

Gathering

Lorri Neilsen Glenn

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Heat rising today after a cold spring and I am indoors and in my head. Squandering an early summer day is heresy in this country. God help me, I think, but if not, well that's fine too.

When I called Aunt Kay last night, she was making dinner.

"How does 103 feel?" I asked. As always, she laughs.

"I didn't expect to live this long." And, as always: "When is David getting married?"

My voice cracked from shouting and I coughed.

"Are you fighting something?"

Fear, I wanted to answer: I didn't tell her, but I'd called twice earlier, and it rang and rang for minutes. No answer. I'm stabbed with the knowledge she is down to months or weeks. She keeps up her small apartment, the fridge stuffed with morsels wrapped in plastic and rubber bands, walls filled with fading family photos her daughter will one day take down. Totchkes, mementos everywhere.

Are we ever ready to lose a loved one? Some of us have more time to prepare; others little or none.

A bright yellow bird appeared on the deck yesterday, stunned from the impact of a crash against glass, ending its spring busyness. I picked up its cooling body, felt the miracle of its soft intricacies, whispered a blessing before laying the body under a budding bush near the shore. When I walked down this morning, the bird was gone.

Resurrection? Predator? It doesn't matter, really. The future is always a promise, and always fatal. The old apple tree, the bird's home, endures these absences year in and year out. At night, I fall asleep looking at stars, listening to the disputes of snarling raccoons in the yard, and I wake before dawn to the scent of lilac, the hush of soft green poplar leaves in the wind. Don't give up on the world, says the poet; keep going even when the going is slow, says Confucius. Everything a bumper sticker. Childhood is burnished with simplicity, and the gift of years, if we're lucky, is nuance, the lingering specifics of intimacies, a kind of worship of what we've been given, gratitude for those we've walked alongside.

Well, maybe I've gone too far: I'm no Mallarme nor Debussy, and it's only an ordinary afternoon in an ordinary life, one that reminds me you could live to 103 if you don't take yourself too seriously, if you wrap up tiny moments and store them, and when people ask you how you lived this long, you give them a different answer each time: I used to skate a lot. I've been a widow for decades. I don't let things worry me.

Up the hill, a machine digs up earth for a foundation. The bus stops on the main road and the neighbour's son and daughter jump out, kick up dust along the gravel. I step outside to water a planter and check on the young crabapple tree with its wind-cracked limb. Always there will be storms and lost limbs, I am always starting over and the years in my body lean harder against the seasons. What else is there to do? And what a time. What a time.

Now this: red blossoms emerging from branches of the broken limb, jubilant.

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Lorri Neilsen Glenn's most recent book is *Following the River: Traces of Red River Women* (Wolsak and Wynn), an award-winning mixed-genre exploration of the lives of her Ininiwak and Métis grandmothers and their contemporaries. Author and editor of several collections of poetry and nonfiction, Lorri has worked with writers across Canada and in Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Greece and Chile and has served on national and regional literary juries. Her award-winning essays have appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *Prairie Fire*, and *Event*, among other journals and anthologies. Former Halifax Poet Laureate, Lorri is a mentor in the University of King's College MFA program in creative nonfiction and Professor Emerita at Mount Saint Vincent University @neilsenglenn