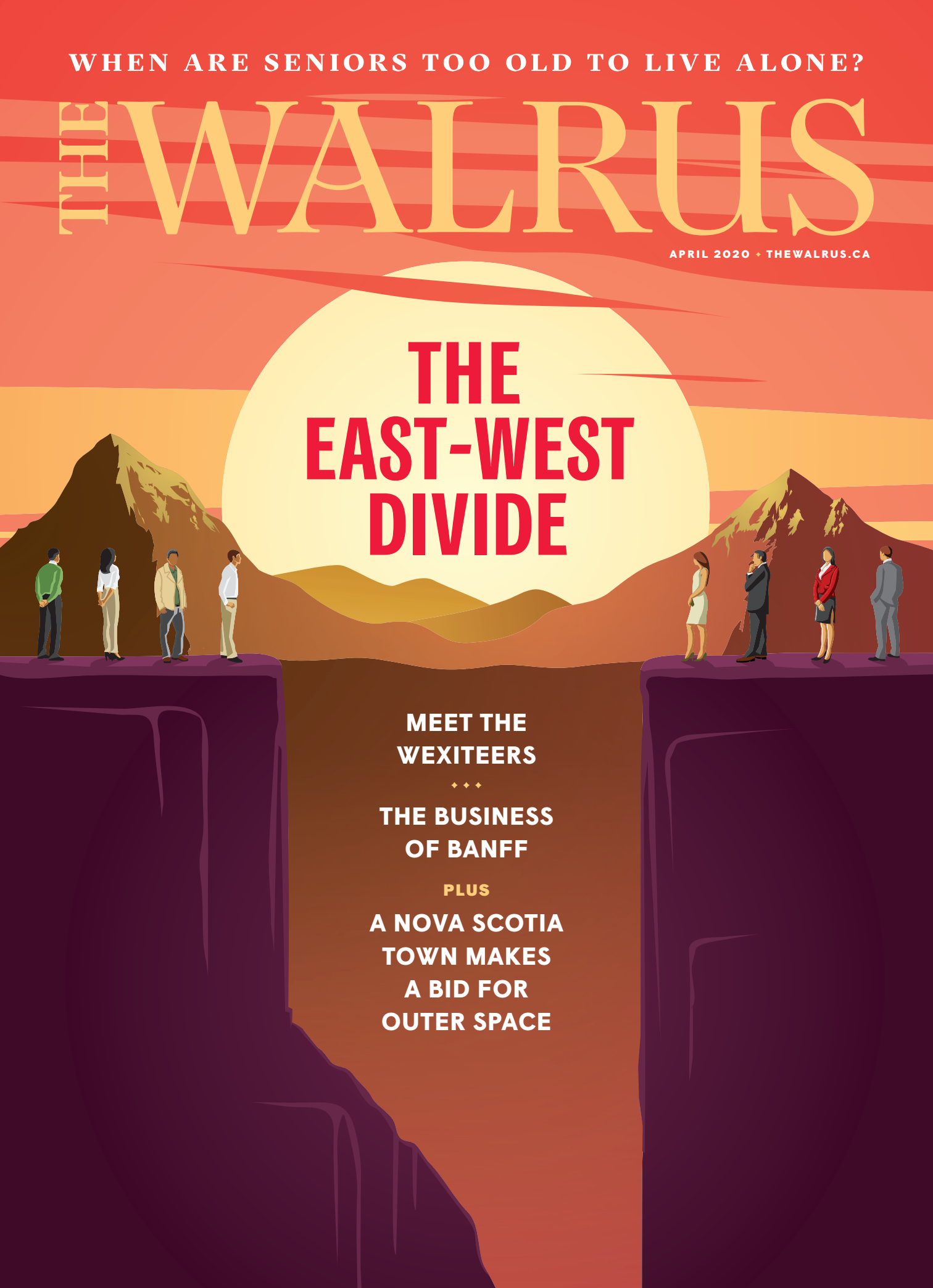


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VOLUME 17 • NUMBER 3  
APRIL 2020

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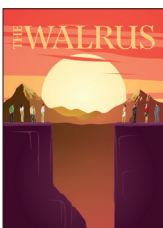
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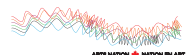
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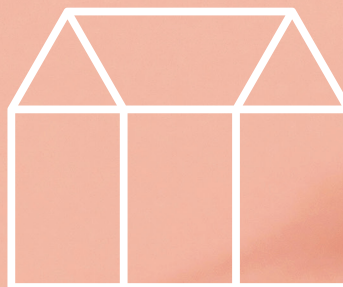
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# Editor's Letter

**N**OT LONG AGO, I was a bit dismayed to read a colleague's description of Saskatoon, the city where I was born, as a small town. Even if you don't subscribe to the ironic idea that the city of 272,000 is the "Paris of the Prairies," it's still the largest city in Saskatchewan.

The tendency to write off places smaller than (or west of) Toronto as backwaters is a particular failing of journalists in this city of more than 2.9 million from which I write, where an increasing number of the country's "national" media outlets are based. The decline in local news coverage across the country and the concentration of media ownership in recent years have contributed to a more homogeneous news climate. As Sarmishta Subramanian wrote in *Maclean's* before the last federal election, Postmedia now operates thirty-four daily newspapers across Canada, all of which have only one executive editor of politics: "A single voice—and an ideological one—will now oversee or directly run political coverage in a fleet of papers, many of which are not conservative."

From a journalistic standpoint, to exclude perspectives can lead to everything from inaccuracy to the propagation of stereotypes. Lack of sensitivity to regionalism feeds the same kind of bias that, this past January, led to the *New York Times's* promotion of a story on the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's potential move to Canada with a tweet about them injecting "some razzle dazzle to the sprawling, bone-chillingly cold country." Well! "Never



been to Canada or spoken to a Canadian, have you muffin?" is one of about 9,000 replies.

For this issue, our contributors turned to the theme of western alienation that reemerged during the recent federal election, in which Alberta and Saskatchewan contributed no seats to the Liberal minority government. To produce his visual essay "Inside Wexit," photographer Brett Gundlock spent time with the group that seeks to turn Alberta into its own country. In "The New Separatists," Edmonton-based journalist Max Fawcett traces the historic roots of Alberta separatism and the movement's link to current populist sentiments around the world. And, in "Go Sell It on the Mountain," Tom Jokinen showcases another side of the province, which has made long-standing contributions to the national arts scene. Founded in 1933, Banff Centre is well known to the country's professional artists and musicians. As the institution adapts to

a world where commerce and creativity feel increasingly linked yet often seem at odds, Jokinen considers the significance of an artists' retreat nestled deep in the mountains that seeks to be an international creative hub.

At The Walrus, we're paying more attention to the issue of regional identity. In the past year, we've greatly benefited from interprovincial migration. A couple of editors have moved from our head office to Montreal, enhancing our coverage of Quebec. We've also recently welcomed Phoebe Sutherland, our second JHR Indigenous Editorial Fellow and our first staffer based

in Moose Factory, Ontario. Although a relatively small newsroom for a country of this size, we at The Walrus are trying to expand our knowledge base and strengthen our connections to different communities, in part by having more people in more places.

Outer space is, as always, the final frontier. In "The East Coast Takes Off," Matthew Halliday explains the ramifications of a company arriving in a small Nova Scotia community to build the country's first commercial spaceport. And, in "Of Needlework and Nebulae," Pamela Young explores the world of Margaret Nazon, an artist in the Northwest Territories who creates beadwork inspired by images taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. While we have no current plans to install a bureau of The Walrus on Mars, it's clear that our potential audience is limited only by the imagination. 🌌

—Jessica Johnson

# Contributors' Notes



## JILLIAN TAMAKI

Illustrations for “The Age of Surrender,” p. 40

“I volunteer with seniors at an adult-literacy program in Toronto. While illustrating this article, which is about elder care, I was thinking about what

the future holds for them—and for me. As much as people can plan for old age, it often doesn’t go exactly as they think it will. Birds are a common symbol for freedom and movement, but in this case, I chose to draw a sleeping bird to hint at the vulnerability of the subjects in the story.”

*Jillian Tamaki is an illustrator and cartoonist whose work has been published in The New Yorker, National Geographic, and The Believer. My Best Friend, a book she collaborated on with writer Julie Fogliano, is out in March.*



## SHARON J. RILEY

“The Age of Surrender,” p. 40

“I wanted to find out how governments and institutions deem individuals no longer capable of managing their own lives. When I read the personal notebook of one of the seniors whose stories I followed, it became clear to me

that mental capacity and cognition wax and wane. It helped me see how someone could be aware but also clearly confused. When you ask someone a bunch of questions in one moment, you’re not going to get the whole story from them; it’s important to see their thoughts over time.”

*Sharon J. Riley is an Alberta-based investigative journalist. Her work has appeared in Harper’s, the Tyee, and Maisonneuve.*



## BRETT GUNDLOCK

“Inside Wexit,” p. 30, and photography for “The New Separatists,” p. 24

“From what I’ve seen, both at separatist rallies in Alberta and on social media, the feeling of alienation in the west is not just because of politics or the drop in the oil economy. There’s a general sense of anger and hopelessness. I don’t think vilifying the separatists is going to really solve anything. The Wexit movement is a window into a bigger conversation that we need to have.”

*Brett Gundlock has had his work published in the New York Times and Time magazine.*



## TOM JOKINEN

“Go Sell It on the Mountain,” p. 48

“In 2011, when I went to Banff Centre, an arts hub in Alberta’s Rockies, for a residency in literary journalism, I grew fond of the place. I thought

it had a peculiar *Twain Peaks* feel, as if it were oddly haunted, though not in a bad way. There are elk walking around everywhere, like squirrels. When I returned to write about the centre’s business-oriented rebrand, I felt that I needed to defend the idea that a place where art is created should be separate from the rest of the world—it should be detached from the machinery of commerce.”

*Tom Jokinen is a writer based in Winnipeg. He contributes to the Globe and Mail and the CBC’s Ideas.*



## DAMIAN ROGERS

“A Space beyond Language,” p. 66

“My mother’s dementia was a cataclysmic event in my life, and I felt I needed to write my way through the experience in order to survive it. I realized that, as I became wrapped up in the

immediate crisis of keeping her safe, I was forgetting who she had been. She can’t speak clearly at all anymore. She tries. I’m still able to connect to her on some level; it just keeps changing—the cord of that connection keeps fraying and thinning. But there is an essential quality of who she is to me that has not diminished.”

*Damian Rogers is an American Canadian poet, author, and creative-writing instructor. An Alphabet for Joanna, a memoir about her life and her relationship with her mother, will be published this fall.*

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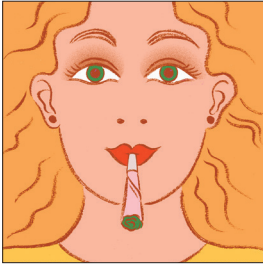
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# Letters



## SMOKE AND MIRRORS

I read Lauren McKeon's feature on cannabis entrepreneurs and female-focused wellness marketing ("New Highs," January/February) wondering when she would mention how women of colour are either participating in or finding themselves inadequately addressed by this new industry. She never does. While racialized minorities and Indigenous people have long been disproportionately convicted of marijuana-related offences, those who have gained the most from legalization have been overwhelmingly white. It's disconcerting to see racial inequities perpetuated in the business of legal cannabis, and it's the CBD-infused cherry on top to read a cover story about efforts to make cannabis "more inclusive" that doesn't include a significant portion of Canadian women.

*Cindy Chen*  
Toronto, ON

## CHURCH AND SLATE

Regarding Michael Coren's criticism of the Catholic school system ("Why Are We Still Paying for Catholic Schools?" *thewalrus.ca*), it's important to take history into account. The faith-based educational divide came from conflict between the English and the French during the early period of Canadian colonization. Certain rights were extended to religious minorities—the French Catholic population in Ontario, the English Protestant population in Quebec—including the establishment of separate schools. In provinces like Ontario, the two-board system continues to this day. But the focus of the conversation shouldn't be on arguments between French and English or Catholic and secular citizens: it should be on quality education. For this, we need a better school system all around.

*Michael Peterson*  
Ottawa, ON

## POWERS THAT BE

I agree with Anna Peppard on the importance of queer representation in superhero narratives ("The Undeniable Queerness of Superhero Stories," *thewalrus.ca*). Queer folks need

to fantasize spectacularly, for better or worse, on our own terms. Many of us didn't have role models growing up—gender norms, sexual norms, and other oppressive ways of thinking were imposed on our bodies, imaginations, and hearts from a young age. We need a variety of queer literature, queer movies, and queer models to loosen this conditioning, to know what it feels like to just be.

*Jeremy Cacho-Lim*  
Toronto, ON

## WILD CARDS

Jessica Myshrall's essay ("Rules of the Game," January/February) is a touching account of how euchre has held her family together. The card game can be "excellent for socializing," she writes, and I am reminded of a story a friend told me about her 1920s childhood. Her parents often hosted card parties for family and friends, with multiple card tables set up in the two largest rooms of their rural Ontario farmhouse. One room was for euchre, the other for bridge. My friend and her sisters, relegated to their bedroom, could always tell which room was which by the sounds that filled them: low voices and sparse words in the bridge room; lively chatter and endless billows of laughter in the euchre room. Excellent for socializing, indeed.

*Carolyn Barnes*  
Penticton, BC

## TAX RACKET

I found Meghan Bell's piece on taxing the rich ("Take My Money," January/February) incompatible with my experience of growing up poor. My

single mother would not have made it without social welfare programs, and I would not be where I am today had it not been for government-funded student aid. And, to be clear, people who are disabled, who have mental health issues, or who are victims of abuse certainly need more help. But I don't believe greater taxation is a panacea for our country's social welfare problems, particularly considering how prone governments are to inefficiently redistributing wealth. We need to hold ourselves accountable, moderate our expectations, and live within our means.

*Jason McLellan,*  
Sault Ste. Marie, ON

.....  
"The time has come," The Walrus said, "to talk of many things." Send us a letter, email ([letters@thewalrus.ca](mailto:letters@thewalrus.ca)), or tweet, or post on our Facebook page. Comments may be published in any medium and edited for length, clarity, and accuracy.

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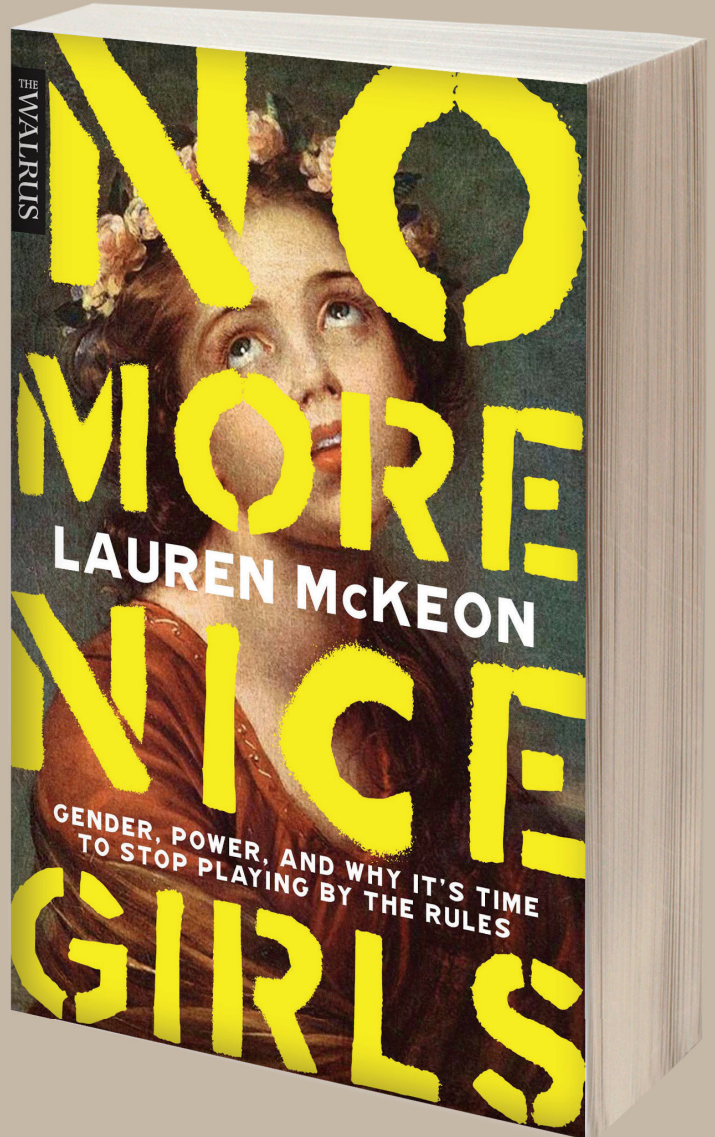
— **Elizabeth Renzetti**, author of *Shrewed: A Wry and Closely Observed Look at the Lives of Women and Girls*

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— **Stacey May Fowles**, author of *Baseball Life Advice: Loving the Game that Saved Me*

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— **Gemma Hartley**, author of *Fed Up: Emotional Labor, Women, and the Way Forward*



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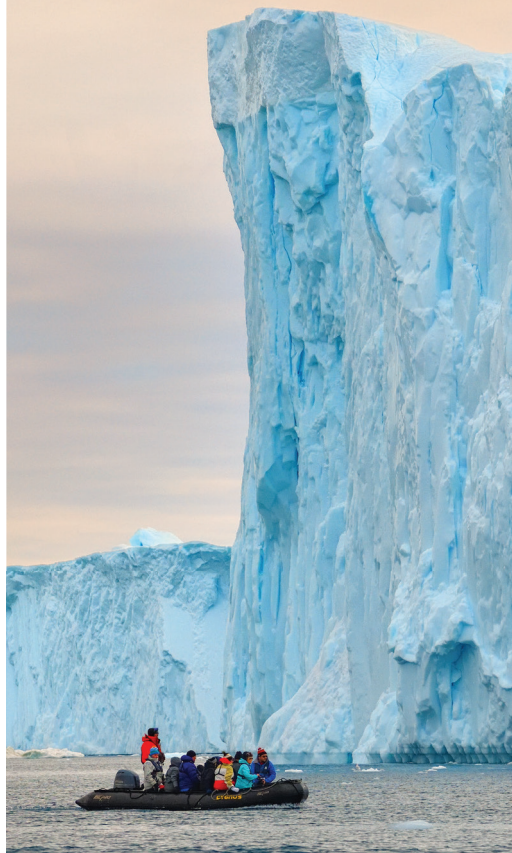
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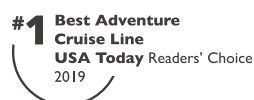
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## ENVIRONMENT

# Climate Believers

*How should religious groups respond to the environmental crisis?*

BY JOSIAH NEUFELD

ILLUSTRATION BY PETE RYAN



**L**AST JUNE, under a spreading maple tree on a hill in the southwest corner of Wisconsin, twenty-five people sat around a bonfire to mourn. To the tempo of a hand drum, they called out recently extinct species, tossing scraps of paper inscribed with animal names into the fire: *Caribbean monk seal*, *Eiao monarch*. White ash settled like snowflakes on knees and shoulders. *Dusky seaside sparrow*. *Bulldog rat*. *Western black rhino*.

Ordained ministers and lay leaders, they had come to this hill from across North America, from churches in Texas, Washington, West Virginia, New Hampshire, British Columbia, and Ontario, for the first in-person gathering organized by

the Wild Church Network. The network is a loose affiliation of congregations, mostly from different Christian denominations, that belong to the Wild Church movement and meet for worship in the outdoors—surrounded by a New England beech grove, say, or in a forest of cedars along the BC coast, or on the grasslands of Colorado. These worshippers aren't just seeking picturesque settings: sometimes they gather beside a stream choked with logging debris, or a bleak asphalt parking lot, or the charred skeleton of a burnt-out forest—places where they can face the destruction humans have wrought.

The Wild Church members believe that, somewhere along the way,

Christianity lost its communion with the natural world. The late Catholic priest and eco-theologian Thomas Berry wrote in the 1990s about the fissure between Christianity and nature, a split he traced back to the Enlightenment, when rationalists such as René Descartes sought to strip the natural world of its spiritual qualities. Then came the colonial era when European invaders dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their lands and drafted new constitutions that enshrined the rights of the colonizers but gave no rights to the land itself. Colonizers violently converted Indigenous people to Christianity, denouncing as heresy Indigenous beliefs, such as that stones, trees, or rivers could be animated by spirits. “The world around us became a natural resource to be used, not a vital reality to be communed with,” Berry wrote. By taking its quest for the sacred back into the wilderness, the Wild Church movement hopes to heal the damaged relationship between humans, the planet, and God.

“[Climate change] is a saga that used to be understood at the scale of mythology and theology,” observed journalist David Wallace-Wells in a recent interview. Wallace-Wells’s 2019 climate change handbook, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, reads like a Biblical apocalypse but with sixty-five pages of endnotes. Perhaps, say Wild Church leaders, it’s time for all of us to start thinking on that scale. After all, Christian mythology contains a flood that destroys most of life on Earth as a consequence of human violence. If we saw our ecological crisis as a moral reckoning rather than simply as a technological challenge, we might be more willing to take the necessary action, even if the sacrifices were large and the chances of success small.

**F**OURTEEN YEARS AGO, Mishka Ly-sack, an Anglican priest and a professor in the faculty of social work at the University of Calgary, read Australian climate scientist Tim Flannery’s 2005 book *The Weather Makers*, which foretells the effects of unchecked climate change: drought, desertification, mass species extinction, and escalating

human conflict. For two nights in a row, Lysack woke up in a cold sweat.

Then, in 2008, he went to his dean and asked if he could shift his focus from clinical research to climate education. Lysack envisioned a mass movement led by people of faith. They would recognize climate change as an urgent moral issue and forge alliances with scientists, policy makers, and Indigenous peoples. They would shut down coal-burning power plants and push the government to start the kind of sweeping energy transition underway in Germany, which has set an ambitious goal of cutting greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050.

Lysack understood that prioritization of the collective good and a focus on the marginalized were at the heart of many religious movements. In the late eighteenth century, the movement to abolish slavery in Great Britain was led by Christian thinkers, like William Wilberforce, and supported by Quakers and other evangelical churches, which raised funds, printed pamphlets, created artwork, wrote letters to Parliament, and participated in a sugar boycott. This took place during a more religious era, and Christianity had undoubtedly helped create the transatlantic slave trade in the first place, but the religious movement against slavery was still instructive, Lysack felt. He believed that, if the Canadian faithful (Statistics Canada found that 76 percent of Canadians in 2011 still claimed a religious affiliation) united their efforts, they could put a dent in climate change. It would require a campaign with the same “breadth and moral power” as the abolitionist movement, he wrote in a paper. And, like the antislavery movement, it would threaten the economic order. Britain and America had had to envision new economies, ones that did not rely on the cheap labour of enslaved humans; just as difficult could be the transformation of an economy based on oil and the principle of infinite growth. But the timeline would have to be much faster: abolishing slavery had taken generations, and the deadline set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for overhauling the fossil fuel-based economy is scarcely more than a decade away.

Lysack spoke in churches, organized climate conferences, and met with bishops, pastors, rabbis, and imams. It was like trying to set fire to damp wood. A few individuals were working feverishly for climate justice, but the masses in the pews seemed willing to make only small-scale changes. Discouraged, Lysack switched his focus to secular audiences: academics and policy makers interested in transitioning to a low-carbon economy. But the question of how to make Christians take action remains.

One hurdle religion may need to clear to seriously address climate change is its preference for the eternal over the temporal. If eternity is what matters, why sweat the fate of a finite planet? A small 2014 study based in the UK found that Protestant Christians and Sunni Muslims who believed in an afterlife and divine intervention were less likely to feel a sense of urgency about the ecological crisis or support technologies such as carbon capture and storage than were secular participants. And, according to a 2015 Pew Research report in the US, white evangelical Christians—many of whom believe that the Earth will eventually be destroyed and true Christians spirited away—were the surveyed demographic least likely to believe the science around climate change. On the other hand, Hispanic Catholics were the surveyed demographic *most* likely to believe in anthropogenic warming. Religious adherence, broadly speaking, turns out to be less a predictor of attitudes toward climate change than are politics or race. Perhaps a deeper divide lies between believers who subscribe to a theology of dominion—that God gave humans the Earth and its resources for their own gain—and those, like Wild Church members, who see humans in an equal relationship with the rest of creation.

There are signs that churches in Canada are moving slowly but inexorably toward action. In a video the United Church of Canada released around both Easter and Earth Day last year, faith leaders representing twelve different Christian denominations addressed climate change and biodiversity loss, which one speaker called a “spiritual crisis,” and urged the

faithful to act. The United Church is the country’s largest Protestant denomination, and it plans to reduce its carbon footprint by 80 percent by 2050 and has voted to divest its holdings from the world’s 200 largest fossil fuel companies. In partnership with an interfaith charity, the church also offers grants of up to \$30,000 for congregations to retrofit their buildings with solar or geothermal energy. Lysack believes members of the North American faith community are starting to wake up to the scale of the crisis, but he fears they’ve missed an opportunity to lead and are now running to catch up.

The late religious historian Phyllis Tickle noticed a pattern others have also observed: every 500 years or so, Christianity seems to undergo a major renovation. Half a millennium ago, the Protestant Reformation rattled Roman Catholic Europe, upending the authority of the church and state, triggering wars and persecutions, and introducing the religious and political freedoms that would set the stage for our modern era. Some 500 years before that, Christianity split down the centre, fracturing into divisions that exist to this day: Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. Victoria Loorz, a pastor who convened the Wild Church gathering in Wisconsin, believes Christianity is on the cusp of another seismic shift, this one precipitated by our growing awareness of the catastrophe humans are inflicting on the planet. Either humans will learn a new way of living—one that acknowledges our interdependence with ecosystems and other species—or we’ll vanish. If Christianity survives, Loorz believes, it will be with new language and rituals that nurture relationships with ponds and praying mantises as well as with God.

**T**HE NORTH AMERICAN church may be getting the emergency memo now, but Christians in the global South have been reckoning with climate change for years. Sixteen years ago, a group of Pacific churches, and representatives from elsewhere, met on the drowning islands of Kiribati, issued a statement declaring that climate change was “not an act of God” but caused by human activity, and called



on industrialized countries to transition quickly from fossil fuels because “the Pacific people are suffering, crying and dying right now.” It’s no surprise that perhaps the most searing sermon on climate change was delivered by the first pope in modern times to hail from the global South: in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis called for a “global ecological conversion” and described the Earth as our sister and mother. “We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life,” he wrote. Since then, *Laudato Si’* has received more attention than perhaps any other recent papal encyclical, inspiring many Catholics around the world to make green action plans, divest from fossil fuels, and convene a synod against Amazonian deforestation.

Faith has the power to move people in a way science cannot, says Mardi Tindal, former moderator of the United Church of

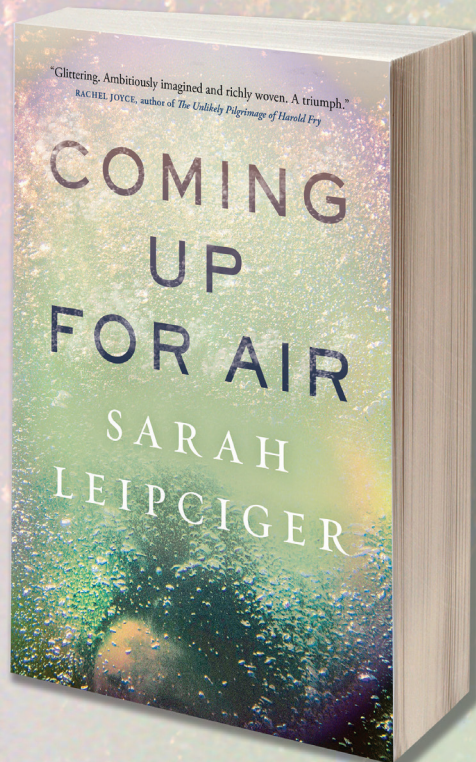
Canada. “Climate scientists have told me for years that they count on people of faith to speak to the heart because information, knowledge, and reason are not getting us where we need to be.” This is where the Wild Church movement comes in.

Before she established the Wild Church Network, in 2016, Victoria Loorz spent years travelling the US to attend climate rallies with her son, who spoke at these events. Alec Loorz was a teenager when he led a campaign to sue state governments for inaction on climate change. But, after six years of campaigning, both mother and son were burnt out. The young people Victoria had campaigned with had been full of energy at first. Then they’d come face to face with the magnitude of the crisis and had seemed to realize that nothing they ever did would be enough. “Once they recognize the depth of the tragedy, many of them end up depressed and disillusioned,” says Loorz. She watched it happen to her son. “Trying to shift people without understanding and addressing the underlying worldview is like moving a mountain one pebble at a time.” The church was

missing an ecological lens, Loorz says, and the environmental movement was missing a spiritual one.

Loorz sees the Wild Church movement nudging the larger church—and society as a whole—toward a different way of being in the world. She’s all for churches getting involved in climate activism or finding ways to lower their carbon footprints, but she believes there’s even deeper work to do: “changing the underlying relationship between humans and the rest of the world.” Wild Church members characterize their faith as a three-way relationship between God, humans, and the natural world. When Wild Church ministers share traditional rituals, like the Eucharist, outside, they often name the plants and animals and ecosystems of their bioregions as members in the pact between humans and the divine. “Our intention is that other churches will adopt it in small ways—shifts in liturgy, shifts in practice,” says Loorz. “We do see this as a reformation.” †

JOSIAH NEUFELD writes for *Broadview*, the *Globe and Mail*, and *Hazlitt*.



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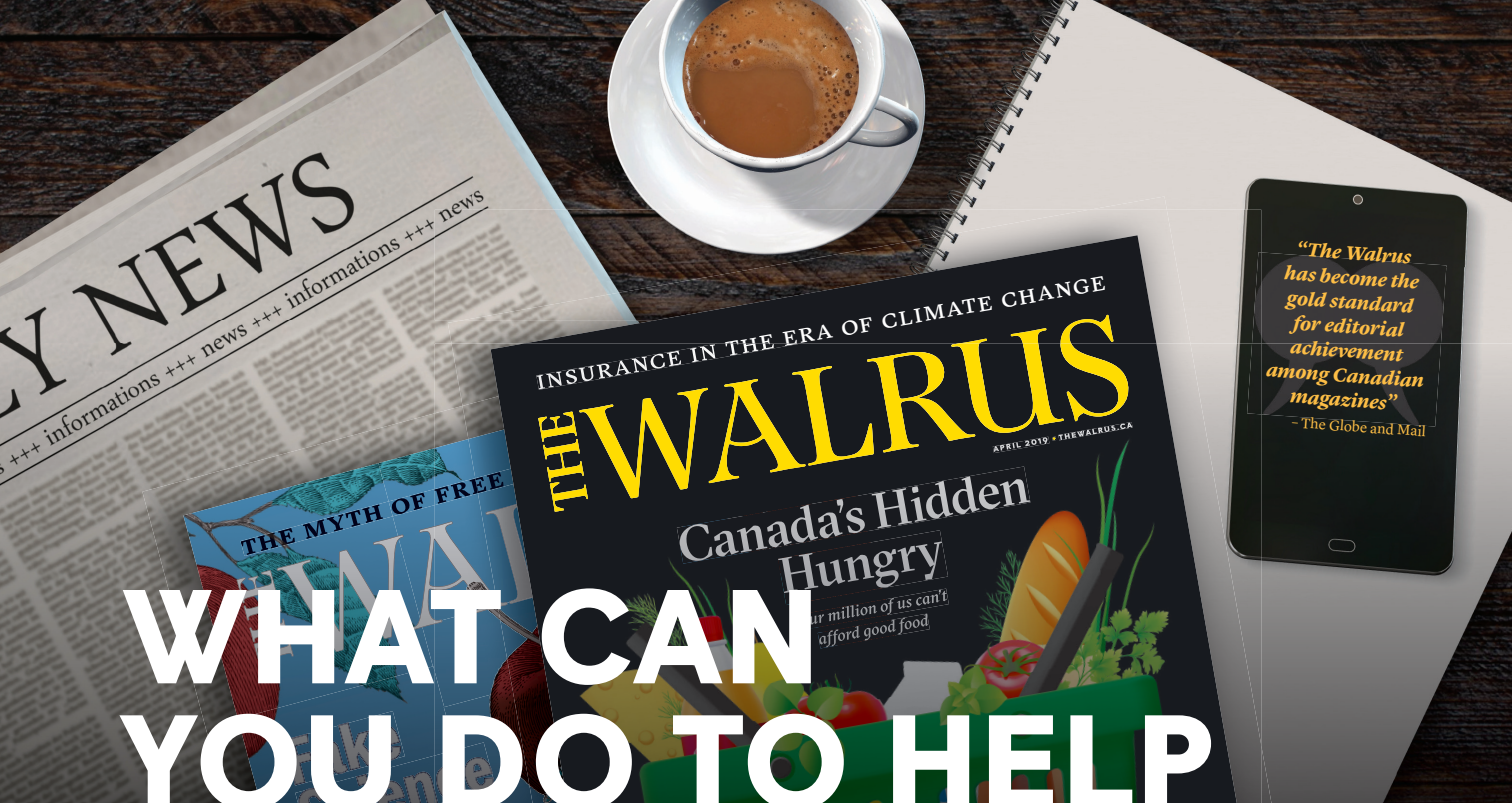
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## BUSINESS

# The East Coast Takes Off

*The promise of a private spaceport fuels hope for a Nova Scotia community*

BY MATTHEW HALLIDAY

ILLUSTRATION BY AIMÉE HENNY BROWN

century—collapsed, and the town’s population followed, falling from 1,200 to just over 700. According to the latest census, the median age was fifty-four, the median income under \$24,000.

In the years since, the promise of economic salvation has appeared every so often in the form of ambitious—though uncertain—megaproject proposals. There’s been talk of a gold mine, a liquid-natural gas terminal, and a granite quarry, though none have come to pass. Then, in October 2016, a company called Maritime Launch Services (MLS) appeared in Halifax with an idea that sounded like the longest Hail Mary of them all: Canso, it said, is the ideal site for Canada’s first commercial spaceport.

The idea wasn’t as far-fetched as it may have seemed. Up until recently, companies seeking to launch satellites have almost exclusively relied on government-run spaceports, like Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida. But, over the next few years, commercial satellite launches are set to increase drastically. Today, there are a little more than 2,000 active satellites orbiting Earth, and nearly half were sent up by private parties ranging from telecommunications companies to research organizations monitoring greenhouse gases. Some industry watchers are projecting that, by 2025, there could be more than 1,000 new satellites launched every year—a technological revolution made possible by the proliferation of smaller, less expensive satellites dubbed “smallsats.” MLS’s pitch is that, if Canso commits to a spaceport, it can capture some of this burgeoning smallsat market, which, according to one report, was worth \$3.63 billion (US) globally in 2018 and is estimated to reach \$15.69 billion (US) by 2026.

MLS CEO and president Stephen Matier, a former NASA contractor-engineer from New Mexico, has said that Canso’s remoteness—generally an economic liability—makes it an ideal location for rocket launches. Anything lobbed into the sky will, within moments, be soaring over the open sea. He’s predicted that the spaceport could create up to 150 full-time jobs in Canso by the mid-2020s, employing everyone from electrical engineers to



**T**HE TINY COMMUNITY of Canso sits at the easternmost tip of Nova Scotia’s mainland—the farthest end of a rocky finger pointing forty kilometres into the North Atlantic. Its claim to fame is folk singer Stan Rogers, who, after visiting family

here during the summers in the 1970s, drew inspiration for songs about hard-luck communities enduring against the odds. And Canso today is about as hard-luck as it gets. In the 1990s, the Atlantic cod fishery—the area’s economic backbone since the seventeenth

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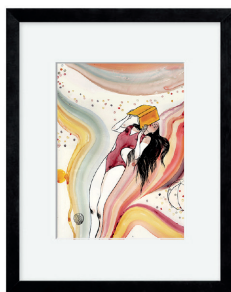
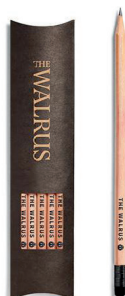
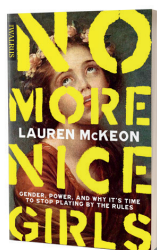
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security guards to office workers—jobs that could transform a community where unemployment was recently measured at over 12 percent.

MLS has announced that it's already working closely with Ukraine's Yuzhnoye Design Office and its associated Yuzhmash factory, which will respectively design and build the rockets that MLS plans to launch near Canso: a new model called the Cyclone-4M. If everything goes as planned, the company will begin launching Cyclones by 2022 and aims to eventually send into space up to eight rockets per year.

The spaceport seems to have progressed further than any of Canso's earlier prospective megaprojects. In April 2017, after meeting with Matier and other MLS representatives, Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil declared the province "fully behind this exciting and innovative development." Global Affairs Canada has been in talks with the US State Department to permit American payloads and vehicles to launch out of Canso. And, last June, the province gave MLS conditional environmental approval to begin building, which means the company has cleared its biggest regulatory hurdle. All that's left for MLS is to raise the money needed for the project, which is estimated to be \$210 million.

Last year, when the province solicited community feedback as part of its environmental assessment process, local reaction was overwhelmingly positive. One typical response argued that, "without our government support for megaprojects such as MLS... this community we love so much will surely die." George Hart, sixty-seven, works much of the year in Edmonton and spends the rest in the once-grand Victorian house that's been in his family since 1893. He seems to represent many of the spaceport supporters when he says MLS "may be the last opportunity Canso will get to become a vibrant community again."

More recently, though, the conversation has started to change. As the

spaceport moves from pitch to reality, skeptics have emerged, dividing Canso into opposing blocs. Some have questioned the wisdom of launching rockets so near the edge of town and the effects of toxic rocket propellant on the community. And, lately, the anti-spaceport faction has begun questioning MLS itself, whose state-owned Ukrainian partners have spent the past thirty years dogged by business missteps and implications of scandal as they struggled to gain a foothold in the modern space economy.

Residents may be right to worry about rushing into an unproven venture. "The idea of a space-launch facility in Nova Scotia is great," says Michael Byers, a professor at the University of British Columbia and co-director of

the international Outer Space Institute. The problem, he warns, is the specific proposal that is now before them.

**D**URING the Cold War, the industrial metropolis of Dnipro (then called Dnipropetrovsk), Ukraine, produced weapons of mass destruction for the USSR the way Detroit manufactured cars. Two of the companies at the heart of this economy were the Yuzhnoye Design Office and the Yuzhmash factory. The latter employed more than 50,000 people at its peak, earning Dnipro the nickname "Rocket City."

When the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991, the closely entwined companies and Dnipro went into an economic nosedive. Yuzhnoye and Yuzhmash have survived to this day thanks to contracts for agricultural equipment and trolleys, all the while trying, with mixed success, to become players in the modern space industry.

In 2009, a much-hyped partnership between Yuzhnoye and Boeing to launch rockets from a floating sea platform entered bankruptcy protection, with the aerospace giant suing Yuzhnoye for breach of contract. In 2015, a decade-in-the-making deal with Brazil to launch the Cyclone rocket's predecessor, the

Tsyklon-4, collapsed amid uncertainty that the project could ever make money. That failure came at the worst possible moment: the previous year, Russia invaded Crimea, an autonomous republic in Ukraine, and lucrative contracts between Russian clients and the Ukrainian companies fell apart. Employment at Yuzhmash fell to barely 5,000 people, and Dnipro was among the fastest-shrinking cities on Earth.

Then, in 2017, nuclear nonproliferation expert Michael Elleman authored a report suggesting that North Korea had used Ukrainian engines in its ICBM tests. Elleman has a theory that underpaid employees helped smuggle Yuzhmash parts into North Korea and, in doing so, violated a raft of international sanctions and United Nations resolutions aimed at curbing nuclear-weapons development. "I've spent a good amount of time in Dnipro," Elleman says with a chuckle. "I know what the security procedures are around there." Yuzhmash has denied any connection to North Korea.

After Yuzhnoye's Brazil deal imploded, the company needed new markets. It hired Matier—who, after his work with NASA, ran a US aerospace consultancy—to assess prospective launch locations in North America. The Canso area was ultimately chosen thanks to its sparse population, edge-of-everything location, and good connections to road, rail, and sea. As Ukrainian state-owned enterprises, Yuzhnoye and Yuzhmash couldn't set up a launch site in Canada on their own. But Matier could. As a result, MLS was born.

The Ukrainian Cyclone-4M rockets, which are central to MLS's spaceport plan, have been promoted as a brand-new product, but a significant portion of the design is more or less a tweak to Yuzhnoye and Yuzhmash's decades-old Tsyklon rocket lineage. Matier prefers to call it "heritage hardware"—sturdy and reliable. It's true that Yuzhnoye and Yuzhmash still enjoy a good reputation among some aerospace wonks: Elon Musk has called their Zenit his favourite rocket (besides his own), and even Elleman praises its engineers, noting, "You're going to get quite a good product from them." But the dated tech used

**The spaceport boom may already have entered the irrational-exuberance phase.**

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in the Cyclone comes with a major liability that has become a sticking point in Canso: a highly toxic fuel source, for the rocket's second stage, called unsymmetrical dimethylhydrazine (UDMH). A space-industry mainstay for decades, UDMH is still used in many satellites and capsules, but it's fallen out of favour as a rocket fuel due to its extreme toxicity. In Canso, UDMH has led to worries about impacts to water, air, and soil.

Some residents, including fifty-year-old Marie Lumsden, have serious concerns about launch-pad disasters and poisonous plumes — anxieties that, she says, are heightened by the injustice of the project being “forced” on Canso. “I had this conversation with my partner,” Lumsden says. “I think he’s found it difficult because it’s completely taken over my psyche, you know? I wake up at night and it’s there... I feel my blood pressure rising at the thought of something happening in those woods.”

The province’s environmental approval for the spaceport was conditional upon MLS providing more information about its handling of dangerous goods and developing worst-case-scenario analyses for launch failures. That hasn’t assuaged critics. “Hydrazine is so twentieth century,” says Byers from the Outer Space Institute. “If we’re going to build a launch facility in Canada, let’s do it with modern technology.”

**M**LS and its supporters have positioned the spaceport as a technological leap forward for Canso, a twenty-first-century equivalent to the town’s old commercial-telegraph industry. As the closest point on mainland North America to Europe, Canso made a convenient landing point for subsea cables, and residents say that, from the 1880s onward, its cable industry was second only to its fishery. It’s fitting, suggests Matier, for the town to embrace a spaceport and once again be at the forefront of globe-spanning communications technology.

Today, since MLS has environmental approval, the backing of government officials, and is in negotiations to lease Crown land for the launch site, the only thing it needs is money. Matier says that, so far, MLS has stayed afloat through several modest rounds of private fundraising. But MLS has also lobbied federal and provincial ministries, and in 2018, Matier appeared before the House of Commons standing committee on finance to make a case for government investment in Canada’s launch industry—which so far consists solely of MLS.

According to Leena Pivarova, a space-industry analyst with Cambridge-based Northern Sky Research, there’s little question that the next decade will see ramped-up demand for satellite launch sites, but she warns that the spaceport boom may already have entered the irrational-exuberance phase. “There’s a lot of money being poured in, from government to big institutions to venture capital,” she says. “We already have a spaceport glut now, to be perfectly honest.”

The United States has eleven licensed commercial spaceports, and only six have actually seen a launch. More are in the planning phases, including Georgia’s Spaceport Camden, the Colorado Air and Space Port, and farther afield, Space Hub Sutherland, near Scotland’s Atlantic coast. Spaceport America, one of the biggest and best-known commercial ventures, has been in the New Mexico desert since 2011. It’s seen launches but has been waiting for Virgin Galactic, its long-promised anchor tenant, to begin offering the world’s first suborbital passenger flights. It, too, is looking into the satellite market.

The unknowns around the long-term viability of the satellite market may be why spaceports have been a tough sell to private investors—which is one reason so many flashy new projects, from SpaceX to Blue Origin to Virgin Galactic, are the respective pet projects of billionaires Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Richard Branson. It’s unclear whether MLS, a small startup relying on distressed

partners, will have the means and reserves needed to succeed in a crowded market. Matier says that MLS has already received several expressions of interest from companies seeking to launch satellites from Canso, but he refuses to divulge any specifics.

MLS initially planned to break ground in fall 2018. That date has now been pushed back twice. As MLS waits to move forward, it seems that the divide between townspeople for and against the spaceport continues to deepen. Some Cansonians told me that only one other schism in living memory comes close: a particularly vicious 1970s labour dispute in the fishery that pitted family against family, many of which could trace their Canso ancestries back centuries. “There are families in this town who still don’t speak to each other because they were on opposite sides of that,” says eighty-three-year-old June Jarvis. Likewise, she says, “if these [MLS] people fold up their tents and go away, there will be a lot of rancour.”

Jarvis promises that, if the spaceport is built, she’ll leave town and “buy, steal, or rent a little shack” close to her daughter’s home, in Nova Scotia’s more prosperous South Shore. She doesn’t believe in the rosy economic forecasts that MLS has promised. Nor does she believe that the province’s environmental assessment sufficiently addressed the community’s concerns. Like Lumsden, she has fears of toxic contamination and exploding rockets.

Her vision for Canso is one of incremental recovery: building up the annual Stan Rogers Folk Festival, growing the outdoor tourism sector, even a “pet dream” of building an observatory on one of the high granite plateaus near Fogarty’s Head. “People who think that someone from away has the answers,” she says, “don’t stop to think that, however industrious this person may be, he’s not here to look after us. He’s here because it serves his own interests.” ✨

.....  
**MATTHEW HALLIDAY** has written for the *Globe and Mail*, *Hazlitt*, and *Chatelaine*. He is the co-founder and executive editor of *The Deep*.

**She has fears of toxic contamination and exploding rockets.**

ESSAY

# The New Separatists

*The roots of western alienation date back generations. Here's why the latest secession movement looks different*

BY MAX FAWCETT

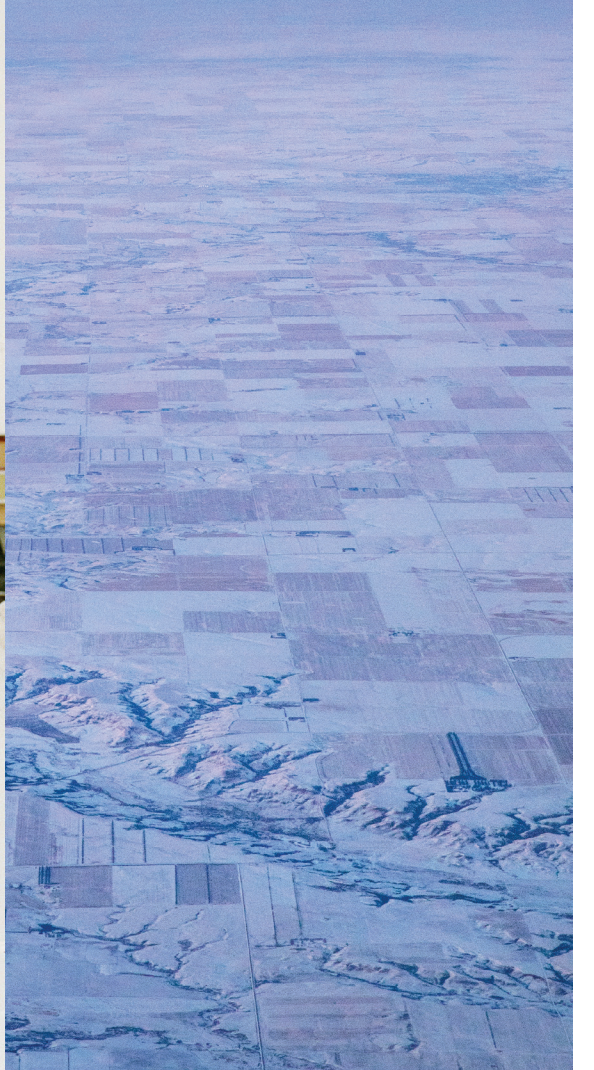
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRETT GUNDLOCK

ON NOVEMBER 2, Edmonton's Boot Scootin' Boogie Dancehall was filled to capacity. Hundreds were there to vent their grievances—grievances stirred up by a series of speakers who lashed out at the federal government for everything from its habit of taking climate change seriously to what one person called its “creeping socialism.” MAGA (that is, Make Alberta Great Again) merchandise was sold, the Canadian flag was held upside down, and the CBC was roundly booed.

The rally was hosted by Wexit Alberta, a separatist group founded by Peter Downing that is calling for a referendum that would allow the province to break away from Canada. A former Mountie, Downing promised the packed room that his movement—now a federal political party—would excise “the parasite of eastern Canada off from our necks,” a sentiment finding new favour after the Liberal party was reelected without securing a single seat in Alberta or Saskatchewan. The Vote Wexit Facebook page today boasts over 250,000 members—according to the Canadian Press, that number went from 2,000 on the night of the election to nearly 160,000 by the following afternoon. On the same day, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney spoke of a conversation with Justin Trudeau in which he told the prime minister that the election results reflected a “profound sense of alienation that must be taken seriously. Many Albertans feel betrayed.”









**ABOVE** Oil pump jacks near Cochrane.

**RIGHT** A sign for a Wexit rally in Red Deer.



If all this talk of western separation sounds familiar to some Canadians, that's because they might have been around the last time it happened. In 1980, lawyer and political activist Doug Christie filled halls with angry Albertans under the auspices of the Western Canada Concept—a political party that would actually win a seat in the provincial legislature, in a 1982 by-election, before fading into irrelevance. Roger Epp, a professor at the University of Alberta who covered one of Christie's meetings in November of that year, as a reporter for the *Lethbridge Herald*, says the similarities are striking. "I remember the three-syllable, Trump-style chant—'free the West, free the West'—that rocked the building whenever the crowd was roused, as it was again and again," he noted in a recent piece for the *Globe and Mail*. "Even now, I cannot recall that night without an involuntary tingle in my spine."

Then, as now, Alberta was dealing with the consequences of an oversupplied global oil market—prices fell from \$35 (US) per barrel in 1980 to less than

\$10 (US) per barrel by 1986—that would bring the province's economy to its knees. Then, as now, the separatists were frustrated with a prime minister named Trudeau and the way his government treated their oil-and-gas industry. Then, as now, the separatists were led by a firebrand with conspicuous connections to the far right (*Vice* described Downing as a "right-wing conspiracy theorist" because of, among other things, his lobby group's funding of a bulletin board that claimed current Prime Minister Trudeau was "normalizing pedophilia," while Christie became known for defending neo-Nazis and holocaust deniers in court). And then, as now, the separatists had a premier who both fanned the flames of western alienation and talked up his ability to contain them.

The similarities are striking, but the differences are also worth our attention. As Epp noted, the separatist movement in the 1980s was a mostly homegrown phenomenon, and it had only print and radio at its disposal. The current iteration, amplified by social media, traffics

in the familiar symbols of global populism, like yellow vests and MAGA hats, as well as many of the uglier ideas, like xenophobia, that those symbols stand for. "Aware or not of the darker tendencies of that populism," Epp wrote, "it risks becoming the kindling for a bigger, more dangerous fire."

That risk is real. Early last November, an Ipsos poll suggested that separatist sentiment in the Prairies had reached record highs. According to that data, 33 percent of Albertans and 27 percent of Saskatchewanians believe their province would be better off if it left Canada—according to some polls, that's an increase of almost 10 percent from 2018 and nearly double the number in 2001. And, while it's tempting to dismiss the movement, that's one temptation Charles Adler, a popular western Canadian radio host, says we need to avoid. "If it stays subterranean, we'll be fine. But if it evolves—as Quebec separatism did, as separatist ideology does all over the world—to the mainstream? Then, Houston, we have a problem."



**LEFT** A man wears a hat that reads “The West Wants Out” at a Wexit rally in Edmonton. This is a play on the slogan “The West Wants In” used by the Reform Party in 1988.



**ABOVE** A snowy owl sits on top of a power line near Cheadle.

**F**RUSTRATION with Ottawa is a foundational part of Alberta’s political culture. It was clear from the outset that federal politicians saw the west as a place to be exploited in any number of ways, a vision that was most famously articulated by John A. Macdonald’s National Policy, a series of tariffs that protected manufacturing sectors in Ontario and Quebec from US competition—building up industries in the east while opening the west (with the railroad and settlement) to create more customers for those industries. Frank Oliver, the publisher of Edmonton’s first newspaper and a federal cabinet minister, claimed back in 1885 that the federal government’s treatment of the west was “despotism as absolute, or more so, than that which curses Russia.”

And, while the rise and fall of the Western Canada Concept, in the early 1980s, was probably the most serious outbreak of western separatism to date, secessionist sentiments surged in the early 2000s with the Alberta Residents League, a group that lay the groundwork for the ideas still

in circulation today. Those ideas were infamously articulated in the so-called Firewall Letter, co-authored in 2000 by a collection of conservative Albertans that included Stephen Harper. Demands included the province creating Alberta versions of the Canada Pension Plan and RCMP, collecting personal income tax, and taking full control of health care policy. The letter also pushed for Alberta to keep the billions that it allegedly “loses” to Ottawa in transfer payments. (The claim was that Alberta sent billions of dollars to Ottawa in taxes that weren’t spent on Albertans but instead handed away to other provinces.) While then premier Ralph Klein dismissed the idea of separating from Canada, he was happy to give the Firewall Letter proposals a hearing at his party’s 2003 annual general meeting, positioning himself as the reasonable voice.

That appears to be Kenney’s strategy too. Last November, in a keynote address in Red Deer, he argued that separation isn’t the answer to Alberta’s problems: “I do not understand how the solution to a campaign to landlock Alberta is to

landlock ourselves voluntarily.” But he followed up by announcing that the province would strike a panel to explore a “Fair Deal” for Alberta, one focused on ideas central to the Firewall Letter. “We are going to be very bold in imagining every way that we can assert ourselves,” he said.

For a government with an economy-first approach, this is an odd strategy. After all, it was the Parti Québécois’s 1976 election and subsequent drive for a referendum on independence that helped shift economic power in Canada away from Montreal and toward Toronto. Hundreds of companies, including Sun Life Financial and the Bank of Montreal, moved their operations south. As former McGill professor Reuven Brenner told the *Financial Times* in 2014, “Montreal never recovered—there is no financial sector in the city.”

And the impact of flirting with separation pales in comparison to what would be visited upon Alberta if it were to actually succeed in breaking away. Its ability to access tidewater would suddenly be mediated by a country it had just separated from. The province’s debt would grow,



**ABOVE** A For Sale sign, broken in half, on a farm near Cochrane.



**RIGHT** Attendees applaud a speaker at a Wexit rally in Red Deer.

likely because it would be forced to take on a proportional share of the federal debt as a condition of secession. That additional burden could be measured in billions of dollars—and might have to be met, ironically, with the introduction of the sales tax Alberta politicians have resisted for so long. And the former province would be on its own when it comes time to deal with the costs associated with cleaning up after the oil sands, an amount that internal documents from the Alberta Energy Regulator suggested could be as high as \$260 billion. (The regulator later called that figure a “worst-case scenario.”)

Perhaps most importantly, the current iteration of Alberta separatism fails to reckon with the resistance of Indigenous communities. “As chiefs, with our united voices and on behalf of our twenty-two member nations—with clear conscience—declare we are strongly opposed to the idea of separation from Canada,” Treaty 8 First Nations chiefs wrote in a joint statement. “Any process of separation which may take place without maintaining the true spirit and intent of

our treaty, and without the consent of our member nations, would be contrary to constitutional and international law.” This is no small matter given that the treaties in question cover much of the province’s geography—including the oil sands.

But facts don’t seem to have the same influence that they used to, and the inherent irrationality of an idea—like, say, Brexit—is no guarantee that voters will reject it. Populism, at its core, is an inversion of Pierre Trudeau’s personal slogan of “reason over passion,” and explanations that appeal to the former have no purchase on the latter. Yes, Alberta has the highest household incomes in the country (at least as of the 2016 census), but that data tends to be a lagging indicator of what’s really happening in the economy—and it doesn’t account for the province’s high rates of suicide and personal insolvency. “All of that is interesting if you’re a policy wonk,” Adler says of efforts to point out the flaws inherent in Alberta separatism, “but as far as the people who are struggling go, it doesn’t mean anything to them.”

**L**AST FALL, a team of University of Alberta researchers talked to more than 600 people across the province as part of an ongoing project called Common Ground. According to Jared Wesley, a political-science professor and the principal investigator, it was an effort to uncover not what people believed or felt about separatist sentiments but what they thought other Albertans believed or felt—and to reveal the bounds of what is politically acceptable.

Perhaps the most important finding is that Wexit sympathizers have a great deal in common with residents from places like Wisconsin, which continues to deal with the collapse of its manufacturing industry, and West Virginia, which has been crushed economically by the cratering price of coal. “Your grandfather’s western alienation was about Alberta being held back,” says Wesley. “But what we’re hearing from folks in these focus groups is that they feel like they’re being left behind. That tells us that we shouldn’t be looking to lessons from previous generations of western Canadians for solutions



**LEFT** An abandoned farm building near Carseland. Similar structures are scattered across the Alberta prairies.

**ABOVE** Coyote carcasses discarded on the side of the highway in Airdrie. Coyotes are considered a nuisance by farmers.

here. We should be looking at what's happening in coal country, the rust belt in the United States, and to a certain extent, what happened to Newfoundland with the closure of the cod fishery."

That, he says, means economic initiatives alone won't be enough to address the concerns that people have. "It's not about positions or policies at this point. It's all about anxieties and priorities." In other words, it's not enough to buy a pipeline and promise to put it into service when many Albertans don't believe the government that bought it actually supports the industry. And, while Trudeau has turned performative apologies into a political art form, he hasn't yet found a way to connect with Albertans. "If it was simply a shopping list of things, at least then the federal government could try to work out some sort of compromise," says Roger Gibbins, a senior fellow at the Canada West Foundation and its president and CEO from 1998 to 2012. "But, when it's a deeper cultural belief in the failure of the national government, it's harder to get a grip on that."

Gibbins, who has studied western alienation for decades, doesn't think Albertans are ready to give up on Canada yet. Neither, it seems, does Kenney. "I believe that, in their heart of hearts, the vast majority of them are Canadian patriots," he said during his Red Deer keynote address. Perhaps. But that didn't stop the Fair Deal Panel his government launched from exploring a raft of policies, like the creation of an Alberta pension plan and the domestic collection of federal taxes, that could conceivably prepare the province to secede from confederation. The panel held at least seven town halls between mid-November and the end of January and, as of this writing, is due to deliver its report to the government by March 31. And, while Wesley thinks that town halls could be good safety valves for the anger coursing through Alberta's body politic right now, the idea of holding referendums is much more fraught. "You run the risk of unleashing forces that you might not be able to control," Wesley says. "David Cameron thought he had a pretty good finger on the pulse

of his party, if not the rest of the country, when he decided to hold a referendum on Brexit."

A referendum on Alberta's relationship with the rest of the country feels practically inevitable at this point. But what makes the latest flare-up of Alberta's separatist movement especially dangerous is the probability that its oil-and-gas industry will never recover to the level it was at back in 2014, when oil last traded above \$100 (US) per barrel, much less chart new heights. Even OPEC sees demand for oil peaking in less than twenty years. "The fight in 1980 was about policy jurisdiction and the distribution of non-renewable resource wealth," Epp writes. "The stakes were not so existential." And, as places like West Virginia (which gave Donald Trump the largest share of the vote in any state in the 2016 election) have shown, when the stakes are high enough, anything can happen—including the previously unthinkable. ☞

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**MAX FAWCETT** is a former editor of *Alberta Oil* and *Vancouver* magazines.

## VISUAL ESSAY

# Inside Wexit

*Meet the Albertans who want  
to start their own country*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRETT GUNDLOCK

**A**LBERTANS are a fiery breed. For those of us who grew up in Alberta, it wasn't uncommon for family get-togethers to climb a few decibels whenever the conversation turned to politics. But political discussions in the province today are angrier than I remember. With tens of thousands of people out of work and businesses closing, current debates around climate change, pipelines, and carbon taxes are being construed by many residents as attacks on their identity and way of life. Many also don't trust the current federal government to represent them. After last year's election, the nearest Liberal MP is almost 700 kilometres from Edmonton. Everyone I know seems to have a personal story about being affected by the shrinking economy. Is it any surprise that western separatists are back, blaming Canada and the so-called eastern elites for their economic difficulties? Albertans have talked about breaking up with the country before—separatist parties in the province date back to the 1980s—but it was more political stunt than manifesto. Now, there's a new urgency to the idea and a new word for the mood: "Wexit." Leaving Confederation has become, almost overnight, a mainstream topic. I went back to Alberta over December and January to speak to members of the various separatist groups. It would be easy to fall back on stereotypes of Albertans and vilify Wexiters as resentful, oil-spoiled rednecks. Instead, I wanted to present their voices in an unbiased fashion, to let them air their grievances without judgment. The separatists often represent the extreme side of the issue, but their views don't stray far from opinions you are likely to hear in many homes across the province. ☺

—Brett Gundlock

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*Interviews have been edited for clarity and length.*



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Kathy Flett, former interim leader of Wexit Alberta, recently joined the Freedom Conservative Party of Alberta. She is pictured in Red Deer.

**Kathy Flett** “I would love to see an amicable separation when Alberta leaves Confederation—one where the rest of the country understands that this is what we have to do for us, for our kids, for future generations; where there isn’t animosity, there is no fight or pushback, and we are able to move forward, creating great working relations and great trade relations within that new structure. That’s what I would love to see. I don’t know if I will, but it’s definitely what we are going to work toward.”

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Jake Eskesen is one of the organizers of Unify the West, whose primary goal is to unite separatist groups. He created a private chat platform to help nearly 2,500 members exchange ideas and coordinate strategy. He is pictured in Calgary.

**Jake Eskesen** “Let’s be honest: Wexit is, overall, pretty conservative. But, in our group, I know we have people who voted NDP, people from the LGBTQ community, people from First Nations communities, people who wouldn’t vote Conservative but would possibly vote for Wexit because they see the things that are wrong with our country. I was talking to a guy the other day, and he showed me his bank account. He was \$800 in the hole. He can’t get any work. And there are a lot of people like him, who are scared, who don’t know what they are going to do, and they’re considering a lot of options that they wouldn’t consider in a normal state.”

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**Michael Wagner** “Wexit strengthens Alberta’s position in the federation. Quebec never separated, but it has gotten a lot of benefits based on the fact that it has a party that advocates seceding from Canada. Having a stable and legitimate separatist movement here would deter some of the federal policies that anger Albertans.”

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Michael Wagner, author of *Alberta: Separatism Then and Now*, at his Edmonton home. Wagner is one of the most well-known historians of the province’s secessionist movement.



**Darren Esayenko** “There is just a complete cultural and ideological divide between east and west. The only way they are going to heal that is if they radically decentralize the federal system. Unless that happens, you are going to have a divided country. It is going to break up, guaranteed.”

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At a Wexit rally in Red Deer, Darren Esayenko holds a flag designed for the Western Independence Party in the 1980s. He says he has been a western sovereignist since he was in his teens.



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Todd Brown, who has written or influenced gun policy for various political parties, is writing Wexit's legislation on firearms. He is pictured on his ranch in Winfield.

**Todd Brown** “The first thing that we are going to do is not have anything to do with the federal Firearms Act. It is garbage, it is gone. Our gun policy won’t outright ban anything, because we see firearms as private property. A lot of people, especially left-thinking people, say, ‘Guns are dangerous, they kill.’ Well, the vehicle that you drive is more likely to kill somebody than the gun that I own. If I want to pack a firearm around my land, I am well within my rights to do so.”

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Sam Bell, administrator of a Make Alberta Great Again Facebook page, poses in downtown Edmonton following a Wexit rally at the provincial legislature. He says the Hawaiian shirt expresses “tongue-in-cheek support for global warming during cold-weather snaps.”



**Sam Bell** “When you take into account our lack of representation, our over-taxation, and the repression of our resource-wealth generation capacity, some Albertans view separatism as a last hope for the province. If we don’t break away from what is holding us back, we might never be able to be great again. Sovereignty and the right to govern ourselves— I think that’s what it comes down to.”

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**Peter Downing** “We are moving with momentum right now. We are capturing the hearts and minds of people across western Canada. We are speaking with Indigenous people. Great conversations, great dialogue. Wexit isn’t a left-wing versus right-wing issue. That, I think, is the big thing for progressive readers to understand: this is not an ideological movement, despite the smears and fake stuff that is out there about me and our organization. What we are doing is in the interest of all western Canadians, whether they’re Indigenous, non-Indigenous, or immigrants.”

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Peter Downing (right), leader of Wexit Canada, photographed at a Wexit event in Red Deer.



**Jon Mihalich** “Alberta sits on enough resources that, if managed properly, they could pay for our health care, our new government, police, education, everything, and we’d have a surplus left over. But our oil industry is desecrated. Nothing is left. Tens of thousands of people are losing everything as we speak. We need to do something. We are in trouble for a reason—we need to fix that. And it is not you and I we got to worry about, it is our kids we got to worry about. It is our neighbours’ kids we got to worry about.”

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Jon Mihalich, pictured at the Sands Inn and Suites in Edmonton. Mihalich is a member of The Myth Is Canada, a group that believes Canada’s constitution is invalid.

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C. W. Alexander, Alberta  
Independence Party  
board member, in his  
Calgary home.



**C. W. Alexander** “Our focus is to demonstrate and show Albertans that an independent Alberta could be massively prosperous. The risks of leaving, we believe, are less than the risks of staying. And, when you actually get down to brass tacks, there are huge benefits. Alberta would literally become a little Dubai in North America.”

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## HEALTH

# The Age of Surrender

*When is a senior no longer capable of making their own decisions? It depends on whom you ask*

BY SHARON J. RILEY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JILLIAN TAMAKI

**M**URIEL SHAW had always said the only way she'd leave home was "feet first." For Shaw, a retired British Columbia Institute of Technology clerk in her eighties, home was a double-wide trailer in Coquitlam, in what her family describes as the "second-best trailer park in British Columbia." Shaw was living an independent life and had endured a series of challenges, including the loss of her partner, in 1996, and breast cancer. She was proud to be in her own space and host friends and family. "Home is home" is how her youngest son, Chris Jarvis, explained it. Jarvis often travelled, but he would stop in to stay with his mother whenever he could. As Shaw got older and her health waned, another son moved in with her. This arrangement worked well until Christmas-time in 2010. According to Jarvis, as the holidays approached, Shaw didn't seem herself: she was anxious and confused—"just acting strange." The family took her to the hospital.







After Shaw was admitted, hospital staff decided to give her a capacity assessment: a common evaluation administered to people who seem disoriented. In many cases, these people are seniors. The goal of these assessments is to determine whether a person has the ability to understand information and foresee the consequences of their actions or decisions. Subjects are asked questions like, “What is today’s date?” and “What problems are you having right now?” They may be asked about how they’d react to various scenarios: “What would you do if you had a fall at home?” or “What if there was a fire?” And, though these assessments are often given by doctors, the responses lead to a legal outcome rather than a medical diagnosis. If the assessor determines that a person is incapable of making some or all of their own decisions, a “certificate of incapability” can then be issued. These certificates have different names depending on the province, but they all have more or less the same result: from that moment on, some or all of a person’s autonomy may be taken away for good.

Being deemed incapable means that a person’s life decisions—what they spend their money on, what health care they receive, where they call home—may be delegated to a trusted party. In some cases, that proxy is a family member; in others, it is the provincial public-guardian system, whose staff may meet with the person rarely, if ever. The system is designed to protect against elder abuse and errors in judgment; it is an attempt to safeguard some of society’s most vulnerable, but it risks doing so at the cost of their liberties.

After her capacity assessment, Shaw was deemed incapable. (Jarvis said that she was showing symptoms consistent with early-stage dementia.) The people around her immediately began trying to work out who would make decisions on her behalf. She had three children, and they had different ideas about what would be best for her. Jarvis said that social workers and hospital staff determined there was no suitable place for Shaw to live among her family, and though she wanted to remain

at home, her care workers wouldn’t allow it.

After months in the transitional-care unit of a hospital, Shaw was moved to a long-term care facility. She started writing in a new journal there, in June 2011. She seemed to want to make the best of her situation, and on the first page, she put down a rosy title for her

the matter, BC’s Public Guardian and Trustee (PGT) became involved. The BC PGT is a government-designated corporation that steps in when there isn’t a family member or close friend available to take responsibility for a person deemed incapable. “If we’d had money and family harmony, this would not have happened,” Jarvis said. “It wasn’t ideal,



project: “New Beginning!” But her entries outlined a growing list of concerns: “My small room lets me see outside, food is available etc, but I am still very sad and lonely,” she wrote. “Wish I could be home rather than in the hospital (or whatever this place is called!).”

While Shaw was getting acclimatized to her new living situation, Jarvis and his siblings argued over how their mother’s money was being managed. To settle

but what was the alternative?” It was a development that would consume the next ten years of his life.

Shaw is not alone in spending her older years deemed incapable and living under the oversight of the PGT. In Alberta and BC respectively, public guardians reported 7,832 and 7,904 adult clients from 2017 to 2018. The Public Guardian in Ontario managed the finances of approximately 12,500 people in 2019, about

half of whom were seniors. Billions of dollars—savings accounts, assets, pensions—are managed by public guardians across the country.

But, in recent years, auditors general and ombudspersons have raised concerns about the inner workings of the closely entwined capacity-assessment and public-guardian systems. In our country-wide patchwork of well-intentioned bureaucracies, some seniors find that, once declared incapable, they are unable to challenge the decision. There has been case after case of mismanaged finances and contested spending. In Ontario, the auditor general found that over \$1 million of assets managed by the PGT was lost between 2015 and 2018 because of staff mistakes.

In one instance, a packet containing nearly \$650 worth of jewellery was found in a PGT office, and employees had no idea which client it belonged to. Errors like this are not confined to one province: reviewers in PEI, BC, Alberta, and New Brunswick have all stated that their public trustees may not be properly protecting or administering their clients' finances.

It can seem like a great deal of attention is paid to other institutions that house vulnerable segments of the population, such as children in daycares. But there's no future in aging; there is next to no potential that a senior might one day cure cancer or be the next prime minister. Reform in elder care may be desperately needed, but it hasn't been forthcoming.

**D**ETERMINING mental capacity can be a puzzle. To test for a fever, medical staff can take a person's temperature; for diabetes, they can do a blood test. Capacity, on the other hand, has no standard unit of measurement. Trying to determine whether a person is able to make their own decisions can be subjective and debatable. Sometimes, the practice may seem more like an art than a science.

In Canada, there is no universal assessment or standardized system to determine capacity. Depending on the province or territory, capacity assessments can be administered by a doctor or a nurse, a social worker or a psychologist, an occupational therapist or, in rare cases, a member of the clergy.

Some assessors may use what's known as a Mini-Mental State Examination. In this evaluation, seniors are asked the month and the season. They are asked to spell "world" backward and forward and given a time limit of thirty seconds. They are asked what province they're in, to repeat the phrase "no ifs, ands, or buts," and to fold a piece of paper in half and put it on their lap or the floor. Other

**"I want my freedom!" she wrote. "I want out of this place!" She never did get out.**

assessors may use the Montreal Cognitive Assessment, in which the subject is asked to draw a clock face and to name as many words that begin with the letter *f* as they can in one minute. Other patients may be assessed on a geriatric-depression scale, where they are asked if they feel "pretty worthless" or if "it is wonderful to be alive."

Being on the receiving end of these questions can be rattling—but not answering to the assessor's satisfaction can influence whether a person goes home at the end of the meeting. And, though these cognitive tests can offer clues about a person's abilities, experts are raising concerns about the efficacy of these tools and caution that assessors may be overrelying on them. Laura Tamblyn Watts, president and CEO of the seniors' advocacy group CanAge, says that capacity should be thought of as more like a dial: "People are more and less capable of doing some things and not others." As she explains, many of us experience some level of uncertainty in our day-to-day lives; we all get confused and ask ourselves questions like,

*Did I pay that bill already? Did I turn off the oven before I left home?* But determining when exactly these sorts of questions become a sign that some greater function has been lost is far from straightforward. Even those with dementia don't fully lose their faculties overnight.

Capacity often comes in fits and spurts and can be influenced by health and environment. Problems with sleep or blood sugar, as well as common illnesses like urinary tract infections, can temporarily affect a person's state of mind. Seniors with dementia may experience a phenomenon known as sundowning, a decline in function that occurs later in the day. And then there are the medications. "There is a massive overdrugging of seniors in long-term care," Tamblyn Watts says. According to the Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement, one in five people in long-term care is administered antipsychotic drugs despite not having any diagnosis of psychosis. These drugs can increase fatigue and confusion and are known in the industry as "chemical restraints."

Maria Zorzitto, head of the geriatrics division at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, explains that there is often a desire to see capacity as "black or white." But, in reality, Zorzitto says, "there's quite a grey spectrum here." How a person performs on a capacity assessment can be influenced by whether they've recently experienced a traumatic event, whether they trust their assessor, or whether they are hard of hearing. Some senior advocates argue that people may even be found incapable without being properly assessed by a doctor at all. Ruth Adria, a retired registered nurse in Edmonton, says that she believes this was the case when a woman she knew—I'll call her Martha—was deemed incapable over ten years ago.

As Adria tells it, Martha was eighty-five and lived alone in her bungalow. She kept busy, filling her days with errands, tending to her backyard garden, and regularly stocking her basement with jars of homemade preserves. Martha had grown up an orphan in Europe and was well acquainted with looking out for herself.

Then, one day, she hurt her foot and was admitted to her local hospital. Adria says that, while Martha was there, health care workers raised concerns about her living conditions. Martha never went home again. She lost control of her finances and was placed in a nursing home. According to documents that Adria saved, Martha's bank account was billed \$2,000 per month for her new room—a shared space in which only a curtain separated her from other residents. Martha's house was emptied, her preserves tossed into a dumpster.

Throughout the ordeal, Martha maintained that she was being unfairly “locked up,” according to a letter she wrote to her doctor that Adria kept. Martha knew what was happening: she complained that she wasn't allowed to attend Mass, that her only exercise was “walking the corridor aimlessly,” and she argued she would be better off at home. “I want my freedom!” she wrote. “I want out of this place!” She never did get out.

With so many complicating factors that can influence capacity, and with a person's rights on the line, public watchdogs have continued voicing concerns about the quality of assessments. Adria now advocates for capacity assessments to be recorded and transcribed so families can have access to the basis of their family member's certificate of incapability. As it stands, many written assessments are vague, with little information about how conclusions were reached.

Registered nurse Alanna Kaye is well versed in the complexities of capacity assessments. When she first trained to become an assessor in Ontario, twenty-five years ago, it was a week-long intensive course, complete with role-playing and exams. Now, the training lasts three days—a length that could be seen as insufficient. “Because this is complex, the more practice you get, the better,” she says.

In 2018, Ontario's auditor general found that outside experts “identified concerns in almost half of the assessors they evaluated.” They cited a “lack of understanding of relevant legislation; asking subjects questions that

lacked sufficient depth; not explaining why they found the subject incapable; and not meeting any of the requirements for completing an assessment.” The auditor concluded, “There is risk that the Public Guardian is assuming authority for managing the finances of people who are in fact capable of doing it themselves.”

IT'S NOT HARD to imagine why a person deemed incapable may want to dispute the decision. But a person's options for challenging a certificate of incapability and the PGT's involvement depends on what province they call home. The most-referenced example of a gold standard, Ontario's Consent and Capacity Board, was created in 1996 but remains a rarity in Canada—a similar body exists only in the Yukon.

If a person objects to a capacity decision in Ontario, the board will convene within seven days. Application forms are available online, or a person can call a toll-free number for help. There is no cost for a hearing. Importantly, the board's panel will go to the person challenging the decision—according to Lora Patton, vice-chair of the board, it has met in hospitals, libraries, and nursing homes.

One hearing concerned a sixty-nine-year-old man. Bob (not his real name) was given a capacity assessment in 2012, after his landlord complained to a social worker that he had stopped paying rent. The assessor, with scant knowledge of Bob's medical, financial, or personal history, met him in a Tim Hortons one evening and noted that he was “vague” in his responses to her questions. The assessor said Bob failed to accurately count some coins she gave him—she had asked

him to count them under the table, as she thought it uncouth to count money in the open. After the brief meeting, the assessor unilaterally decided that Bob was incapable of handling his finances. They would be taken over by the Ontario PGT.

The full story came out only at the hearing. Alex Procope, a Toronto lawyer who represented Bob and specializes in capacity, guardianship, and power of attorney, told me Bob had stopped paying his rent in protest—his landlord was failing to address a cockroach infestation in his apartment. Procope has represented hundreds of clients before

the Consent and Capacity Board and says situations like this are more common for capacity rulings concerning property. “[Landlords] will try to get the PGT [involved] because they think they'll have an easier time getting their rent,” he says.

The assessor later admitted her testing was influenced by the sense that she was on “a rescue mission” to prevent Bob from being evicted and that the PGT would help him straighten out his finances. The board deemed Bob capable, noting that the assessor “may have had

the best of intentions” but that, in her short meeting with Bob, she had “made a number of assumptions that were proven erroneous.” Bob was lucky: he regained control over his bank account and his life.

Another Ontario case involved a ninety-five-year-old widow who lived alone and was prone to falls. In 2014, a nurse she had never met conducted a forty-minute interview and, as part of the questioning, asked what would happen to the woman if she stayed at home. The ninety-five-year-old responded, “I guess I will just live 'till I die”—an accurate, if blunt, statement. The nurse deemed the woman incapable of deciding where she should live. The Consent and Capacity Board later found the opposite to be true.

**“People are more likely to infantilize older people. Just because they're old doesn't mean they've lost their right to make decisions.”**

According to Ontario's auditor general, the board has come to a different conclusion than the original assessor in 80 percent of cases it has heard concerning people's ability to manage their own finances. In British Columbia, as in many other provinces, there is no such tribunal to review an assessor's conclusions. In a 2013 report, the province's ombudsperson noted that, in most cases, a person issued a certificate of incapability has only two options: they can request a reassessment at their own cost, or they can put up an expensive fight in court. The BC ombudsperson urged the Ministry of Justice to set up an independent tribunal for appeals, though it has not yet done so.

These institutions are not something every senior will encounter. PGT involvement in particular can be more likely for people who lack willing caregivers, those without prior written plans, or those with families who are in disagreement. Muriel Shaw fit into the latter two categories.

When Shaw first moved into her nursing home, she received statements from the PGT listing her monthly income: her work pension and old-age security. The PGT also noted the fees it was deducting, which in BC is 4 percent of a person's annual income plus a percentage of their pension. (The PGT can also deem it necessary to sell a person's home and will collect 4 percent of the sale price.)

But Jarvis said that, as time went on, his mother's financial statements stopped arriving. Shaw's notebook contains an ever-growing list of items she wanted to buy—Band-Aids, a flashlight, brown socks—and a desire to figure out her finances. "Find out amount in bank," she wrote. "What do I own?" Jarvis said that the lack of communication frustrated and confused his mother. "She lost control of her sovereignty by not having control of her own money. It made her angry," Jarvis said. (The PGT told me that it doesn't comment on specific cases but added that, "if assets are secure and the adult is able," it will try to minimize its involvement in day-to-day decisions like shopping and entertainment.)

The lack of communication made Jarvis angry too. He spent years trying to explain his and his mother's concerns

to the PGT and described a Kafkaesque struggle with a faceless bureaucracy featuring frequently changing staff members and a long list of unanswered questions, unilateral decisions, and refusals to grant even the simplest expenditures. The PGT used Shaw's money to buy her a wheelchair, but Jarvis argued that they didn't research the most cost-effective model. He said that a PGT representative would visit his mother once a year, but in his opinion, that was not enough time for them to understand her situation. Jarvis wanted out of the arrangement, but he felt there was no way for the family to take back control of his mother's finances without getting mixed up in an expensive legal battle.

Jarvis told me that, throughout the experience, no one in his family was properly consulted about what might be best for his mother. Nor, for that matter, was she. As time progressed and Shaw's health deteriorated, her notebook entries appeared to reflect this. The pages were punctuated with scribbles and rips, and it's evident that she often became confused. "What day is it today?" she asked in one entry. "I am mixed up as usual." But even so, her unhappiness with the situation was clear: "I am sad to have reached the end of my life like this."

Situations like that of Jarvis and Shaw are not isolated incidents. I met with Kris Schmuland at a coffee shop in Vancouver. His mother, Mary Rose, had been living in a nursing home when she was deemed incapable and her finances turned over to the PGT. He said that, once the PGT became involved, he had to go through a tedious process of seeking permission to help his mother buy herself items—lotions, clothing, supplements—and these requests were often turned down. Mary Rose had suffered a stroke and was not able to speak, but Schmuland spent a long time believing that his mother was still capable of making her own decisions. Even so, he had no means to appeal Mary Rose's assessment. "Battling a legal team of the best lawyers in the province?" he asked. "I don't have money like that."

Schmuland would often bus or hitchhike to visit Mary Rose at the care homes

she was placed in across the Lower Mainland. He wanted his mother to spend the last of her money on her own comforts. The Christmas he knew would be her last, he went all out. He bought a Christmas train and strung paper snowflakes from dental floss in front of her window. "There were lights and elves and stuff hanging everywhere," he told me, near tears. He wanted to "make sure her life was as pleasant and as beautiful as possible until she passed away." The PGT, he said, didn't make that easy.

**I**N MY CONVERSATIONS with doctors and lawyers over the course of two years, one word came up repeatedly: "paternalism." When the state or a family member is given the power to make decisions on another's behalf, they inevitably run the risk of substituting their own values for those of their charge. "It's a fundamental right to protect a person's autonomy," says Kim Whaley, a trusts and estates lawyer in Toronto, "but you also want to balance that against whether a person is vulnerable and needs protection. It's a fine balance."

Jarvis told me a story that seems indicative of this conflict. When his mother was living on a fixed income, she discovered that her poodle was dying. She spent around \$700 on veterinary bills, though her dog's life was prolonged only a few days. Was Shaw's spending a foolish decision that ought to have been prevented for her own sake? Did she understand the consequences? These are the questions a capacity assessment tries to answer, but whether there *is* a correct answer is up for debate.

Samir Sinha, director of geriatrics for Sinai Health System and the University Health Network in Toronto, says that, for doctors, the desire to protect a patient can be overwhelming and can sometimes lead to overreach. "You pledge to do no harm," he says. "It's so deeply ingrained." Still, he's concerned that ageism can affect decisions: "People are more likely to infantilize older people. Just because they're old doesn't mean they've lost their right to make those decisions." After all, people have the right to make mistakes, spend frivolously, and live in less

# Incantation

BY SADIQA DE MEIJER

Cider light of spring  
perforates the maples—

they bloom in tight vermilion packets  
that the squirrels chew, discard.

Fabric of small aggregates of families,  
pushbikes, buckets, stuffies.

Single thunder of the metal slide undenting.  
The mothers clutch coffees, they wave and relate.

I'm not quite right.  
One hand pushes the swing, the other holds an open book,

paper valley of an elsewhere.  
And an axe, Kafka said—

love, I recalibrated all catastrophes  
when you were born,

and they were worse—  
the sloping lines I read

in gulps while automatically repeating  
*whheeeeeee*

as you fly elliptically out  
of my attention, which should be undivided, but is

skulking for the possibility  
that words

could suddenly align the elements—  
then every gesture

has a choreography: rope climber in its tilted  
orbit, woman emptying

a shoe of sand, fledgling  
robin's skimming flight—and I'm

forgiven, bookish, motherly, because the weave,  
made visible, leaves nothing out,

not even you, not even me.

than stellar conditions—this includes all manner of hoarders and misfits.

But even so, many would agree there comes a time when the state must intervene to protect a person. “In some instances,” Whaley says, “I say we’re not paternalistic enough.” Through her decades of practice, she’s seen countless instances of elder abuse—horrible cases where a person’s health care is neglected or their bank accounts are drained by family members or scammers. According to the National Survey on the Mistreatment of Older Canadians, nearly 250,000 seniors were victims of financial abuse in 2015, and millions of dollars have been lost to scams or fraud. Do we not have an obligation as a society, Whaley wonders, to be aware and assist when a person is vulnerable?

These ethical questions are becoming more pressing. It is projected that there will be more seniors in Canada than children by next year, and the population of people over eighty is set to double by 2036. It’s estimated that more than 1.5 million Canadians are now well past the average age of mortality, and as such, they have likely outlived most of their friends, colleagues, and siblings. Many have moved beyond their sunny retirements into the final phase of their lives. As part of their care, many will be pushed toward nursing homes, regardless of their own preferences. “The biggest indignity faced by many older people is losing the right to live independently in their home,” says Marshall Swadron, a Toronto lawyer who, for over thirty years, has represented clients whom he describes as “allegedly incapable.” “Some people are very proud of their homes, their independence, their ability to decide who comes in and who doesn’t—all of which you lose when you’re in any kind of institutional setting.”

In BC, the Office of the Seniors Advocate surveyed nursing-home residents and found that nearly half don’t want to be there. About the same amount say they don’t have any close friends in the facility. At some point, as one advocate told me, many seniors in nursing homes end up looking “like flowers with drooping heads.”

But, as Sinha points out, the system that's been created to protect seniors can also work to support them—to see them as individuals with their own preferences and desires. He tells me a story about Josephine, a patient he got to know well. Josephine was blind and bedridden, and doctors wanted to place her in a nursing home—a decision she vehemently opposed. Some assessors may have seen Josephine as a woman incapable of deciding what was in her best interest. But, in this case, she kept her autonomy. Josephine stayed in her apartment and received government-funded visits from caregivers. She would lie in bed for most of the day and listen to her radio. To some, it may have appeared to be an awful way to live. To Josephine, it was the best life possible.

Advocate Laura Tambllyn Watts points to examples like this as evidence that a more supportive model is possible, one that doesn't strip a person of their decision-making ability. "We always want to make sure that we are only removing the civil rights of the person to the smallest degree that need be,"

she says. Lately, some advocates have been promoting a "supported decision-making model" where seniors receive help understanding the consequences of their decisions and come to solutions alongside a team. The process is collaborative; it doesn't rely on someone making decisions on the senior's behalf. This kind of process takes time, training, and trust, and not all seniors today have trustworthy advocates willing to work with them on such a level. Despite the challenges involved, Tambllyn Watts says the goal should always be to ensure that each senior's personhood is respected for as long as possible.

**T**HE END of all our stories is the same: we die. But how we spend our final years matters. I first met Jarvis long after his mother was admitted to long-term care. Shaw's "new beginning" was over, and her health had continued to wane. She was on multiple medications, and her mind was often swarmed with fleeting thoughts that, like fireflies, dimmed and flitted away. Her notebook was long forgotten.

Jarvis told me he had one regret: that the PGT had ever become involved in his family's affairs. He felt that, rather than relieving the stress that age and illness brought to both his mother and his family, the PGT had made her decline all the more painful. Through tears, he told me that he was planting sunflowers in a window-box at his mother's nursing home. He planned to use them at her funeral.

Muriel Shaw died last January. I met with Jarvis a few weeks afterward, at his home in Coquitlam. Her funeral had yet to be arranged, and her family members were trying to find a way to gather. I asked about the flowers in the window, and Jarvis told me they wouldn't be making it to her funeral after all. "I let the sunflowers die," he said. It was near the end of the season, he concluded. And besides, they didn't get the care and attention they needed. ❁

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**SHARON J. RILEY** is an Alberta-based investigative journalist with *The Narwhal*. Her work has also appeared in *Maison-neuve*, *Harper's*, and *Alberta Views*.

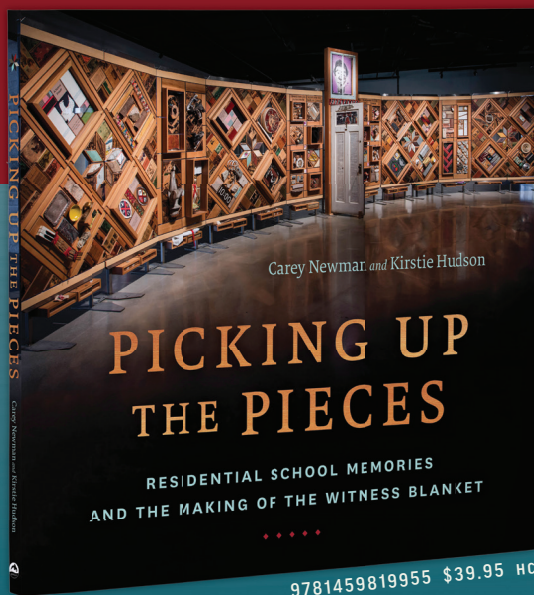
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## ARTS

# GO SELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

*Banff Centre started off as a remote artists' retreat.  
Now it's trying to help creatives adapt to the modern world*

BY TOM JOKINEN

ILLUSTRATION BY KYLE SCOTT

**O**NE AFTERNOON in 2017, while visiting Alberta's Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, I took shelter from the rain in Glyde Hall, the visual-arts building. Deep in the basement, near the ceramic and paper-making studios, I came across something odd.

Rock, from the nearby mountains, was coming out of the floor. Not a wee chunk but a huge shelf of limestone, tall and wide enough for at least six people to climb onto without feeling crowded. This, in the middle of a workspace. Embedded in the rock, I later learned, are around 300-million-year-old fossils: stromatoporoids from a reef environment of the Paleozoic era, back when Banff was undersea. Tectonic forces brought the limestone up to where it is now. What I was seeing was an architectural hack: they built the basement around the rock to save having to blast through it. But the effect was deeper and weirder, science-fictional, as if the rock had pushed into the building like the Blob, oozing through a crack in the floor.

This sense, nature as animated and commanding attention, has helped make Banff Centre one of the premier

arts-and-culture institutions in the world. Hundreds of artists, of every school and discipline, come through here every year—some by invitation, most as applicants—to escape urban life, figure things out, and get to work. There's a residence, a library, rehearsal halls, and theatres. There is a gym. There are yoga classes. There are places for students to eat and areas, like Glyde Hall, where they can create and exhibit the results. Lodged in a national park in the Rocky Mountains, Banff is supposed to be cut off from the real world, the better to act as crucible for inspiration. Weather rolls in as metaphor. The air is scrubbed clear, and something new is set in motion: country music, abstract paintings, ceramic bowls, sonnets, one-act plays, avant-garde sculptures, the odd theatrical wig—all the fine things that artists can produce when free from distraction. Notable alumni over the years range from Yann Martel and Joni Mitchell to Bruno Gerussi and Claudia Rankine, Guy Maddin to John Luther Adams. Artists have to make a living, but Banff, for me, has always looked like a place where that fact can be postponed, briefly, in the act of creation.

The link between nature and creativity is an old idea and one on which



Banff Centre's reputation is based. The site is significant: the campus is in the middle of rugged, whitewater wild-life. It's a mood, as if the mountains are closing in on you. Nothing fatal, just dark and weird: *Twin Peaks* for cellists and painters. Those surroundings provide the "peculiar mental background"—isolation, stark weather—that Stephen Leacock believed Canadians shared and that, for generations, has been a boon to writers and artists. About a ten-minute walk away, in the town itself, is a main drag whose gift shops sell fridge magnets, expensive Arc'teryx jackets, dream catchers, and stuffed rainbow poo-emojis. Tour buses egest people dressed too warmly for mild weather. Last year, the town considered a ban on backyard bird feeders as they become food sources for bears. With its faux-Gold Rush architecture, Banff is a quasi-theme park in which nature, often red in tooth and claw, lurks just behind a theatrical curtain. Same with Banff Centre—which you'll find up the hill on Wolverine Street, past the old cemetery—where Newfoundland writer Joan Sullivan was charged, she once told me half-proudly, by an elk.

I went to Banff over two years ago to see what was behind a rebranding of the famous arts centre. While the idea of the solo artist in a quiet studio was still relevant, Banff now wanted to be the place to teach artists how to be entrepreneurs, to brand themselves. In other words, there appeared to be another idea being built around the living rock of the mountain: commercial success. This involves promoting, teaching, and nurturing the business smarts of the artists; not shielding them from the working world but preparing them for it. Classical musicians, depending on the program, are coached on everything from building marketing and business plans to the intricacies of touring.

None of this changed the underlying purpose of Banff Centre for artists: to be amazed, and not a little spooked, by the sublime, by the unknown, by that which startles the impressionable. "They meet other artists, they think about their art and commune with nature," says Janice Price, president and CEO of Banff Centre since March 2015 and the main driver behind its new image. "But I don't know any artists who are not doing the work for an audience." Price knows something about the kind of audience artists often crave. Before coming to Banff, she was

**"The world  
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head of Toronto's Luminato Festival, a kind of culture-crawl which, every June, brings theatre, film, and art installation to public and private spaces. She was also interim executive director of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in Manhattan, home to the Met Opera—and arguably the Buckingham Palace of North American arts centres.

Banff Centre, Price suggests, has ambitions too. It is interested in artistic entrepreneurship on an international scale and in being noticed. In this context, that means producing art that can raise approving eyebrows in not just Calgary but Berlin and New York. (As an example, there's *Betroffenheit*, a dance-theatre piece on trauma and loss that Vancouver choreographer Crystal Pite developed at Banff in 2014 before eventually taking it to London, England, where the *Guardian* called it "raw and riveting.") To that end, I was told in a communications brief, "every artist and arts administrator needs to be an entrepreneur, to understand how to create great work, find an audience, find a donor base, and propel that work to Canadians and the world. That's what we are teaching at Banff Centre."

When she started, Price was quick out of the blocks. Thirty-three jobs terminated in her first year (about 8 per cent of the centre's staff). "The Banff Centre" became "Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity"; after much consultation, they'd decided to lose "The." The centre's mission, for Price, is simple: she wants Banff to be the global leader in arts and culture. Not *a* global leader but *the* global leader (as if this is where the missing article from the centre's name wound up). She got pushback from her team. How could they claim such a thing? "Guys, you're being so Canadian," she told them. "People can take us to account or not. Enough of this constant mushing down of what's supposed to be aspirational, an accurate, bold statement of what you want to be."

So she's hoping for big projects to carry the Banff name. Case in point would be *Pepperland*, an idiosyncratic modern-dance musical adapted from the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and presented by Banff Centre, in 2018, with seventeen international partners, including the Sony Centre (now Meridian Hall) in Toronto, the City of Liverpool in the UK, and Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Illinois. Not addressed in the dance musical's marketing is a question that wants answering in a world where young Canadian artists struggle for attention and resources: Why take on a project created by an American choreographer and an American composer, neither of whom worked on it at Banff?

On that score, according to Price, I am missing the point. "Well, I don't see a problem," she says. "For me, it's a combination of working with an important partner in Toronto who is also trying to bring international dance to the city." Furthermore, "It'll be completely sold out, and the Banff name will be attached to it." In short, *Pepperland* is good business.

Business is a word that Price tends to favour. As she said last year in a release announcing the extension of her contract to 2023, "One thing I always like to remind people is what a big business the arts are. When you factor in film and digital, our sector is bigger than the

forestry, fishing, and auto industries combined. It is a big economic driver in this country.” Fair enough. But is *Pepperland* what Banff’s founders had in mind when they built a wilderness arts centre?

**B**ANFF CENTRE was founded, in 1933, as a summer drama school. Instruction in visual arts soon followed, and students would troop into the woods and mountains to take down the landscape in oils. A. Y. Jackson, of the Group of Seven, taught painting at Banff from 1943 to 1949. Donald Cameron, one of Banff’s early directors, wrote in 1956 that the centre “could be the Salzburg of America”—referring to the Austrian city considered one of Europe’s fine-arts hubs. “As one surveys those majestic hills the atmosphere becomes at once peaceful and serene, a shield against the grinding abrasions of a mechanized and discordant age.”

It’s a romantic idea that Banff Centre eventually outgrew. The centre currently gets \$21.78 million a year from the Alberta government and \$2.62 million from Ottawa, and it holds over \$41 million in

endowments. It runs leadership-training programs for governments, corporations, and NGOs. It also runs a popular Outward Bound-style program called Foundations of Purpose, in which high achievers face down fears, go into the wild, and encounter the complexity of nature. The dining hall serves 90,000 meals a year, going through 300 kilograms of onions, 250 kilograms of carrots, 380 litres of 2 percent milk, and 50 kilograms of chicken breasts a week. While we’re on numbers, residency stays for artists can cost—depending on program and length of stay—several thousand dollars in tuition. (A five-week workshop for opera musicians, for instance, will run you \$5099.69 plus GST.) But most programs are eligible for up to 100 percent in subsidy from Banff Centre, which in 2018 spent \$3.9 million covering scholarships and tuition for students who didn’t have that kind of money. (The median annual income of a Canadian artist in 2016, according to the Canada Council, was \$24,300.) That’s 60 percent of the student body covered, fully or partially, according to the latest annual report.

Given the stakes, the entrepreneurial focus seems, at least in part, directed to potential donors: donors who want to feel their money is being well spent, that the investment is of value. But the branding pitch also conjures Cameron’s “discordant age.” The point of Banff, historically, has been to look away from the world to the mountains. This idea of an art-of-the-wild is what Northrop Frye partly had in mind, in 1965, when he wrote of Canada’s “garrison mentality.” There is, he argued, a cultural urge, from colonial times, for “small and isolated communities” to build walls against nature’s hostility. In Banff, it’s hard not to see, in literal terms, what Frye was banging on about: here’s a place where you can confront the dark roots of colonial Canada, that which is created from some kind of romantic, nostalgic terror.

But then, even in Frye’s time, the idea of art inspired by nature was seen as only part of the story. Takao Tanabe, who ran the visual arts program at Banff from 1973 to 1980, wanted professional art students to come through the Banff programs: those interested in modern

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form and technique. I asked him if his students found inspiration in being Canadian, in the nature at Banff, and he laughed. “I don’t know what you mean by Canadian!” he said. “I mean, some of the team were national, international types—they certainly did admire the mountains, but that wasn’t the focus of their work or their ideas.” So Price’s global focus is nothing new.

Harvey Locke is a photographer and conservationist who lives in the town of Banff. The area, he says, “is a powerful place, and that’s what artists who are open to the energy feel when they come here, and that’s what helps them create great art.” So, when talk turns to *globalization*, the buzzword that Banff seems to be inviting into its mission, Locke takes a step back. “Does that mean,” he asks, “following trends and patterns that are being cooked up in global media centres, let’s say New York or Tokyo or some other place? Or are you talking about relevance to the globe and what you offer the world? Those are two different conversations.” In other words, if Banff’s goal is to be like other urban arts centres, then “it’s just an inconvenient place to get to.”

Yann Martel, whose novel *Life of Pi* won the Booker Prize in 2002, was in his thirties, pre-fame, when he first came to Banff to write. “Sometimes you look at people’s careers,” he says, “and it looks preordained. And it really isn’t. You give up, even if you have talent. The indifference of the world can grind you down.” The world, he says, mostly tells you it doesn’t need another novel, doesn’t need another painting, doesn’t need another composition. And, still, creators go to Banff. “What happens afterward,” he says, “is the world can still crush them, or they can burn out, but nonetheless, a place like Banff really validates what they are doing.” In other words, there really is no marketplace for art *in advance* of the accident of success. And success can’t be taught. Art can be created in the right environment and then dispatched to the market, where something might happen, but the process has never been predictable. So why teach artists to be entrepreneurs?

Some of it is necessity: Amazon rankings, Goodreads reviews, and Spotify algorithms have all changed the way people find books, art, and music. But the promotion of the artist-entrepreneur may run counter to the cherished myth of the artist as oddball. So, when it comes to fundraising—something that matters deeply to Price at a time when culture is the first to go under austerity programs—it’s best to avoid the subject of oddballs and instead talk, with enthusiasm, about personal branding, about fostering Banff graduates who have a firm grasp on the marketplace.

Imre Szeman is a professor of communications at the University of Waterloo who also taught at Banff Centre. He thinks the rebrand might come with a cost. He believes artists are being “encouraged to become more entrepreneurial.” Most artists, Szeman says, instead operate on a “labour discount,” meaning they create way more than they earn for it. “If one orients their work toward an end, it changes what one does and how one does it.” Is it enough for Banff to be a hothouse of artists, or do artists need to think more like small businesses? If the latter, Szeman is saying, they will likely fail: “The vast, vast majority of entrepreneurial enterprises don’t work out.”

But fine art is, in part, what made Banff Centre, and location matters. Ian Brown, a feature writer for the *Globe and Mail*, was the head of literary journalism at Banff back when I took the program in 2011. “It’s a small town,” he says. “Everybody knows everybody, but part of it is also physical, the mountains. I will sound like a lunatic when I say this, but the mountains are big, and they ring you in and they look down on you. They’re like this condo board that’s never going to approve of anything.”

This tension enriches a life of the imagination, sharpens its flavour. Banff, Brown says, “exists as this encapsulation, the kind of physical embodiment of a point of view where ideas can exist for their own sake. Art can spring up out of inspiration, away from commercial concerns, away from the city, away from political concerns. You’re high up. It’s rarefied like the oxygen.”

**W**HERE Banff Centre, located on Treaty 7 land, is arguably most progressive—high-profile partnerships aside—is in producing and funding Indigenous art and in educating political and business leaders on justice, as it did with a Truth and Reconciliation Summit in October 2016. Reneltha Arluk, a theatre artist of Inuvialuit, Dene, and Cree descent, was appointed the director of Indigenous arts, and artists can now take advantage of Indigenous-focused residencies on choreography, playwrighting, and the creative use of digital technology.

One takeaway from Indigenous art, for me, is that the world is complex, especially at the level of raw nature. Commerce may be impatient with complexity, but commercial fashions are transient. It’s hard to brand complexity, however. The arts “have always been good at ferreting out the deep forces and impulses that animate us,” Szeman says. “In place of the arts, what we have now is a fixation on and fetishization of entrepreneurial culture.” As for the message this gives to the artists who come to Banff, “This might be subtle, but it’s there.”

That is, it’s the artist’s job to see what’s out the window and say something, make something. Or, perhaps, it was. Now, it’s hard not to think that we’re in the time of the citizen-producer, when creative people can not only present their work unfiltered via social media but use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to promote themselves and find their audience (think poet Rupi Kaur, who writes short, accessible poems designed for social media—or what’s been called “instapoetry”—and has sold 3.5 million copies between two poetry collections). While it’s true that artists have always found a way to promote themselves to buyers and patrons, the fact is that social media becomes an end in itself. What happens on Instagram doesn’t just point you to art, it replaces art: people seek out the “influencer” and the so-called content creator to understand their culture. We are all artists now; what separates us comes down to who has the most robust promotion strategy.

“Sounds like bullshit to me,” says Banff artist Dustin Wilson, who was working

at Glyde Hall the day I encountered the rock Blob (and, just to dial up the weirdness, he was watching *The Blob*, the 1988 remake, on a desktop in his studio). “That model,” he says of the artist-as-entrepreneur, “is a straight line to the consumable, evading any critical thought.”

But then Vickie Vainionpää, a visual artist in Montreal, seems happier about Banff’s rebrand. “One hundred percent I think of myself as a brand,” she says. “And I think every artist should do the same.” The world, she says, has turned into a giant house party where everyone is talking and where the smart artist needs to compete to be seen. “I describe my brand as optimistic, multipassionate, polished, and thoughtful,” she later wrote in an email. “I really think that, for artists, at least *looking* like you have your shit together puts you miles ahead of the competition.”

What about the value of facing up to the wild outside, as per Frye, or the wild inside, as per Freud, or globalization, as per Harvey Locke, and making art for art’s sake, not for art’s sale? This,

says Vainionpää, goes along with the “myth of the ‘artist-genius’ and ‘starving artist.’”

“There is a huge gap in artistic education right now,” she adds. “Nothing to the effect of managing the business of creativity, pricing work, creating financial statements, marketing, sales, branding, or the importance of websites and online media. These are the skills you will need in the real world if you want to bring your A-game and are serious about art.” God knows these skills *help*, but it’s still possible to imagine a world-class arts centre like Banff existing apart from all that, a very rare exception to the commodification of art, if only because that’s how it seems to have been imagined in the first place.

Price doesn’t entirely disagree: no artist is obliged to finish anything at Banff, never mind sell it. “We feed them,” she says. “We make their beds. We encourage them—in some cases force them—to work on their art. They’re working harder than ever before.” She’s just done with what she calls the “elite” notion of Banff Centre as some kind of artists’ spa. But,

for Price, art is also big business, like forestry and fishing. For Szeman, this is the problem. The “entrepreneur,” he wrote in a 2015 paper on the subject, is “no longer a minor figure at the margins of capital.” Instead, they are “the neoliberal subject par excellence—the perfect figure for a world where the market has replaced society.”

Banff appears to be positioning itself less as a “shield against the grinding abrasions of a mechanized and discordant age” and more as a fellow traveller for commerce, for creators and influencers, whether they see themselves as artists or not. That’s fashionable and rational, but it might easily miss the point of putting your arts centre in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. So maybe I’m wrong about the stone Blob in Glyde Hall. Maybe it’s a reminder of an older Banff that won’t be ignored: the muse, which remains misunderstood but insists on pushing its way in. 禁

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**TOM JOKINEN** is a writer based in Winnipeg and a contributor to the *Globe and Mail*, *Canadian Art*, and the CBC’s *Ideas*.

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## MUSIC

## Vocal Range

*Riit's new album brings throat singing to the nightclub*

BY CARLY LEWIS

**D**EEP IN THE mazy grey passages of Toronto's CBC headquarters, Nunavut-born throat singer Riit is gleaming. She's in studio to record some songs from her debut album, *Ataataga*. From my perch in the sound booth, I listen as she and her co-singer, Alexia Galloway-Alainga, move between

luscious Inuktitut harmonies and the commanding thunder of throat singing—their vocals steadied by the pulse of electronic beats. This fusion feels energizing: tradition meets a party scene on a zesty TV melodrama.

Inuit throat singing typically features two people who alternate between quick, rhythmic breaths to produce sonic layers,

from high-pitched tones to hoarse, guttural expressions. As Riit and Galloway-Alainga work through the tracks, they switch back and forth: Riit often takes the lead on the melody, while Galloway-Alainga anchors the song with solo throat singing. Sometimes throat singing is the focus, sometimes it's the structure. At the end of the album's title song, the backing music falls away, and Riit and Galloway-Alainga face off, allowing the listener to hear the power of Inuit throat singing on its own. For almost a minute, the singers intricately counter each other. The song ends only when they erupt into laughter. "I almost burped!" exclaims Riit. She makes a tilted hand motion to her manager, signalling that she'd like the wine brought in from her dressing room.

For the taping, Riit and Galloway-Alainga selected bright-green skirts that they found at an eccentric Queen West dress shop—the colour glows in the darkness of the studio, its shade as likely to be found on a club-district tube top as within a wave of the Northern Lights. I later search a colour wheel until I find the exact hue: Arctic Lime.

The week prior to the CBC performance, twenty-four-year-old Riit—full name Rita Claire Mike-Murphy—was in her hometown of Panniqtuuq, a hamlet near a fjord in the Qikiqtaaluk Region. Panniqtuuq, fifty kilometres south of the Arctic Circle and with a population of around 1,500, is often called "the Switzerland of the Arctic" owing to the mountains and majestic swaths of glacial blues that ornament its horizon. Riit was briefly enjoying a reprieve from a touring schedule that had sent her through Canada and Europe. She spent her days hiking, fishing, and preparing country food like seal and maktaaq—whale skin and blubber.

Riit first made a name for herself in 2017, after releasing a self-titled, home-recorded three-song EP that *Exclaim!* described as "an enchanting blend of mellow folk-rock." It earned nominations at the Indigenous Music Awards and the Western Canadian Music Awards and is still proudly on display in the Iqaluit Airport gift shop.



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But, when writing *Ataataga*, which was released last October, she embarked toward a different sound—exchanging the light, guitar-focused folk stylings that had brought her early recognition for a more danceable design.

This mix of traditional throat singing and perimeter-pushing experimentation has led to an eclectic performance history. Last March, Riit and Galloway-Alainga travelled to London to perform for the Duke and Duchess of Sussex at a private embassy showcase. The following night, they were in Paris for a UNESCO event. Then, in October, Riit opened for Wolastoqiyik musician Jeremy Dutcher's sold-out show at Toronto's Danforth Music Hall, which has a capacity of nearly 1,500.

When I begin to ask if she's endured any pushback for her evolving style, Riit answers before I can complete the question. "Like I'm sinning?" she says, noting that most people have been supportive. Last summer, she plotted a mini-tour of Nunavut, swapping marquee venues for elementary-school gymnasiums. She played in Iqaluit, Baker Lake, and Chesterfield Inlet—the latter with a total population of about 440. "This was their first time hearing my new music, going from Inuktitut folky pop to sticky electronic," she says. "I could tell some were so confused, like, 'Do I like this?' In southern Canada, people love it. And then, playing the shows back home, they're like, 'What is this?' But it makes sense—it's a completely new sound for Inuktitut music."

**I**NUIT THROAT SINGING dates back generations as a way for two women to connect and pass the time while others were out hunting. It originated as a friendly competition: the winner was the last singer to stumble or laugh.

In the eighteenth century, Christian missionaries started arriving in the North and sought to repress Inuit arts, culture, and language. As part of their campaign, they banned the practice.

Throat singing's public resurgence began in the 1980s, and in the following decades, younger generations worked with Elders to learn traditions that were under threat of being lost. Its revival is as

much a musical movement as it is proof of what can be reclaimed.

Riit spent her childhood learning throat singing techniques from her cousin, singer Becky Qilavvaq. "One thing she said that stuck with me was, 'Don't be afraid to go super guttural and deep,'" Riit says. "That's the type of throat singing that I personally am amazed by."

There are a range of different forms of throat singing practised around the world. Tuvan singers, from central Asia, are famous for their ability to generate multiple sounds at the same time; South African Xhosa singers perform complex rhythms that rely on two basic notes.

What sets Inuit singers apart, says Qilavvaq, is their ability to change sounds in quick succession: a master can go from deep and bass-heavy to bright and birdlike almost instantly. When two or more people sing together, they echo one another's choices, resulting in an extraordinary range of tones that are simultaneously high and low.

Before Riit started recording *Ataataga*, she asked her producer, Graham Walsh, to visit Iqaluit. She wanted him to understand the inimitability of Nunavut and the extent to which her home guides her work. While in Iqaluit, he gathered field recordings to include on the album: ravens cawing, footsteps on snow, an ulu knife being sharpened, the sound of caribou meat being sliced. "I wanted to capture as much of the environment as I could," he says. "Whether overtly or subconsciously, it's in the music."

Riit's reinvigorated direction on *Ataataga* has won her fans within the music industry—her album was recently nominated for Indigenous Artist or Group of the Year at the 2020 Juno Awards. Chaka V. Grier, writing in *Now Magazine*, awarded the album four stars out of five and described Riit as "an artist who knows exactly what she wants to say and how she wants to say it."

This clear-heartedness is evident in Riit's lead single, a duet with South African Canadian singer Zaki Ibrahim called "#uvangattaq." In it, they reference the #MeToo movement and call out abusive men: "Auvut tiqtiliqput ijivu ikualappu



takugannu arnami tilluujaqtumi.” (In English: “Our blood starts to boil, our eyes catch on fire, when we see a woman bruised.”) The singers’ ire culminates in a whispered “fuck you,” one of few English lines on the record.

Riit received vitriol for the song online—she felt that the detractors were accusing her of hating men—but she remains undeterred. During live performances, she prefaces her performance of “#uvangattaug” with a call for people to intervene when they witness abuse, alongside a disclosure of her own experience of violence. “When I was going through it, I felt so alone, I felt so deep in the dark,” she told the audience at a recent Toronto show. “I thought it was important to write a song to let other young Inuit women know that I am here supporting you.”

Her message seems to resonate with listeners. “There was this one woman in Winnipeg who came up to me [after the show] and said, ‘I had a really bad fight with my abusive boyfriend last night, and it’s been going on for two years, but today you made me see the light, and I am not going back to him,’” Riit says. “Even if I change ten women’s lives because of the song, that’s a milestone for me.”

**W**HEN TENOR, composer, and pianist Jeremy Dutcher won the 2018 Polaris Music Prize, he used his acceptance speech to declare that Canada was in the midst of “an Indigenous renaissance.” This movement can be seen in the recent history of the Polaris itself: in the past decade, the award has been won by folk idol Buffy Sainte-Marie, genre-defying artist Lido Pimienta, and Tanya Tagaq, whose third album, *Animism*, was an international hit and brought the term “throat singing” into dozens of headlines around the world.

In northern Canada and beyond, this renaissance has taken hold thanks in part to the 2016 launch of Aakuluk Music, the first Nunavut-based record label. Prior to Aakuluk, there were no managers, booking agents, producers, or publicists who focused on developing and exporting the territory’s musicians, especially those

whose lyrics are in Inuktitut. Riit was among the label’s inaugural artists alongside alt-country outfit the Jerry Cans (whose members founded the label), rising pop singer Aasiva, bluesy rockers Josh Q and the Trade-Offs, and Northern Haze, whose 1985 debut marked the first Indigenous-language rock album recorded in North America. (Riit has since signed to Toronto-based Six Shooter Records.)

While Riit’s approach to throat singing is innovative, she is one of several Inuit artists whose style is revitalizing the form. In November, sibling duo Piqsiq, from Yellowknife, released a throat singing Christmas album. Another twosome, the Juno-nominated Silla and Rise, are also incorporating electronic elements into their throat singing sound.

As audiences become acquainted with all the ways throat singing can be performed, Riit, too, continues to bloom. In addition to being a singer, she hosts an educational children’s show on APTN called *Anaana’s Tent*. And last summer, she spent a month performing in the live theatre show *Unikkaaqtuat*, working alongside a cast of musicians and circus artists to tell the stories of Inuit founding myths.

“For our performances, I kept drawing this tattoo on with eyeliner,” Riit says, softly dragging her finger down her chin to show where it was placed. The day after the *Unikkaaqtuat* show in Iqaluit, her friend, Ippiksaut, texted her out of the blue to ask if she wanted a tattoo. Riit had been thinking about getting a design on her thighs. But, when they later met up to start the process, Riit noticed that Ippiksaut kept looking at her face. And so it was determined that Riit would be adorned with tallurutit: traditional chin tattoos. Where Riit is from, it signifies that she has entered womanhood. The art of Inuit face tattoos, like throat singing, had once been banned by colonists. It, too, is now being revitalized. “It was such a powerful experience, being tattooed traditionally,” Riit says. “I feel like I’ve always had it.”

.....  
**CARLY LEWIS** is a writer living in Toronto.

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by Brian Barth

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## FEATURED ARTIST

# Of Needlework and Nebulae

*The otherworldly beading creations  
of Margaret Nazon*

MARGARET NAZON grew up near Tsiigehtchic, a Gwich'in settlement in the Northwest Territories. For most of the year, she and her family would hunt, fish, and trap in seasonal camps, returning to their Tsiigehtchic log cabin for a week at a time, once around Christmas and once in the summer. In the community, she would watch her older sister and her friends' mothers stitch beads into floral designs on velvet, stroud, and moose hide after their chores were finished for the day. At their invitation, she began learning how to decorate bracelets, headbands, and moccasins. But she didn't particularly like beading.

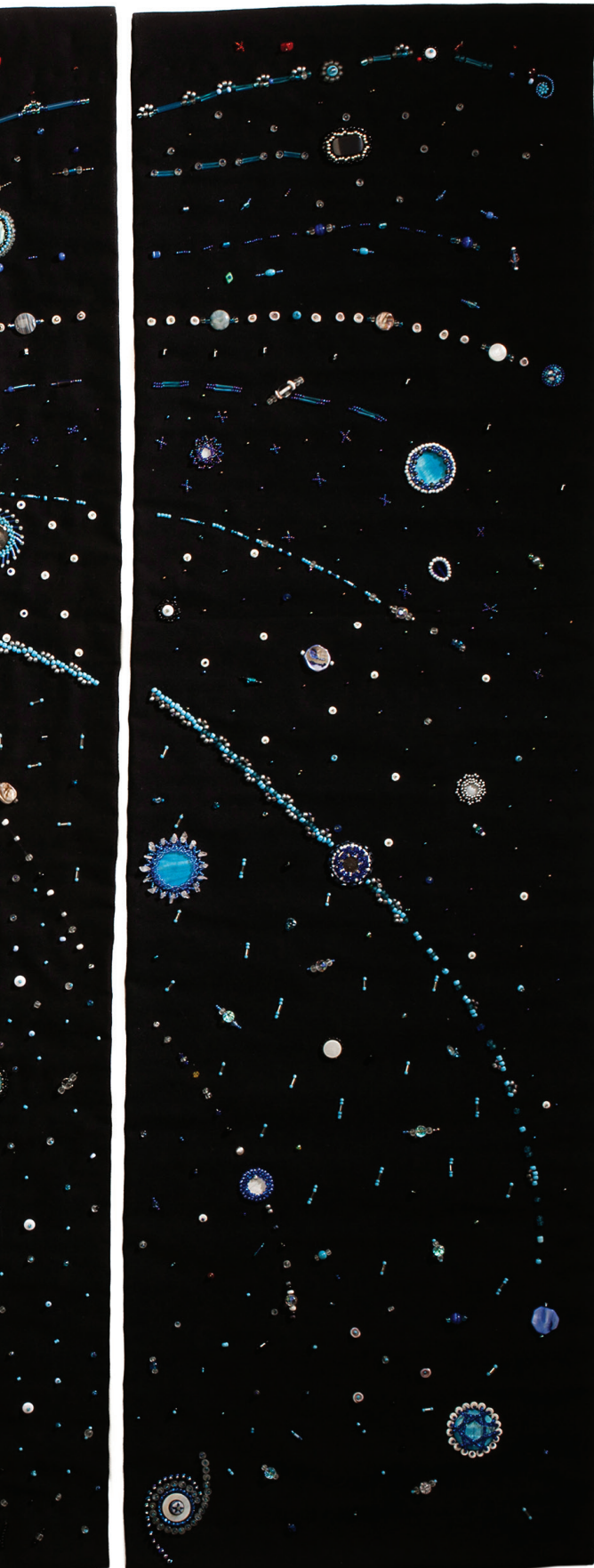
"I was doing the same thing as everyone else," she recalls. The women in the community taught her that flowers and geometric patterns were the only suitable choices of subject matter. They determined which colour combinations were acceptable: leaves had to be outlined with rows of dark-green beads and filled in with light-green ones; yellow and black were the only options for flower centres. She remembers experienced bead-ers requiring their students to tear out and redo any work that did not meet their standards of neatness and precision. Their rigour may have stemmed from the rules that apply when living and travelling in nature: "When you're out on the land," says Nazon, "you've got to follow tradition, otherwise you could get lost, you could starve, something could happen."

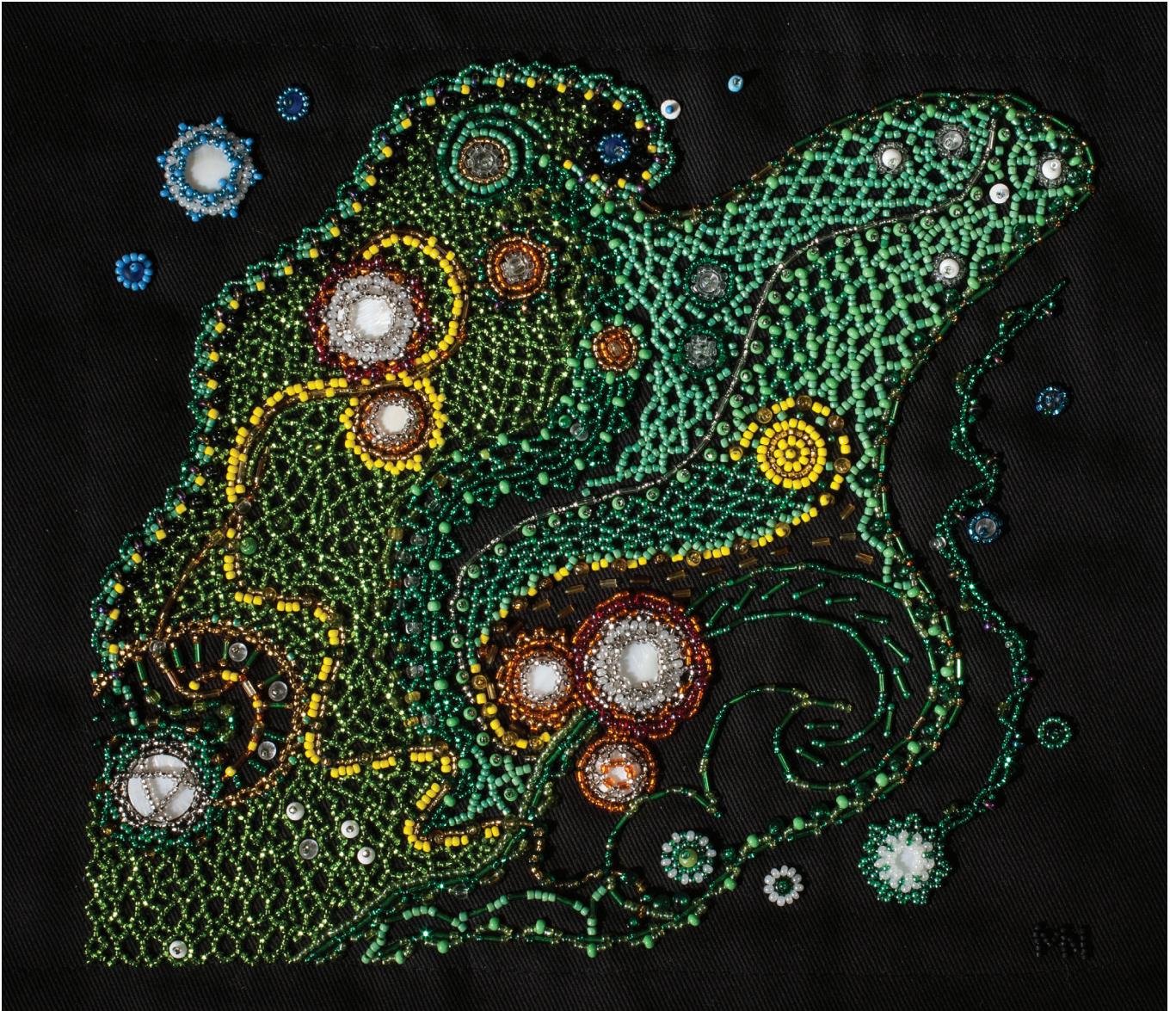
Outside, Nazon developed a different passion. The local priest, Jean Colas, taught her and other children about the constellations above. In a part of the world where winters bring long nights, the skies can be particularly vivid.

But it wasn't until Nazon was in her sixties that her love for astronomy appeared in her beadwork. She remembers the day, over a decade ago, when her partner, Bob Mumford, showed her some Hubble Space Telescope images online. The swirling nebulae, star clusters, and galaxies reminded him of beadwork. Nazon agreed; she was particularly attracted to the whirl of colours and ocular shape of the Cat's Eye Nebula. In the tradition that had characterized her

beading experiences, she tried to create a precise replica of the image. This left her frustrated, and she eventually disassembled the piece.

**LEFT**  
*Andromeda Galaxy,*  
2017

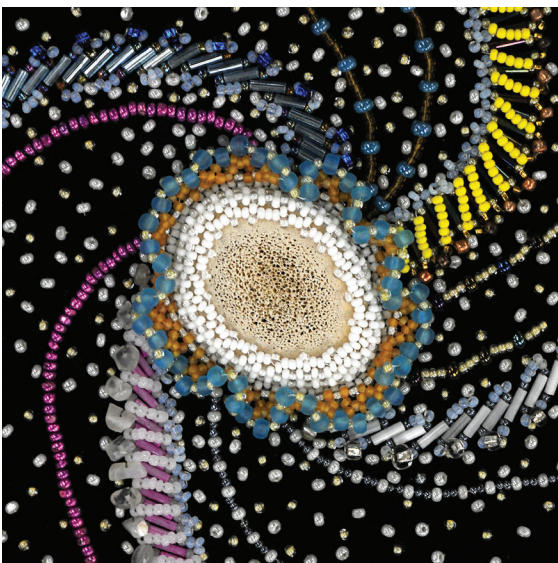




**ABOVE**  
*Bright Lights,*  
*Green City Nebula,*  
2018

**LEFT**  
*Milky Way Spiral*  
*Galaxy, detail, 2014*  
(PWNHC/2017.26.1)

**OPPOSITE**  
*Purple Galaxy, 2018*



When she read in more detail about phenomena photographed by the Hubble telescope, however, Nazon learned that many, including the Cat's Eye Nebula, were composed of gases and other moving particles. This meant the colours and shapes captured would long have shifted by the time she saw them. That realization, she says, freed her to "go wild" with her designs. "If I make a wrong stitch, so what? I'm not a perfectionist. I don't care if this colour doesn't match with that one. It looks good to me."

She began incorporating wooden and metal beads, spherical seed beads and tube-shaped bugle beads, fish vertebrae, bits of driftwood, and stones into her works. Thrift stores provided





serendipitous finds such as shells and glass. A section of caribou antler became the centrepiece for *Milky Way Spiral Galaxy*.

When Rae Braden, the exhibit-design manager at Yellowknife's Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, visited Tsiigehtchic in 2015, she was struck by Nazon's signature style—it's still unusual to see beadwork that doesn't fall within the standard floral and geometric themes. She helped organize Nazon's first public exhibit, which opened two years later at the centre. Nazon's art soon began gaining wider recognition: in the fall of 2018, independent curator Mary-Beth Laviolette included Nazon's work in the *Cosmos* exhibit at Calgary's Glenbow Museum.

"Up here, you're going to get looked at if you're doing something different with a traditional style," says Inuk (Brendalynn Trennert), an Inuvialuit artist who creates three-dimensional designs using bundles of caribou hair stitched onto hide backing, a practice known as caribou-hair tufting. Despite Nazon's

break with the strictures of beadworking, northern artists have celebrated her ingenuity.

"I don't know why we have to speak to this binary of traditional or contemporary," says Tania Larsson, a Yellowknife-based artist who creates jewellery that draws on her Gwich'in culture. "The love of the land, the love of the universe, all these things embrace Indigenous values."

As Nazon's work gains popularity among northern artists, so does her commitment to mentoring others. In conjunction with her Yellowknife show, Nazon held a workshop to share her techniques with a group of NWT artisans. She encouraged her students to not simply replicate her approach but to develop their own styles. "Margaret would give them what they need to flourish," says Inuk. "She is leaving an example. Next thing you know, they're breaking their own trail." ★

—Pamela Young

## FIRST PERSON

# A Space beyond Language

*What I've learned from what my mother has forgotten*

BY DAMIAN ROGERS

TEN YEARS AGO, after my mother was diagnosed with dementia at age sixty-one, she was in free fall. She lived alone and had lost her job. In a state of desperation, she began a mnemonic project of her own design. She tried to memorize a list of 150 animal names.

I didn't know where this idea came from. It seemed like her plan was to prove to the doctors that there was nothing wrong with her. She copied this list out over and over and over, filling notebooks, sketchbooks, the insides of novel and self-help-book jacket covers. Even after she entered an assisted-living facility, she continued to compulsively copy out this list of animals. I think it became a way to focus her fear into some kind of activity. I even found the names of animals scrawled across two of her pillowcases. I couldn't help picturing these animals running through her dreams.

As I approached my mid-forties, I became terrified that what had happened to my mother would happen to me. My anxiety inspired a fierce determination to seek out as much information as I could. I wouldn't bury my head in the sand, I promised myself. I spit into a mail-order DNA test tube and found out that I carry a copy of the APOE4 gene, which increases my risk of developing dementia. So I began to do what some of the current science—the consensus is constantly changing—recommends to decrease my risk. Every day, I take a heroic dose of concentrated turmeric and swallow spoonfuls of fish oil along with a host of other supplements. I bike to work. I meditate.



I drink tea. I eat blueberries and greens and sweet potatoes.

I also started to police my own cognitive health. On my worst day, I was melting a quarter cup of coconut oil on the stove for a flourless, high-fibre seed loaf when my young son called me into the living room. He showed me something in his dinosaur book, and I totally spaced out about the oil heating on the burner. When I ran back into the kitchen, there was a column of flame rising about three feet out of the saucepan. I panicked. *Wait, how do you put out a grease fire? I know, not water, not water.* My son started screaming. It was a mess.

Later, I texted my husband, “I’m really worried about my brain,” and he texted back, “Dude, no offence, but you’ve been burning pots since I met you in 1998.”

Still, I made an appointment for a full cognitive-health evaluation. Toward the end of the exam, the doctor conducting the test asked me to list as many animal names as I could in two minutes. I smiled. I suddenly understood where my mother’s lists came from. I also saw that, in trying to face the spectre of this

illness head on, I had lost myself in my own lists.

My mother no longer knows my name. She couldn’t explain who I am to anyone who might ask her, “Who is this, Joanna?” But we still find each other in a space beyond language. When I visit her at the nursing home where she lives, near Buffalo, I find a quiet corner for us, away from the other residents and the sound of the television. On my phone, I play old songs she used to sing to me when I was a child. Sometimes she knows the words to the

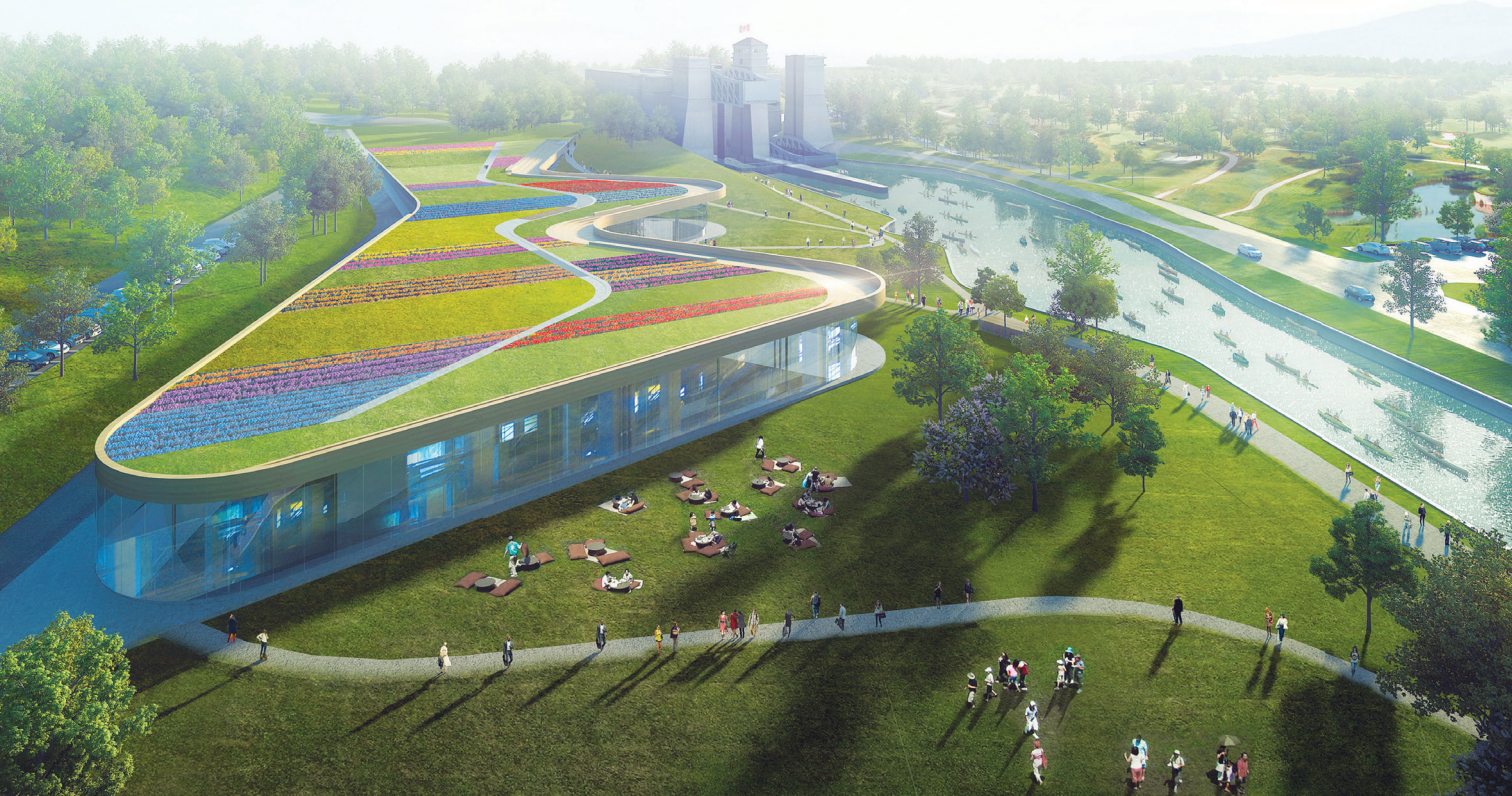
chorus; sometimes she hums the melody. These are the moments I feel closest to her. No matter how anxious I am as I drive from Toronto to see her, no matter how guilty I feel over how long it’s been since my last visit, when we are sitting together like that, singing, I am filled with gentleness and patience, and I’m completely present. In this way, she’s teaching me to treat myself with the same kindness.

Sometimes the ghost of an old fear will bubble up inside my mother. And we ride through it like a wave. Her body stiffens, her face clouds, she might mutter something about a bill. I hold her hand, I speak in a calm voice. It passes. We turn our attention back to the music. A line will suddenly leap forward—maybe James Taylor singing “I always thought I’d see you again”—and our eyes will well up as we sing it together. 🎵

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**DAMIAN ROGERS** is a former poetry editor at *The Walrus* and the author of the forthcoming memoir *An Alphabet for Joanna*. This essay is adapted from a speech she gave at *The Walrus Talks Living Better* last fall in Toronto.

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*Victoria Grant*

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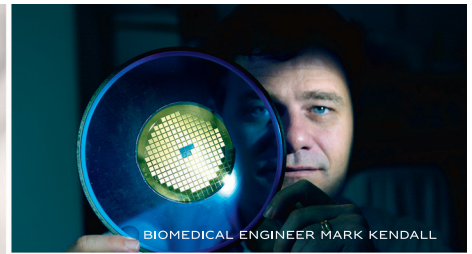


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