

*It's really my privilege to have been able to serve as Peterborough's second Poet Laureate. It's been a rare and delicious opportunity to address you from the prism of poetry. Poetry can't save us but it can accompany us in rough seas. Poetry is a lifeboat with room enough for all.*

*My work as an artist is not to change your mind, but to expand it. To inspire us to look up for a moment, to view the horizon and beyond—to remember why we are here. Poetry can be magic—but only if you turn toward it.*

*I invite you to do that with me for my last reading tonight.*

## **At the Risk of Listening**

Ziysah von Bieberstein

I was walking home from the bus station one night  
when up ahead I saw an old friend I'd heard had been living on the street.

I confess I considered crossing to the other side,  
casting my eyes down.

But my grandmother taught me that life is 99% luck.

All that separates me from my friend's vacant eyes and frenetic gait  
is one sheer layer of fate—a trick of birth, a twist of time.

We hugged; said, "been a while."

They told me they had been painting, that being on the streets meant early mornings,  
which meant that for the past year, they had seen the sunrise every single day.

\*

Over 84,000 people live in the City of Peterborough, but that night I learned  
we do not all live in the same town.

Some of us live in a city of patios and fine wine.

Others navigate by a map of back alleys, bus shelters, cafés that let you use the washroom.

For some, this place is a new home, a new language, a sacrifice for safety.

For others, Nogojiwanong is where the old growth once reigned, where the river ran thick with  
salmon,  
where it is now difficult to access the shoreline, and buried relatives lay unmarked.

For some, a colourful sky caps off a day of waterskiing and BBQ.

For others, it signifies yet another early morning tent eviction.

Our leadership must come to know each of the cities that make up Peterborough.

The city of sanctuary,  
the city of art,  
the city of lean-tos and church meals,  
the city of colonial ghosts.

\*

Despite this time of calamity, if the history of humanity were written as a novel,  
this right here is the chapter I'd most want to read.

For the first time, we are all connected—across cultures, across continents.

The people of this town were born in over one hundred different countries,  
speak over 75 different tongues.

Separation is an illusion this poem is sharpened to shatter.

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In these times, we wring our hands.

It seems nothing we do will stop the bombs from falling.  
We can't seem to stop addiction or homelessness or gentrification.

But here is something simple. It costs nothing but the risk of being changed by truth.

We can listen.

Listening does not mean staying quiet while someone else speaks.

It is not about folding interesting people into a plan already in place.

Listening is a much deeper act; one that requires a soft posture and a profound strength.

The seashell of an open ear  
is at least as worthy as the curve  
of a flapping tongue.

\*

Imagine we missed this moment,  
spent it guarding old rituals,  
building new barriers,  
protecting old ways at the expense of the new.

Imagine I had crossed the street that night,  
cast my eyes down.

Imagine I had never heard about the year of the rising suns.

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Listening is an act of opening, of receiving.

And it is an act of great risk.

A risk that is our only hope of a livable future.

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May this poem turn you toward your neighbour.

May this poem turn you toward the truth of your heart.

May we expand ourselves to make room for each other.

May we listen. May we soften.

May we be bold enough to be changed by what we hear.