are simply the nondescript sedans and hatchbacks and SUVs of the past decade, all heading fast to somewhere. But it's the contrast that's eye-catching. There are enough car collectors around to dot the roads

in summer with occasional Model As or the rounded wheel wells of vintage trucks, big 1970s muscle cars, late-20<sup>th</sup> century touring motorcycles. Down every road in every season come pickup trucks decaled with Chevy-vs-Ford bumper stickers. Large diesel-ticking trucks of millwrights, electricians, farmers, carpenters. Some a good bit beat-up, held together by incessant care and repair; others, brightly Turtle Waxed, leased new with stainless steel tool canteens lining the bed. And spliced into this traffic are the transport trucks and double-hitched trailers that freight grain and livestock, industrial products and residential wares, to and from and throughout North America—port to warehouse to shop and retail store.

These rural roads, in other words, are punctuated by a vehicle grammar that has been rolling in the present perfect continuous tense for fifteen decades.

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Nearly a hundred years ago, in the spring of 1923, my great-grandmother's parents moved from their roadside rented farm on the outskirts of the village of Elmira to the maternal homestead farm in Waterloo. To complete the move, they walked their cows to the new barn, ten miles south. Along the way, they would have had to cross the Conestoga River tributary at some point, skirt the village of St. Jacobs, and navigate around planted fields and fence rows and forest tract. Father, child, and a brother or cousin or hired-hand walking along beside, their prodding sticks swishing through the ditch grasses. They would have packed the herd close—moving together, never stopping for long.

It's a strange imagining, this kind of herding of thirty head of cattle across the region's landscape without the hundred years of build-up that has followed, before blacktop highways and the closed-access expressway, before big box plaza developments

and post-war suburban housing stock. Before the car, especially. Because the car has altered the landscape as no other machine has done, whole routes and lifeways re-imagined to accommodate the internal combustion engine and easy, individual transportation.

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I was once stuffed with five others in the backseat of a heavily upholstered, navy blue Buick. We were seven to the car, all of us fourteen and fifteen and eighteen and invincible with windows down driving north in the night on the expressway out of Waterloo. Driving as fast as the Regal would take us. One of us (was it me?) suddenly declared their super-sized Dr. Pepper to be *so gross!* Over the throttled wind someone yelled to throw it out the window. Such an easy thing, entirely unnecessary and a touch illicit. So, we did it.

Our laughing eyes followed the oddly erect trajectory of that cup and lid and straw as it arched high from the window, reached some calculable apex, and fell fast for the road. Our silent fixation crashed awake in shouts of celebration as the icy syrup slicked out across the highway behind us and our driver's head snapped back to realize we were coming far too fast on the back of a tractor-trailer. He threw the wheel.

Those of us in the back crushed into the right door panel. He managed to downshift once then twice before finding traction at the left shoulder, hurtling us back in the opposite direction. We zigged and zagged from behind and then beside and then in front of eighteen treaded tires, the suspension grinding low and stretching high and rocking, the nose of the car swiveling just past the Northfield bridge abutment until the car came to a crawl. Wheels aligned north, headlights beaming home.

We drove on slowly. My friend's knuckles clamped white to the steering wheel. The rest of us tittering

nervously, wondering how it was we didn't roll, commending him on his racecar-driver reflexes, blaming our deaths-that-didn't-happen on that stupid Dr. Pepper.

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### Roadbed:

noun \ˈrōd-bed\

The earth foundations of a road prepared for surfacing.

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The topography around home is hilly, full of small gravel moraines offset by low hollows and rounded knolls. Square patches of second or third growth forest, maple bush strung year-round with clear pneumatic hose. The Grand River, though winding, is not the cause of the road surveyor's odd angles. By contrast, six miles past the river the rural concessions run more direct and grid-like. Those other roads cut straight lines down into other river valleys and up over other hills. Those roads are impositions.

Head northwest on Line 86, for example, from the hilltop crossroads of Wallenstein, and you'll descend steeply to a cement bridge jutting square across the Conestogo River. The road climbs straight up to a long, flat plateau that stretches past Listowel as far as the land runs west. You could hold the steering wheel straight, lock into cruise control, and drive for an hour and twenty minutes until your front bumper hits water at Lake Huron. Roads just as straight, each one either parallel or perpendicular to Line 86, step their way across southwestern Ontario, down the pie slice of land between Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, and Lake Erie.

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But head back the other way, and that's where the trouble starts. Follow me here: Drive southeast from Wallenstein towards the Grand and watch as the road curves suddenly, strangely. Halfway to Elmira, Line 86 takes this long, arching S-curve, first left then right. Meanwhile, on the right-side at that first crook, Highway 85 tees to a stop after a long, vicious bending of its own. I've had friends nearly lose their motor-bikes, which is to say their lives, after hitting either of these bends with novice judgment and an open throttle. The two sets of curves bend to each other like strands of a cord, twining into that long, straight-shot west to Lake Huron.

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Or, still driving east from Wallenstein, take a left onto Floradale Road and head straight north. Five miles up, the road narrows over a small creek and then throws itself suddenly right, veering at a seventy-degree angle.

No matter your speed going into the bend, your left suspension will ride low and your right wheels will roll air at the road. Your tires will sing.

Or turn back around at Floradale and head south until you hit the T-intersection at Highway 85. Turn right and then take the first left, Steffler Road, halfway through the long bend. Follow it straight past the old sawmill, now a metal shop. The road you're on follows the slope to the flood-line of the river flats. Summer air thick with pasture land grass and pollen. Directly on the other side of the narrow valley rises a high gravel moraine, a massive landscape feature that stands tall above the lesser hills of the surrounding countryside.

Right at the crest of that hill above—exactly in line with the sharp elbow bend at the far side of Floradale in the distance and the two S-bends in the middle ground—runs another sharpened bend, this one graded on a lean, like a corner of a velodrome track: the

tragi-comic curve at the top of the Hawkesville Hills.

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In all three cases, these roads carve into or away from the same cutline, a boundary edge demarcated six miles west of the Grand River. These roadbeds, it turns out, mark the territorial edge of the Haldimand Tract, a 1784 land grant by the British Governor of Upper Canada to the Haudenosaunee, the Six Nations Confederacy.

These roads don't simply pave over—or bury under—this fact. They assert it, carving a disruptive history into sharp, palpably unexpected bends. The Proclamation, in other words, still proclaims.

These roads don't forget.

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I knew only the thrill of those Hills in my youth. The way we'd gun the engine just at the crest, nosing for a bit more loft. Stomach float and eyeball bounce on the descent.

But in 1960, the car driven by three sisters—all over sixty years of age—wouldn't make it up one of the icy hills, much as they tried. Their tire treads just skidding ice halfway up in a white-out, daytime squall above Hawkesville. They abandoned the car in the dip, and began walking, following their car tracks up the centerline.

My paternal grandfather, Edgar, thirty-three at the time, topped the hill from the other direction, headlights white in slanted snow, and ran suddenly and directly into two of them.

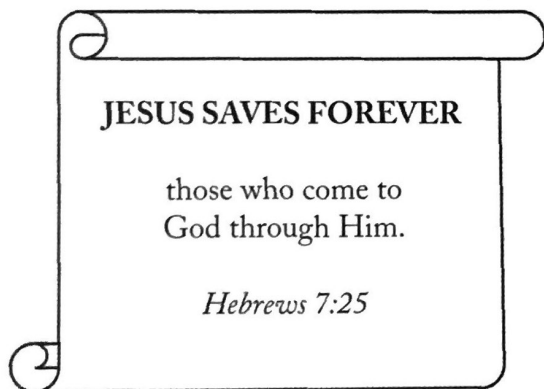
I picture the car icing to a slantways stop. Driver's door flung open, boots slip-sliding. Grandpa lifting one of the women by her shoulders, head lolling, and pulling her legs toward the car. They crawl in. One of

the women cradles her sister's face in the backbench, the other curls up front in pain, while Grandpa nudges the car through accumulated drift, clears the hill, and pushes as fast as he dares towards the hospital in the city, for the declaration they know is coming for the one sister.

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The roadways around Kitchener-Waterloo remind me that I am shaped as much by their built passage and specific history as I am by my own Mennonite ancestors and the cultural milieu of that upbringing. These roadways made me, predate me. They haunt me.

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A friend of mine once stumbled through three car accidents in the space of six weeks: one that totaled his truck against a tree in winter, another that smashed up the front end of his replacement truck, and a third when he T-boned another car in town. He walked away from each without a broken bone.

So then he had to catch a ride from me, as I drove

a van load of us town kids out to Wednesday night Bible Study in Wallenstein. He sat in the middle of the backbench, skinnyboy arms spread across the headrests, knobby knees stretched down the center aisle. Looking crucified, he regaled us with the stories of his smashups. A wild magic in his eyes glinting in my rearview mirror. He was clearly incredulous to be alive, but it manifested as misplaced pride.

*I can't die*, I recall him exclaiming with a laugh that grew more cackling upon each repetition. *No, seriously*, he began shouting, *I can't die!* The rest of us sat silent, stone-faced.

*Not even God can kill me!* he thundered.

I'm way less orthodox than I was then, but even now my stomach squeezes tight at his taunting blasphemy. I expected God to smite my parents' Aerostar as I wound our way through the S-curves of the Haldimand Tract and Township borderlines enroute to Wallenstein. I thought for sure we'd all die with my friend's body vaulting across the centerline of the van and out through the windshield, while the rest of us—collateral damage—tumbled down the deep, grassy ditch strapped in by our seatbelts.

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Labour Day, 1997. I'm laughing uproariously with friends all the way back down Line 86 from a day at the lake. From the backseat of a Dodge Shadow, we call out in mock horror while our driver plays his game of chicken with oncoming holiday traffic. We're seatbeltless and sandy, still in wet bathing suits. Stripped towels hang damp from the headrests. With each sudden veering across the double yellow line, our bodies smash up against each other. Drivers honk against our weaving, and we zipper back into place just as the next oncoming car begins to brake or inch to the shoulder, its incredulous driver preparing for some fast, defen-

sive maneuver.

We beat the rest of our friends back from the beach by a full fifteen minutes. So we just waited around, kicking stones in the gravel lot behind the church, nowhere else to go.

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“God has a way,” I was once told, “of removing people who are no longer enacting His will, no longer following His plan.”

The comment—in hindsight, a surprisingly Calvinist sentiment from amidst our church’s stringent Armenianist belief in individual free-will—came a week after a friend’s cousin, if I recall correctly, had missed a stop sign in the fog, his newborn baby rendered instantly fatherless.

“Goddamn,” I thought.

How careless our words could be, uttered from the confidence of absolute certainty.

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The “hand of God” is a stand-in for destiny and design. And it’s a terrifying trope to invoke, done far too recklessly, whether talking about narrow escapes or terrible accidents or the histories of this land.

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This land, which is to say its borders, its laws, too—I learned in innumerable ways—was God’s gift and intention. His miraculous working out of good from sea-to-sea.

*A Mari usque ad Mare* is pulled from the context of Psalm 72, translated in the King James Version as: “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea.” He, meaning in scripture, God. He, meaning on the crest

of Canada, the Crown. It’s a convenient correspondence. Under the terms of empire, the two are joined in marriage: Our Father in heaven, our Queen Mother on earth.

It is the same pernicious Divine Right and exceptionalism as Manifest Destiny—the United States as God’s new “chosen nation.” Only, in this case, it’s dressed in the red coat of Pax Britannica, societal order, and good government.

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A memorial fountain near the old grand stand in Elmira is lined with the chiseled names of the township’s young dead. I called home recently, sent my niece on assignment: there’s now sixty-three names listed on the three inward-facing panels of granite. You have to look through the spacing and walk the perimeter to see them all. Circle their absences.

In front of the high school, too, a line of trees commemorates the students who died before they graduated. Almost all of them the victims of car accidents. Several times, I stood with the rest of the student body as someone’s mom or dad or sibling shoveled dirt around a maple sapling while a favourite song played out from speakers during an extended silence. The principal’s words, forgettable to me, closing out the ritual.

The weight of the thing would cloud the hallways for a day or two before dissipating in the centrifuge of teenage life.

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They died in the most tragically mundane of ways. Too much speed on an icy curve. Fiddling with the radio while they nosed across the centerline. Braking to turn back for a forgotten textbook and suddenly

finding—hopefully never knowing—some truck climbing up and over the roof of their car. One friend, the closest one in this tragic set, simply forgot to look left at a country intersection. Failed to see the coach bus hurtling her way.

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*Look away now. Let loose. See?*

writes the poet Daniel David Moses in his quiet reflection on the riverine view from Six Nations of the Grand River.

These home roads for me, like the river of his poem, are

*bending like a bruise.*

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All that road-kill created an obligation, a wound, a guilty gratitude. This is one of many reasons why I can't shake the place, I think. Why I keep circling back around.

Teenage martyr complex in-heart, I used to pray that God might see fit to take me instead and use my death for His greater good. I hoped for a passionate eulogy centered on the necessity of individual salvation. For a few years, I even imagined an altar call after they wheeled my casket away. I was convinced I wouldn't make it to eighteen years of age anyway, so why not contribute to the salvation of others on my way out (and up)?

Really though, I was just bargaining to secure my own immortalization: a tree on the street. My name on the lips of a thousand students for a week.

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Such foolishness. A near squandering of my portion.

Thanks be to God, my unwise prayers went unanswered. Now each added year of adulthood is a gift, for I certainly neither rode nor drove any safer than anyone else.

I used to secretly fear the sudden rapturing away of my family and closest friends, of being left behind amidst the carnage of pilot-less airplanes and emptied cars. That fear, with nearly twenty years of hindsight, seems the more rational one, made from within a sealed system of thought. It's my old death-wish that haunts me now—the absolute incomprehensibility of it.

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**Roadstead:**

noun \ˈrōd-sted\

A partly sheltered stretch of water near the shore in which ships can ride at anchor.

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Every road connects, in some roundabout way, to every other road. No matter how scenic their weft or their weave nor how wide and straight and paved with destruction, all are part of the same map.

The street is our strange commons, where we overlap, share space, co-travel. Despite the efforts of car culture and the individualization of everyday life, our routes are never solo journeys. These are all roads well-travelled, not less. We've been here before, and others before us still. We write our collective stories into the asphalt, mount signs and markers at the side of the road, crash into one another on the way.

And in my own *essai*, my try at this, I turn my



homeground into the dead center of it all. That's the flagrant conceit of the writer, the privilege and power that comes with my pen. In my telling, all of these roads lead back to my own place, and those selfsame roads lead out and off and away in unexpected directions that still, somehow, loop. I frequently end up right back where I started, both lost and found, simultaneously home and away.

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If you take a long drive, leave home on the road for a year or three or more, and later head back, you'll find the route broken, altered in some intangible way. By the time you turn onto your old road again, home has changed and the landscape shifted in your absence. Sundown, and it all looks so different in the dark. You pull in with more, or less, gas in the tank than when you left. A different person keying at the door.

Home is a mirage of memory and yearning. It is simultaneously a place left behind, a thing packed in the trunk, and a roof on the approaching horizon.

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In Chicago, where I lived for a time—a time long enough that it became *home*—I found myself in the pews of a Mennonite church on the city's west side. I attended intermittently, noncommittal at first. The congregation, over their thirty years together, had invented a number of rituals, which were nowhere codified. The community's traditions would simply well up from the lifeways of the church when the

occasion was right. As such, they would catch me by surprise, often move me in unexpected ways.

One Sunday, after a quiet, unassuming boy named Brennan had obtained his beginners driver's license, he was called to the front of the church. The carpeted sanctuary quiet but for the hush of highway traffic from the Eisenhower, running below-grade out beyond the stained-glass window. The pastor made a second request that we pass forward several of the car keys the boy might be borrowing in the months and years ahead. A jangling ensued. The rings were gathered up into a sharp ball of cut metal, plastic fob ends, and assorted eccentricities: furry pompom, metal bottle openers, bright carabiners.

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The congregation spoke out as one:

*May he be blessed with fun, adventure and a growing sense of independence.*

*May he be blessed with safety, attentiveness and a truckload of good judgment.*

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Brennan pursed his lips awkwardly at the front, a bit uncertain of all the attention emanating out from this adult love and concern, but he'd seen others stand where he stood. This was his rite of passage now. The bolus of keys was held out like a talisman while the congregation blessed him. Smiling, he kicked at his toes while I, unexpectedly, began to cry.