

THESE BURNING STREETS



POEMS BY
KELLY ROSE PFLUG-BACK

These Burning Streets
Kelly Rose Pflug-Back, 2012

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FOREWORD
BY JULIE BELMAS

AS A MILITANT ECO-ANARCHIST AND FEMINIST, I HAVE EAGERLY WORKED TOWARDS fostering revolution in everyday life. But I also believe an important contributing factor in realizing radical social change lies in nurturing a cultural “renaissance” amongst womyn.

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, and I know of no experience that has generated a wider range of emotion for me than the effective communication of revolutionary spirit through an amazing song or poem. In *These Burning Streets*, Kelly Rose Pflug-Back writes openly and tenderly about themes of hope and fear, exhilaration and humiliation, hatred for the enemy and love for fellow comrades in ten absolutely beautiful and visionary poems about a centuries-old war that has been slaughtering the earth, the feminine psyche, and the minds and bodies of oppressed people worldwide for generations. Her heroines show us their cuts, scrapes, and decomposing bodies barely left in pieces, limping, all bloodied but unbowed to speak to us from the dead on behalf of the living.

The boundary-crossing nature of Kelly’s poems can be labeled mythic, fantastic, science fictional, historical, surreal, or magic realist, but I liken it more than anything to “wild” because it feels inspired more by a sense of wonder and the shape of things to come than lamenting about the past. Turning away from comfort, she embraces instinct, seeking to perpetuate nature rather than manmade culture. Each poem in *These Burning Streets* feels like unearthing a treasure chest of uncharted remnants and fossils that inform us of our psychic inheritance as a species, making connections between ancient mythology and contemporary experience.

As a G20 culture steeped in surveillance technology continues its ferocious state repression, pitting neighbor against neighbor and “good” protester against masked “bad” protester in order to silence and desensitize the people from demanding revolutionary change, Kelly’s poetry inspires us not to remain silent or become desensitized. It delivers a postmodern message that there is no ideological or socially conscious solution to a misogynistic capitalist society other than to join as one in the instinctual ancestral path of the collective unconsciousness. Beneath the pavement, another world is possible—even if you can’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not there.

xox

*In total strength & resistance,
continually spinning through sisterhood,
Julie(t)*

PREFACE
BY KELLY ROSE PFLUG-BACK

AS A CREATIVE FORM, POETRY HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE MORE ANARCHIC THAN other styles of literature. While conventional fiction and journalism generally require some sort of narrative structure in order to accomplish their purpose, poetry can reduce language to its raw materials, a medium no longer fettered by the rules of grammar, punctuation, or linearity. A large part of the magic of poetry is its power to break through boundaries, transcending or ignoring the artificial divisions built by society to separate the mythic and the real, the beautiful and the monstrous, the precious and the worthless, the sacred and the mundane.

The book that you're about to read is the distilled product of nine years worth of notebooks, random scraps of paper, and scribbles on the walls of abandoned buildings and rented rooms. Some of these poems, such as "Wolf Suit" and "Holes in the Backdrop," I wrote when I was fourteen and living in a small town just north of Peterborough, Ontario. Others, like "A Cure for the Water Trapped Inside Your Body" and "Words to Chart Elapsed Time," existed for years in my mind as I drifted around Canada sleeping on stoops as a teenager, thoroughly convinced of my own lack of talent, intelligence, or any other discernible merit that would warrant recording my thoughts on paper.

Much like love, creativity is one of the few essential forces in this world that is truly ungovernable. One could cite plenty of examples to argue that anger is equally potent, but I believe that the purest and most fertile forms of anger are not those that stem from animosity towards what one opposes, but from a love for what one is defending. Both love and creativity can become so all-encompassing that they wash away the false pretensions of human society, exposing the phony and superficial nature of all things our species has consecrated. In the face of adversity, both also have unique ways of flourishing despite their constraints. These drives inspire us to overstep the boundaries and divisions imposed on us by society, regardless of the severity of risk that these transgressions involve.

SWEET MERCY,
HER BODY AN ARK OF WILD BEASTS

*There are dead who light up the night
of butterflies,
and the dead who come at dawn
to drink your tea
as peaceful as on the day your
guns mowed them down.
—Mahmoud Darwish*

My life has been the tin ribbons of a jaw harp,
its bent notes twanging
in the lightless space cupped between my hands.

I've tried to make sense of it:
the button eyes of cloth animals,
frayed cotton straining
at their herniated stitches.

The bones of my face are a map, I told you
the plates of my skull fused like petals at my crown

where the Queen's infantry anointed me in mortar dust
and closed their ranks forever.

I told you the truth:
before I knew you, I lived for years as a sin eater.
Beauty was a charm I would never inherit,
my palate's cracked seam a cleft between floorboards
in the attic apartment
where we lived before the war.

You never stared at the palimpsest of scrawled transgressions
that I was sure still etched my body.

Once you took my hand
and pressed it to the shallow depression in your skull
where you told me famine had wracked you while the bones were still soft.

Trepanned from birth,
your fontanelles like spy-holed fingers
never quite closing
over the keyhole to a locked room.

As a child, you told me how you used to wake sometimes
to see a wax museum of saints looming above your bones' cradle

the dark haired Virgin standing over you,
her robes a swimming quilt of fish and birds.

Their feathers were cursive, crested
in halved suns;

she pressed her palm to your chest, once
and fear died inside you.

I wonder where the mark of her hand is now
watching hoarfrost bloom against the panes
of a shattered city.

The world turns its black spokes,
and the wind covers my tracks forever.

Daylilies wilt and bow their heads,
blight-palsied stalks
curling, clawed against my palm.

The insult of bayonets will erase you

a limp body left to bear witness
to history's bloody unfolding.

I am a corpse, like the others
they heap like sandbags
along the edges of their barricade.

I am a man who has blinded himself
painting portraits on eggshell fragments
with a single-hair brush,
touching the clothes you left folded in my room
until their texture no longer recalls your body
and my hands, too are cast into the insensate dark.

In my mind
I called you Lost.

I called you City of Ur.

Your eyebrows the dark arches of Fayoum portraits,
the bones of whales' ancestors scattered through the floors
of now-parched Cretaceous seas.

The stelae of their backbones rise like buzzard-ridden harbours,
spines whip-stitched, lacing between sun-bleached dunes.

I want the ululations of a thousand throats
to guide me across black waters whose shores I'll never reach

a ghost of night overpasses
watching the headlights of transport trucks pass through my body
before the dark under the train bridge swallows them again.

I want to open my eyes to see her staring down on me
from the grotto tattooed on your sunken chest

frail and impossible, a hothouse flower
blooming in the nuclear heat.

I have bled, and seen a river fork through this place.

I have watched lithograph smoke
spill from the barrels of silenced guns
to curl in bows and lariats
around her heart-shaped face;

fetal buds pushing through cracked asphalt,
the bones of ploughshares rusting
in soil too anaemic for even the grass to anchor its roots in.

Somewhere, a revolution is happening
that will never be broadcast.

Somewhere, the sun rises on a world
no longer drawn as if by some hand

enamoured
of human pain.

A CURE FOR THE
WATER TRAPPED
INSIDE YOUR BODY

Death will not undo the frayed seams that cinch my waist
or stand above me in the light
to better watch my mouth slacken;
the ceiling fan revolving in my damp eyes,
their pupils like an axis for the turning spokes.

I remember the weight of those small, brittle bones
like broken eggshells in my hands—
something that can't withstand even the force of being fit back together:

the window box flowers collared in white eyelet cotton,
pleating to foetal buds again when the sun starts to set
and the scarecrow casts the shadow of the cross—
cutting across my path
as though what was seeded in this plight could never rise above it;

my stomach a globe of tears,
the room's reflection frozen in the mirror of a clean knife

curved like a scythe
to fit the hollow of the swell.

We made graves for each of your sorrows in the folds of my abdomen once,
buried too close to the surface
so that in years of famine the small mounds rose up,
embossed like braille across my stomach.

I didn't think of it for years,
pacing unlit rooms flicking my butane lighter
to watch the shadows break up and scatter like insects,
disappearing into cracks in the drywall
or shivering in corners,
waiting for me to put it out.

Sometimes I traced the planes of those hard, formless things inside me
and wondered if I'd stayed with you too.
If the shame that spread over everything I touched
still coats your body like a milky thrush:

your hands braced forever in the doorway;

every thrash and heave of the dog-toothed sea
still rolling in the whites of my eyes.

HEPATOMANCY

fall upon me, quiet siege of day
let slip your rain of petals

your pale & baying hounds
that usher in the sun's wild hunt.

dawn lets fall the night's last fading shawls
& her body weeps with cut-glass jewels

thighs a blush of rose
behind the white-blond of ostrich plumes.

in the city I part my hair down the centre like one of Ted Bundy's victims
& write you letters in my head:

your beauty is the flight paths of migrating geese
whose silhouettes flap, transient
against my closed eyelids.

it is a godless country unmarred by the scourges of bullets
& it is no one's.

I cried enough to flood the Euphrates
remembering the soft curves of your body

Tigris, Neander
black channels wending the root systems of briars
down my painted cheeks.

cosmetic,
like all things are cosmetic

eyelids swollen fat with bruise

hinged black legs of spiders fish-hooked
at the corners of my mouth.

in my poverty I clung to such illusions
forgetting words and the placement of objects
names of whole cities.

my burning palms
my Shirtwaist fire

I would have sold everything to keep him

car stereos, cheap gold
engraved with strangers' names

divided portions of my flesh
wrapped up in waxed brown paper
bound with packing twine.

in shop windows bodies hang
exhumed of the red, bunched fruit of organs

like the halved carapaces of spent missile shells
like grottoes to some bloody saint, left empty
with nothing in them.

I have seen the past, cleft like living waters before me
in the path of a black armada.

I have seen the future, & it is darkness pooling
in the hollow clavicles of children

the televised rape of nations

iridescence
on the wings of flies.

every morning the streets fill with people
& I dream of pressing my lips
to the burst hyacinth of your mouth.

spring would thaw the ground
& we both would fill with life again
writhing with switch-tailed worms.

in my mind I am monstrous

lurching with my arms outstretched
through the brittle celluloid of film reels

staples glittering at the seams of my skull

my body a mess of scars
too ugly to fake.

I am sewn together from the flesh of many,
& we ache.

TARANTELE

Every day she pulls my body from the ground
and wrings the water from my clothes anew,
cradling my head in her hands
when she takes me to the river and lowers me in.
I am born again, she tells me.
Its surface is troubled, broken
where she wades.

She wants me to forget my name
and press my cheek into her belly's smooth altar.
She wants to wrap the bones of fish into my winding sheet
and sow me in the ground like a seed,
my skull crowning from the dirt once the frost has thawed.

In her kitchen she smooths my hair
with a fishbone comb; I close my eyes
and I can feel the rats walk across me with their sharp feet,
naked tails gripping the catwalks of my arms for balance.
She folds paper and cuts the shapes of people,
unfolding accordion-pleated garlands
into a fanning arc between her hands.
Every day they rise from dust to destroy each other again;
they coat the ground in their white ash,
settling while she paints crude animal shapes on my body
with her set of stinging brushes.
They paw at me with their blunt hooves
and I feel nothing,
braying panicked screams
when they bound across my abdomen
away from the candle flame's paraffin torch.

My shadow dances a death-tarantelle
under a canopy of powerline transmission towers,
the frost-hard dirt furrows
cracking the soles of my feet like old leather.

Small leaves have grown where the callous rends
and seeps my blood;
It rains in fat teardrops from the fanned tips of my fingers,
beading like sweat on my skin
where the flames curl and lick.

She wants to see me lined in shadows;
in the cut-up shade of her broom-bristle wings.
She wants to press me through the filter of her laced fingers
and hold my face while I drown, choked in pearls;

my blood's furnace quelled
to a snuffed-out wick.

WOLF SUIT

What a graveyard this room has tilted into;
an overflowing necropolis of the shed husks of things.
Little decapitated bodies of sparrows scattered everywhere,
like rice after a wedding.

When I play my harp
strange pale-skinned eyeless things emerge from under the double bed,
recoiling again from the brightness of my eyes
which have begun to repel the light like new quarters.

Soon I will lie
awake and blinking in the ground,
sedated by the pressure of tree roots.
When I come to people in dreams
I will be much taller than usual,
stooping under door frames.
I'm not really sure why.
I understand this is the natural progression of things:
we all become ash-gray eventually,
terrified of falling asleep facing the closet door.

On Sundays I limp into town wearing my wolf suit.
I will never touch the only dress in my closet;
its fabric is cheap and white,
the sleeves made of a silvery substance as thin as cobwebs.
Sometime a few years ago
I began to suspect it was meant to be a child's Halloween costume,
although I still tell visitors that it's a dress.
I offer them a look at it instead of something to eat.
There is no food in the house;
my organs were replaced years ago by neat contraptions
built of stained glass
and half-full of coloured liquid
with little wheels moved by tarnished brass gears,
like wind-up toys.

There are days I still look for my bloody, anatomical heart—
it isn't wrapped in grease-stained butcher's paper in the freezer
or drawn around someone's initials
on the wall of a public bathroom.
It isn't on a chain around the neck of one of the girls I see in town
or anywhere else I can think of.

On Mondays I pick up my wolf suit off the floor.
I hang it in the closet and bide my time
picking at the rusty nails in my ankle
as I wait for it and the dress to reach for each other in the dark.

These floorboards are veined with tiny colonies of insects:
I know that soon my bones will be static,
wrapped in the soft bodies of earthworms.
My own trials will be imprinted into the wood-grain of this house
for idle children to watch, in repetition,
while I survey them from gaps between floorboards
with my pink eyes.

BIRCH

When you left I found a book on the shelf
full of drawings of birds.
I cut them out with my scissors
thinking I would make you a halo
if I could teach them to circle your forehead.
I closed my eyelids with masking tape
and walked with my arms stretched out
into the wind-snapped firs
and the white trunks of birches,
convinced that I could find you if you thought I wasn't looking,
still sitting cross-legged somewhere
catching moths with the flame of your butane lighter.

MAKESHIFT BALLROOM

People with eyes that big,
they're hardwired to love just about anyone
somebody's mother told me once,
pulling an expensive necklace from her tear duct.

I watched my feet for cracks in the pavement after that
but still I could feel that my back was changing shape.
I pricked my finger and fell asleep
thinking that I'd wake and mistake your pupils
for little safe houses at night
because of the windows reflected in them.
I breathed myself too high into somebody's thrashing green branches
and even that fatigued me;

casting something altogether removed,
perfect and antiseptic and trailing strings of little lights.

I think that you and I were never built for this dustless spill;
neither seraphim nor parasitic gulls

but atrophied tin soldiers
in this blue-choked parade of pretty girls.

A CHORUS OF SEVERED PIPES

When I was a kid, I threw a stone into the moon's reflection
and saw it break into a thousand sharp pieces.

It was dark, and the world sang to itself
to keep from being frightened.
Wheat stalks sighed under the thresher's blades,
a chorus of severed pipes.
The crickets and frogs kept time with one another;
I wrapped my arms around nothing
and waltzed circles through the corn rows
adrift in the harvest's beaconless sea.

I kept all the pieces I found
in a sack in the barn
where the pigeons battered, frantic in my chest.

Sunrise flicked its laughing tongue
through the interstices between gap-toothed rafters
and I knew that I could never make it whole again;

all those tarnish-bright shards
carried away in the silt of stream beds
winking at nothing
from the thatch of magpies' nests.

That's why there are still dark patches on the moon.
That's why the animals still call out to each other in the dark,

bullfrogs' throats stretched fat like pearls
while the crickets rub their thighs and sing.

MY BONES' CRACKED ABACUS

1.

night spawns the shapes of dark birds
suspended legless on their wing tips,

loping like stilt walkers
ragged in their gait.

I saw the moon curve its ridged spine against your cheekbone once;
a crescent of bristled fork tines, spokes,
tendons forming ridges under the skin of my hands.
I thought of you while she combed my damp hair over my face,
a curtain of blond tatters to veil my eyes.

the birds walked hunched under their winter cloaks,
only graceful in flight.

they pull themselves, dripping
from the cluttered dark of your pupils,
leaving sparse haired brush strokes
where their wet feathers drag.

2.

when I stood still they used to flock to my twisted arms.
my body was a filter, a valved artery for the world's slowing traffic.

they grinned under their beaked masks when i sang,
when my ribs creaked and opened.

a jew's harp strung between broken teeth,
the striated palette.

3.

I hummed under your bow once,
an instrument gutted.

inside me is a world of oil-dark pistons,
a rhythm madder than the heart.
my hands unfold embossed in red seams,
anemone flowers petalled in boneless fingers.
this is where they cut me, I told you.
this is where the flesh-tone doll's parts were grafted;
blank ugly sutures, a torturer's braille.

this is the cartography of the blind.

4.
my body is scarred in botched attempts,
a city untouched by grace.

sometimes when I lie awake at night
I can still hear their scraping laughter.
her back arches,
the sky filled with battering wings.

I live on the banks of a tar-black river;
its silence swallows everything.

5.
she bunches the skirt around her hips,
crumpled gathers of white netting.
the birds take form under her hands,
bright eyed in the pooling ink.
they tug like kites
until she cuts them from their puppet strings,
dusk flooded
with the clatter of hollow quills.

my flesh rasps, I tell her.
there is nothing that could appease me.

WORDS TO CHART ELAPSED TIME

Fluorescent lights hum and flicker in the gas station bathroom
where you raise the hem of your shirt
to show your body to the mirror—
mortar grinding in your joints
and white skin pocked red with insect bites
slightly raised in places where the pins are still embedded;

life clinging, interminable
under the place where you rest your hand
kicking with frog's legs against the walls of your stomach,
its pulse ticking
like the mechanism inside a wind-up toy.

Birdsong overlay the highway's distant sighing
in the morning that found you awake together
curled like parentheses
in your cradle of dead leaves and green-rot,
condensation dripping from the pillars of the overpass
where decades of graffiti overlap.

Blisters have risen
in the light of what flared inside your body once,
the seam of your ribs cracked and open
for the world to rush in through—

the rain-wet concrete
and the glitter of broken glass,
the force of the wind
and the pieces of torn paper and leaf debris
that circled above you,
caught in its currents.

All that you have will slip like water
through the cracks between your fingers
eventually—

leaving only the ripple
of your body's last tremors
for time to blot out:

sunlight filtering
through poplar leaves
to dapple the ground at your feet,
spotted like the gums
of a snarling dog;

the lights on the other side of the Fraser Valley
blinking through the darkness
while cold wind scalds your face,

something inside fizzling out
like a cigarette butt,
dropped into half an inch of cold black coffee.

HOLES IN THE BACKDROP

I should bring you the different fevers of things,
paintboxes and wrapped bars of them—
slight variations of heart, sized appropriately and canned.
They dress in many colours;
his feet make the dead leaves noisy.
And a grayscale rain would wash away the small wars,
the spots where I emptied my pockets onto the sidewalk.
Bringing up messes of wet jewels or the eyes of birds maybe,
clinging by strands of newspaper to the cuffs of my shirt.
All these sad accessories, the rags are obvious.
Sometimes tin cans have perfectly formed and functional digestive systems.
I opened one once with a sharp thing
and disturbed the preservation of its beating, pulsing things.
All week, you could tell just by my complexion.
I'd sleep facing the closet door and
the white shirts liked to pretend to be ghosts,
flying up and removing him from my line of vision.
Already I could hear the birds battering themselves at his rib cage.
Once he coughed them out while sleeping, just on accident,
and little angels blinked on, in every corner of the room.
There were no more deaths in the family to pacify him
back to dreams of pharmacy keys and the contents of my pockets, after that,
so he shot a moon and stars worth of holes.
Immeasurable milligrams of ghost.
His dance partner was a dying flashlight, for the time being,
her cheeks like blown light bulbs,
a malfunctioning TV set lodged under each of her eyelids.
He woke up alone and dug the dirt from under his nails
with a little broken piece of her.
He must have thought that it was something else;
a thing for drawing with, maybe.

STONE

Something has left you, *cabrón*.
Your most indefinable piece.

It has braced itself at your parted lips
and pulled itself free while you slept

waltzing, deaf
through the dark of subway tunnels,
curled on its haunches in the bowl of a starving man's hips.

It pales a woman's last breath, like smoke
pushed forever from her chest's closed bellows.

It flies in short gusts from the unknowable dark
of chimney pipes, of overturned top hats,
to coast on sooty coat-tail wings
passing sometimes while you sleep

so close that it grazes the hairs on your chest
and wakes you, seconds too late.

There is violence
in the slow wilt of these stems;

in the warp and seethe of the skyline
and in the ragged gait of wire-thin animals
that meet your eyes in the city at night.

Your reason dances on the head of a pin,
squirming on the tip of sleep's hollow needle.

It curls itself in the small of your back
drawn through the dark by your body's warmth.

Forget time's currents and the channels they have wrought;
the twisted faces of these carousel horses
and the slow lull of their rocking.

Every night you lift sorrow's knees around your waist,
drawing your own long shadow into the daylight
where its motions no longer mirror your own.

One day, *cabrón*
our human skins will grow too tired and worn
to be convincing anymore

and people will look at us both like they did
before we ever learned to pretend.

Just tatter-cloaked shadows hidden among the crows
that gather every day on the tiered pagoda roofs
of phone booths

and wait for the Chinatown market to close,
necks jerking at avocado rinds
and crusts of bread

trying to break the spine of the small animal
that instinct still tells them they hold.

APPENDIX

EVERY PRISONER IS A POLITICAL PRISONER: A MEMOIR

All names have been changed to protect the identities of those mentioned.

JUNE 27, 2010, WAS A DAY UNCHARACTERISTICALLY OVERCAST FOR MID-SUMMER Toronto. My head pounded from the humidity as I walked alone down Queen Street, through a cityscape teeming with riot police and still dusted with shards of broken glass from the day before. Construction crews had already set to work repairing the trail of wreckage, attempting to get everything back to normal before anyone noticed.

When I reached Jimmie Simpson Park, where people were meeting for the day's scheduled prison solidarity rally, I saw only a small crowd of friends standing under the drooping honey locust trees; some were debriefing or consoling one another, others speaking with the reporters who swarmed like gnats around the gathering. This sparse group of about thirty people was all that remained after the preemptive kidnappings and mass arrests. I can't remember if I felt any particular sense of foreboding—any eerie apprehension of why I too hadn't been taken away.

As our diminished group walked from the park to the detention center where our friends were being held, I hoped to be able to find some news of what had happened to my partner, or to anyone for that matter.

The gray sky sprinkled rain upon us, but we were happy and smiling. We chanted, sang, played instruments and shared whatever food we'd brought. Cops surrounded us, jostling the crowd to step farther away from the chain link fence surrounding the prison. I'd been there about half an hour when the unmarked van drove into the crowd. A group of men jumped out and forced their way toward me, yelling for people to move out of the way. One of them said my name, and within seconds they had dragged me into the van.

I can't say I felt anything when my face hit the floor, but later in my cell I noticed a deep throbbing in my teeth and gums. The front ones were loose. My mouth tasted like blood.

One of the cops who'd pulled me into the van asked me if I was on welfare. He leered at my bare legs and told me I needed a razor. Another tied my wrists with zip

ties and proceeded to rifle through my purse.

Inside, the building was a massive warehouse filled with wire cages, like some industrial chicken farm. The noise of other prisoners screaming protest songs and rattling the doors of their cages echoed off the concrete walls, making our numbers seem greater even than the 992 people occupying cells. They put me in a cage and locked the door. On the wall to my left I saw a guard scribble my name on a white board alongside the words “*do not release.*” I sat down on the concrete and anticipated the worst.

The following day I was hospitalized after losing consciousness from low blood sugar. All we were given to eat was a cheese sandwich every 12 to 24 hours with no alternatives for those who were vegan or had an allergy. I was unable to walk to the medical trailer; the guards informed me that this constituted refusing medical attention. Another prisoner who overheard this screamed at a guard busy amusing himself by doing tricks on an unused wheelchair, and they brought it to my cell shortly after.

A female guard snarled at me to “close my fucking legs” while I sat sprawled inside the medical trailer with an intravenous glucose drip in my arm. I’d been arrested in a short skirt and tank top, and they had refused me, numerous times, pants or a blanket. It was freezing inside the detention center. There was no way to get off the bare concrete. My teeth chattered constantly, and I never stopped shaking. It was too cold to sleep.

After they took me back to my cell, I could hear a man nearby screaming that he needed his medication. He screamed for hours before stopping abruptly; I pressed my face to the cage door and I could see him convulsing on the floor of his cell with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. “Get up,” the guards told him, repeatedly, before finally acknowledging his unconsciousness. Then they dragged him away.

Countless people were processed and released, many of them with bruises, cuts and abrasions on their arms and faces from being slammed into the concrete. A number of the guards passed the time by spewing racist, homophobic, classist, and sexist harassments at prisoners, or threatening them with further brutalization. A number of women were threatened with rape.

Hours and hours passed, and it became increasingly clear that I would not be allowed to call my lawyer or let my family know where I was. As a matter of fact, I hadn’t yet been informed of my charges. I spent over two days in my cell, curled in a ball on concrete, or pacing the small vicinity of my cage, sometimes yelling to other prisoners or joining them in hysterical, sleep deprived bouts of laughter.

I was unsurprised to see a few old friends from Toronto’s street community pass through the detention center. Were it not for the unfortunate circumstances, it would have been a welcome reunion. When an acquaintance of mine ended up in the cell beside me, we started talking about the circumstances that had brought us there. Only seventeen, he had spent the majority of his life being transferred from group home to group home. Since finally being appointed as his own legal guardian, his life had been plagued by poverty, class profiling, and prejudice in the court system.

Although he didn't consider himself an "activist," he was obviously more steeped in the realities of social struggle than a large portion of the other detainees. We talked about our mutual experiences with police, shelters, group homes, and homelessness. We talked about how these experiences had politicized us, and how a person doesn't need to understand party politics to be political. Every poor person is political, we agreed, just by nature of their experiences.

I realized at one point that I probably had more in common with him than I did with most of the other protesters. Unfortunate as it was, life had already acclimatized us to be treated like shit by the authorities. None of this surprised us. We were used to being beaten, having our rights stripped away.

After most of the detention center had been emptied, I was transferred to the general population at the women's prison in Milton. While waiting to be processed in the holding cells, the other women and I laughed and joked, trading stories about how we'd ended up where we were. A lot of them were arrested and presumed guilty for unequivocal bullshit; for being homeless, poor, racialized, using drugs, working in the sex trade, or any combination of these factors. Others were arrested for crimes of necessity: for stealing food because they were hungry, or robbing a store to feed their young kids, for needing a way to pay rent. A few had been charged with assault after having fought back against abusive spouses. I told them my charges, and got a lot of hugs, high-fives and congratulations. "Fucking right," people said, slapping me on the back. "Fuck the rich bastards! Fuck the G20!"

Some people had been unclear as to what the summit had been all about, and we got into a long conversation about it. We all laughed, ranted, waited, and laughed some more. If these were the women with whom I'd be surrounded, I thought to myself, maybe prison won't be all that bad.

My first days inside were largely spent adjusting to the prison environment, and as time went on, my new setting reminded me increasingly of the years I spent living on the street when I was a teenager.

On the streets, as in prison, you never get a decent night's sleep or a meal that resembles real food. There's always a few arrogant people who think they run everything because they've been there the longest, and people in uniforms can do whatever they want to you and get away with it. In both situations, your status as a human being is revoked. Humanity is a privilege awarded to those who help perpetuate capitalism, and once you cease to do that, you're a burden. You're expected to express gratitude to the system that ghettoizes you, that doles you out a few table scraps and a thin blanket.

The first range I was sent to was renowned for being the least hospitable. We were locked in our cells for most of the day. Each had one bed, though the high volume of prisoners meant that two people usually shared a cell. The only windows were thin slats of frosted glass too opaque to see through, and we were allowed outside only once a week. "Outside" was a small walled concrete enclosure with metal grating for a ceiling. Through a small crack underneath the heavy steel door, I could see grass. It depressed me to look at it. I tried not to.

This was the range to which people were sent as punishment, for getting into fights, mouthing off to guards, being caught with contraband, or generally failing to comply with prison regulations. If you were “good” you qualified for transfer to a medium security unit where you could go to a real outdoor exercise yard, have your own cell, and see visitors without a thick pane of Plexiglas separating you.

A lot of the women on maximum security had been on the same range for over a year. I met one woman who had been there for almost two; she’d never had a misconduct, but there was a note in her file stating that she would have to serve her entire sentence on maximum security. She came from a mafia family, she explained. Putting her on a medium security unit would have been an open invitation for any of her high-up friends to come break her out.

After visiting the classification office, I learned of a similar note in my file. “Apparently I’m a terrorist,” I shrugged, when people asked why I hadn’t been transferred yet.

I won’t say that I instantly got along with everyone on my range, or that I was the most popular prisoner. I didn’t pay attention to the hierarchies that existed between other prisoners, and some people had a problem with that. I wouldn’t join in when others ridiculed or ganged up on the less popular women. It was a total pecking order, and it reminded me too much of a schoolyard.

I became close friends with a woman named Rachel whom I met in the common area during breakfast on a rare day when we weren’t on 24-hour lockdown. She was violently ill from drug withdrawal, and the nurse hadn’t filled her methadone prescription. Apparently, her cellmate was a complete asshole, so we snuck her into my cell after the doors were buzzed open. The next guard that came by on her rounds started yelling at us, but we assured her that the other staff had transferred Rachel and forgotten to do the paperwork. I don’t think the guard believed us, but she didn’t seem to care enough to do anything about it.

When Rachel wasn’t too sick to make conversation, we passed the long hours of our confinement playing cards, singing tuneless renditions of R&B hits, washing our dirty uniforms in the sink, and talking about life in general. She lived near Niagara with her partner, their four year old son, and their newborn daughter. She struggled with addiction but still managed to keep her life together and be there for her kids. Her dad had been in and out of prison most of her life and her mom had been drunk all the time. She’d spent her early teenage years working as a prostitute, and the crown attorney at her bail hearing had used this to argue that she was unfit to re-enter society. It seems that when 13-year-old girls end up hooking on the streets it’s because they possess some moral defect, and not because life has given them no other choices.

Our cells looked out onto the common area, an oval-shaped concrete room. It contained five bolted-down tables, four showers at one end, a shelf with a few bad paperback romance novels and three phones, only two of which functioned. When allowed into the common area, I went straight to waiting in line for the phones. Some women didn’t have anybody to call or only had relatives outside of the country; the phones only accepted collect calls within North America. Other women gripped

the phone receivers with white knuckles, trying to explain to their young children why mommy wasn't coming home. Rachel said she had told her partner not to bring the kids when coming to visit her. "They were just too young. They would only be confused by the Plexiglas in the visitor's cubicle. Being able to see their mother, but not reach out and touch her."

I thought of an article I'd read once, about animal testing laboratories. One method used by lab technicians to create symptoms of stress and depression in mammals involved removing newborn babies from their mother, then placing the mother in isolation. I looked up at the florescent ceiling lights within their shatter-proof wire cages. Soon the nurse came and people lined up to receive their daily doses of sedatives and anti-psychotics—a precautionary measure, prescribed to virtually everyone, like cutting off the beaks of factory farmed chickens to prevent them from pecking themselves, or each other, to death from the stress of confinement and isolation.

My views of the prison system solidified: prisons are little more than warehouses for concentrating the poor. Rather than being populated by the people most harmful to society, they are crowded with those who have been the most harmed *by* society. Rather than being "correctional" facilities, they are a method of ridding the streets of those who act as living reminders of the crisis of poverty, the widening income gap, the future of hardship which may very well await many more in the coming years if something does not change. Prisons are a way of sweeping people under the rug. They are a way of pretending that nothing is wrong.

Very few of the women on my range had been imprisoned for any kind of violent crime, and most of those who did have violent charges had been defending themselves against abusive partners or assailants. Most of these women's attackers had walked away without charges, free to roam the streets at their leisure.

The small portion of women facing violent charges not involving self-defense were often the survivors of past traumas; a history rarely taken into consideration by the courts that sentenced them. Much like the homeless community, a large portion of the women with whom I spoke were survivors of the lifelong onslaught of abuse perpetrated against poor and disenfranchised women by our society, particularly racialized women. Many had been arrested for not having full citizenship, while others had been in the process of applying for refugee status. A disturbingly high number also lived with (dis)abilities like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Fetal Narcotic Syndrome, schizophrenia, and ADD/ADHD.

These are women who have been bounced between abusive foster homes and youth detention facilities, graduating at 16 as wards of the Children's Aid Society only to become wards of the State, criminalized for doing what needs to be done in order to survive the minefield of poverty.

As the days turned into weeks, I began to erase from my mind the hope of being released. The health problems with which I've been living the last few years became increasingly severe, and I often found it difficult to stand up or walk around without fainting. My ribs stuck out. My stomach became concave. I became depressed.

Was it stress, overly-processed food, or a general lack of fresh air and exercise that made me unhealthy? Probably some combination of all these things. Without even examining me, the doctor put me on a liquid diet, which in jail consists largely of juice crystals, water, and MSG-filled soup powder. When I was sent finally to the examination room I was told that nothing seemed to be wrong with me, regardless of the fact that I'd lost close to 20 pounds, felt tired constantly, and was in serious pain and discomfort.

I talked to my partner on the phone, but his voice sounded distant and crackly through the receiver. He came to visit me, and we pressed our hands to the inch-thick Plexiglas between us. It was almost harder than not seeing him. My mom sounded stressed whenever I called her, and I could hear my dog howling in the background at the sound of my voice through the receiver.

I needed to talk to somebody, but the prospect of being force-fed Thorazine dissuaded me from applying to see the psychiatrist. So I went to the prison chaplain, for the sheer novelty. He was a square-jawed man in a gray suit, with the bearing of a televangelist. He told me I was in prison because I had sinned, and that I had to repent for these sins. I was in my current situation because the devil had led me astray.

"But Jesus was a political prisoner!" I said. "The devil didn't tell me to do anything; I'm a political prisoner like Jesus!" He thought I was crazy.

I was released after about a month on conditions of strict house arrest and non-association with some of my closest friends. All I felt was numb. I walked into the parking lot with my family and my partner, squinting under the bright sunlight. We drove back to the house where I lived as a kid and I slept for days. At first I felt fine. I could leave the house, if I was with my parents, to take the dogs for walks in the last of summer's warm weather. I drank coffee, read a lot. People I'd never met sent me stickers and zines and nice letters in the mail.

Two months later I started having panic attacks, insomnia, and nervous breakdowns on an almost daily basis. When I did sleep, I had awful nightmares. It seemed as though every past instance of trauma and violence I'd seen or experienced had been consolidated into a heavy, poisonous lump, slowly turning my insides black and rotten. I felt like the world was just too ugly to live in. I was suffocating under the weight of clearcut forests and floundering, tar-drowned shore birds. When I closed my eyes all I could see was torture and war, droughts and chemical spills, napalm.

All I wanted was to move past the negative experiences I'd had and work towards piecing my life back together. But I realized that the pain I felt was trying to tell me something: I would not be able to forget and move on as though none of this had happened. In a way I think the disgust and pain we feel when we see or experience something horrific can be the greatest catalyst for creating positive change. When we experience something first hand we are better equipped to understand it—and with that understanding we can educate others and give real support to those who are also experiencing it. We can see its flaws and weak points, and we can use this knowledge to criticize, discredit, and eventually destroy it.

Although I never heard this said firsthand, others told me they overheard quite a

few young people say they'd never go to another protest again after their experiences at the detention center. I felt not only disappointed that everyone hadn't been able to see the ways to reclaim these experiences and use them as further motivation, but profoundly confused by this perspective. What we went through during the mass arrests at the G20 was only a small window into the everyday experiences of countless marginalized people in this country, who suffer police profiling, brutality, and prejudice within the legal system on a horrifyingly regular basis. As hard as I try, I simply can't understand the notion that anyone could propose to be an ally of any marginalized group, then give up and turn away when faced with a tiny microcosm of what that group puts up with every day.

My experience in prison and the women with whom I shared it have reminded me of the reasons I became politically active in the first place. They've reminded me of the sorrow, the desperation, the heartbreak, the trauma, the unlivable realities of poverty that first spurred me to get my life together and dedicate myself to helping others rather than accepting the conditions in which I lived. Being in prison reminded me of the core of my politics. At the bottom of it, we were all inside that prison for the exact same reason. We were dangerous only in the sense that our existence discredited Canada's status as a place of liberty and equality. We were a glaring reminder that this country doesn't offer equal status and opportunity to everyone.

Some political prisoners are arrested for staging public demonstrations that address poverty, and some are arrested for living in poverty. Some actively protest social inequality, while others turn to drugs or alcohol because they can no longer bear the brunt of this inequality. Some choose to publicly draw attention to injustice by their words and actions, while others are swept off the streets because their very presence is a public exposure of this injustice. Now is the time for everyone in our community to think about what it really means to say that every prisoner is a political prisoner. The next time we're shocked and outraged by an experience of being targeted, harassed, or otherwise mistreated by law enforcement or society in general, we should be stopping to recognize how much respect we owe to the people all around us who face much more than that every day of their lives. *Every prisoner is a political prisoner.*

*Somewhere, a revolution is happening
that will never be broadcast.*

*Somewhere, the sun rises on a world
no longer drawn as if by some hand*

*enamoured
of human pain.*

The name of this collection is no mere hyperbole. When the G-20 met in Toronto, Canada in 2010 behind armed thugs and fortress walls to discuss the fate of the world, Kelly Pflug-Back was among those who took to the streets to counter it with the militancy that the situation demanded. The cops dragged her off and tormented her in jail for a month while the government attempted to frame her as the leader of the infamously leaderless Black Bloc. Many of her charges were dropped, but she pleaded guilty to the destruction of several police cars and corporate storefronts and awaits sentencing. **She was sentenced to fifteen months behind bars for daring to be free, for writing her poetry with action and words alike.** Every dollar received by the publisher from the sale of this volume will go to aid her in her struggle against the state.

Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness

