

DANIEL SCOTT TYSDAL

## THE POEM

The Poem began after the waiter said, “Binoculars are against the law.” *Indecent* was the word the waiter struggled for and the poet helped him find. This was in Morocco in 1989, on the first trip the poet took at the age of nineteen after leaving home. Inside her, this almost autonomic system of synapse and sensibility inhaled a big breath of world and right away she saw that the town from the restaurant terrace resembled a crowd of bowed men. It *was* indecent, those invasions the curved lenses permitted, the intimacy they invented between eye and rooftop, eye and half-curtained window, eye and the line where the flaking, sun-worn crown of the minaret swelled like a fine, aged breast, like a breath-puffed cheek, like a mittened fist into the most exquisite and elemental sky. She hid the binoculars out of view on her lap under the table.

“No, no,” the waiter apologized, “you’re not in trouble.”

He gestured for her to return the binoculars to her eyes and explore the afternoon.

“It’s wrong for locals. For us.”

That was the Poem: the way the waiter tapped his chest when he said, “for us,” the way, at first, he wouldn’t even look at the binoculars when she asked if he wanted to try. The waiter finally relented. He accepted the things uncertainly with both hands. Judging from his backward glances at the empty tables, ghosts she could not see must have possessed those chairs, commanding “no” in voices that were the wails of the one God’s newborns, voices that were the mists that burst where the ocean of the law struck shore.

Suddenly, the waiter transformed into the wagtails, the falcon, the menagerie of birds he tracked with the binoculars and pointed out to her. The poet’s eyes welled up. The depth of her skin grew palpable along her arms and neck and back. It was a sensation that made her feel like she was filling with a colony of candle-heated ants. Somewhere inside her a home was exposed; it longed to house forever the way the waiter flapped and fluttered and dove from the north edge of the terrace to the east to the south and back to the north, the way he left to seek different heights and flocks, returning in five to fifteen minute intervals, sometimes with portions of her meal, to share news of this specific distance collapsed and this specific, simple want amplifying as it neared what it wanted.

“I wish my wife was here,” the waiter said more than once, the last being after he returned the binoculars and brought the bill. Each time he said it, his eyes widened, as though he had just

been struck by the name of the thief in a heist flick, by the missing variable of a formula he'd battled for years, by the weight of missing years certain amnesiacs must feel while peeling page by page through piles of old photo albums and old diaries and old correspondence from strangers whose status as acquaintance or true friend remains as indeterminate and indefinable as your own reflected face would be if you spent a lifetime staring straight at the sun.

The Poem barely survived the trip back to Canada. For months, it remained an assembly of notes and unfinished drafts in the poet's notebook. It was the poet's first time in Toronto, and her transition to the new city was hardly eased by the artist couple that had swarmed her in Spain, buzzing "you *must* move to Toronto" and promising her a couch and a job. She had met them backpacking on her way to the Basque region, where she had heard you could make money picking on farms, though picking *what* she had not been sure. The artists had been undertaking research for a performance piece on matadors, but had called it quits early to strike out for Germany. They wanted to grab a few particles of the freedom swirling in the ruins of the just-fallen Berlin Wall.

The job in Toronto turned out to be a volunteer position (due to a failed grant application) at the gallery the artists ran. They charged their fellow creators to display their creations. "Just as you can't put a price on work experience," ran the party line, "you can't put a price on experienced work." The couch was back-breakingly trendy, clean-lined and spotless yet robust with a funk suggestive of mushrooms picked fresh from deep, deep woods. The poet's plan for her trip had specifically been *not* to plan her return. On the flight out of Vancouver International nearly six months earlier, she wrote a poem with a line that summed up her initiative: "seek to be among things as they stand." At night she woke on the couch evacuated of the will to scribble in the dark anything more than, "What now?"

Eventually, she saved enough money working as a nude model to rent a room, and she translated the valuable work experience she gained volunteering at the gallery into a job serving coffee. Yet despite the expanding of the time she had to write from minutes to hours, the poet's attempts to fully form the Poem remained unsuccessful. It was not a question of beginning. On its own volition the memory of that moment in Morocco would overtake her without warning—as she reached for the exact Boston Cream donut a customer requested, as she rode a people-packed streetcar to her GED class—and she would be overcome by the buzzing up and down her arms of a hive of candle-bearing bees. But none of the versions of the Poem she wrote, enrapt in these flashes, felt complete.

The editors at the literary journals she submitted the Poem to confirmed this feeling. Other poems from her trip were accepted for publication: the Eiffel Tower villanelle, the Amsterdam aubade, the one about what happened in the taxi in Glasgow. All the Poem ever received were form rejections, the best of them personalized with vague, conflicting critical blips like “too blindly colonialist,” or “too overtly political.” Sometimes, as she struggled to revise the Poem, she felt like a first responder lowering into the far-bottomed crevasse the Poem had tumbled into. Other times, she was the one who had plunged into the pit and she waited and waited for rescue, until the Poem finally called down with the news that she could not be saved.

Two years later, the Poem was all but abandoned. The poet’s first book, *The Young Woman’s Guide to the End of the World*, was only weeks away from final proofs and the Poem did not survive the last round of revisions. The decision to cut the Poem was made mutually. The editor still found it “too tell-y,” particularly the bit about the binoculars “transforming vision.” The poet couldn’t shake the feeling that the Poem was missing something crucial, like it was a globular blob of organs, flesh, and brains that lacked any sign of a fibula, thumb bone, or skull.

Exhausted by the search for the Poem’s skeleton, the poet cultivated any distraction to escape the impulse to revise. She typed up the notes from last semester’s courses. She perpetually reorganized her bookshelf by the colour of the spine, then by national origin, by theme, by length, and then back to the spine’s colour again. During her lunch break at the U of T bookstore, she even went so far as to play her first videogame. The co-worker who owned the Game Boy showed her how to fit the falling blocks into place to stop the pile from accumulating and choking the throat of the screen. She was as enchanted as she was disgusted. This, at the start of the millennium’s last decade, was the pinnacle of technology? Shrink the factory to something palm-sized. Make the meaningless task the self-absorbing end. Make self-absorption so incredibly and ecstatically mobile.

“You can keep it,” her co-worker said, breaking her from the grey pixel trance as he pulled on his jacket.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I’m cutting out early to finish an essay,” he said. “You can give the Game Boy back to me tomorrow.”

The poet pushed the game into her co-worker’s hands and hurried to the counter for a pen. That was what the Poem was missing, the “keep it”—the obvious offer she had failed to make to the waiter. She had failed not out of selfishness, but distraction. So wrapped up in hanging onto the images and impressions that would become the Poem, she had accepted the binoculars from the

waiter without thinking to say, “They’re yours.” That was the Poem: this failure. Back at her apartment, she plucked the heat-defeating birds from this draft, the palpable plasticine sky from another, her nerves gone mad like moths in light. By morning, it was done. The Poem, read over the phone to the editor, was met by approval and advice about where it should appear in the manuscript. Buoyed by this good news, the poet visited the office of the arts editor of the student newspaper before class. The arts editor had asked for some work, and, reading the Poem, agreed that it was perfect for “The Poet’s Corner,” the poetry section of *The Varsity*. She promised to publish it in an issue by the end of the month.

On page seventy-six of *The Young Woman’s Guide to the End of the World* and page nineteen of *The Varsity*, the Poem, complete, entered the world. By the length of its lines, its steady patience in ink, the affable interaction of its infinite internal shapes with the “will be,” “was,” and “is” of our saintly, sailing selves, the Poem expressed the manacle-smacking desire to free stuff from its silence, its impermanence, its pseudo-salves and mock healings, all the etceteras of the sources of impossible vision. It wanted to be the 12-step program to beauty, the thief who snuck truth into the pockets of the masses mobbed by the miserly vitality of ignorance and the inane. The Poem wanted to un-break us. It wanted to be the crazy cowboy who rode us in reverse and made us wild.

But none of the Poem’s longings came to pass. In their place, one Level II ESL student found the Poem in *The Varsity* and memorized it for a recitation assignment. She received a 9.5 out of 10 after nailing it, her only slips being the “the” she changed to an “an” and her pronunciation of “reed” as “red.” The publisher’s father was reminded of his trip to Marrakesh after skimming the Poem and asked his wife if she still had the recipe for that stew with the dates. Meanwhile, the piece on the page opposite the Poem, about crossing the Mediterranean Sea in a doorless helicopter, received praise for its “thrilling ingenuity” in the book’s first and only review. The piece eight pages before the Poem became the most read poem in the book because of where the spine naturally flipped open. Fifty-four pages before and sixteen pages after the Poem, respectively, were printed the two poems that would soon be anthologized in *Never Never North: Poetry by New Canadian Writers*. Nothing of note happened to—or because of—the Poem for years, even after *The Young Woman’s Guide to the End of the World* was republished a decade later (along with the poet’s second book, *Good Time Kimchi*). The poet had received a major national award for her third collection, *One Who Is Born Under the Sign of Cancer*, a poetic history of figures for the moon.

In September of 2005, at the start of the Poet's second year teaching creative writing courses at University of New Brunswick, she had a dream about the waiter. In her dream, the waiter woke her in a stone room without windows. She was in blankets on the floor, and he shook the lid of a Tim Hortons coffee cup in front of her face while pleading, "wake up, wake up, wake up." He begged her to show him how to use the lid. To prove it wasn't working, he stood, faced the windowless wall, and raised the plastic lid to his eyes with both hands, as though it were a pair of binoculars. He wept and muttered under his breath, "I wanted to show my wife." He moved from wall to wall to wall, trying to see through the lid.

"That's not how it works," the poet said in her dream.

The waiter turned to her.

"Then show me."

She woke on the floor beside her bed and reached up from the blankets for her pen.

In her office, after discussing prose poetry with her 9 a.m. creative writing workshop, she pulled a copy of *The Young Woman's Guide to the End of the World* off her shelf and flipped to the Poem. She needed the table of contents to find it. Repelled by the simplicity of what she had written fifteen years ago, she did not make it past the second stanza. This inspired a bit about not being able to read the Poem, which she added to the poem she had written about her dream. In the ensuing weeks, she added more to this new piece: sections that speculated on the whereabouts of the waiter and his wife, sections about their country's colonial history, a section about her memory of the minarets, her memory of the wagtails, a section about the binoculars, another about advances in ocular amplification, and another about buying binoculars on eBay, the same make as the pair she had lost long ago. She received a Canada Council grant for the project, with the working title *Lighthouse*, and she used the money to return to Morocco. The restaurant was shut down, the building having been converted to what seemed to be a private residence, though no one answered the door any of the times she visited. She could see the terrace of the old restaurant from the rooftop of a different restaurant three blocks east. No one said her binoculars were illegal. No one became a bird. No one wished for a wife. There was no way to find the waiter. She left the binoculars in front of the locked entrance of the former restaurant. The new, book-length poem was published under the title *The Beacon* to rave, rave reviews.

Two lines from *The Beacon*, an oft-underlined passage that figured the nomadity of wounds through desert sands, ended up being employed as the epigraph for *Heal*, a dark satirical novel about the war in Afghanistan. The novelist who wrote it had personally asked the poet's permission for the

quote. In *Heal*, military scientists manipulate a stem cell-born salve developed to restore the skin of burn victims. The new creation, also administered via a topical solution, renders wounds sentient entities that, hacked from their bodily abodes, relentlessly seek out new bodies upon which to attach themselves in order to be sustained. The protagonist is the scientist who developed the procedure to save burn victims (his brother having committed suicide after being disfigured by an IED outside Kabul) and the story follows his attempt to stop the military when he learns their top-secret plot to deploy the monstrously modified solution. His attempt fails. In the Afghan theatre, he and a platoon of Canadian soldiers are bound and inflicted with ten, fifteen, twenty wounds apiece with bullets, blades, batons, and flames. As the scientist and soldiers die, their wounds are brought to life with the topical solution, excised from their bodies, and set free in the mountains at the mouth of a Taliban-occupied cave. Impervious to attack, the animated wounds hunt down the insurgents and make their homes on the limbs and chests and heads of the terrorists. The cell is wiped out. The mission is repeated. The war is won.

*Heal* was an international bestseller. It was even optioned for a film, though Paramount would end up rejecting all of the novelist's screenplays, wanting a climax that saw the now-American soldiers both survive *and* win the war. To thank the poet for the epigraph, the novelist nominated her for a mid-career achievement award given bi-annually at the University of British Columbia, where the novelist taught. The poet won the award and was invited to read. The Poem was also rewarded at the last minute after the poet had made the cross-country trip, her first visit to BC since leaving almost two decades earlier. Before the reading, over sushi with the novelist, his fellow faculty members, and his top students, one disturbingly cheerful young writer admitted to being "über-inspired" by the poet's early work, and, if it was request hour, he wondered if the poet would read the Poem, which happened to be the beaming student's "absolute fave." The poet agreed, and later that night, as she took the stage and stepped up to the microphone in the half-filled auditorium, she opened the book to the Poem, which she had never shared at a public reading. The title came out right, just as she had practiced it whispering in the bathroom stall of the sushi restaurant, and, before transporting the audience back to that terrace in Morocco, she raised her head, just as she had practiced, to undertake one last exchange of eye contact with her listeners.

She stopped.

Something at the back of the room, something very familiar yet very distant caught her eye, and she squinted slightly to see, to see if it was who she thought it was. The audience followed her gaze to the older woman who had stepped forward from the back wall, looking down at her own

hands as they fidgeted with the front of a purple, pink, and blue wool sweater that was far too thick for the weather.

Instead of reading the first line of the Poem, the poet asked into the microphone, “What are you doing here?”

The woman finally looked up from her sweater.

“Your father’s dead,” she replied.

The woman continued fidgeting. The poet climbed down off the front of the stage and dropped into a crouch. She closed the book and set it beside her on the floor.

“I came here to tell you,” the woman added.

The poet looked up at the woman and watched her, holding back any intervening action with a look that promised she was about to speak. But she didn’t speak. Instead, she rose, dusted her legs off, and exited through the door at the front of the auditorium, leaving her book on the ground and, on the seat in the front row, her backpack, the copy of *Heal* she had gotten signed for her neighbour, and the spring jacket she always wore, regardless of the season.

News of the encounter proliferated quickly. The eyewitness and second-hand accounts—spreading through wall posts, text messages, emails, and phone calls—were supplemented by four photos and a twenty-second video of the poet crouched on the ground. In the video, the poet seemed to make a strange humming sound, but, as one YouTube commenter noted, that was in fact the buzzing of the auditorium’s overhead lights. The event was strange enough, and the poet famous enough, for the *Vancouver Courier* to assign a reporter to find and interview the woman in the sweater. Every lead was a dead end, though, and the reporter was forced to write about the rumours on the newspaper’s blog. One popular rumour was that the woman was the poet’s mother. The father had always been sickly, thus putting the burden of running the family farm, orchard, or business, on the mother and children. It had been this life of hard labour that the poet, as a budding artist, had needed to escape. Another rumour was that the woman was the poet’s older sister and the father had sexually abused them both. The poet was racked with guilt for, decades earlier, not having let her sister in on her plan to escape. The strangest rumour pegged the woman as the author of the poet’s lifework. The poet was just the front, the chassis, while the mysterious woman was the true authorial engine.

During an interview for *The Globe and Mail*, the poet refused to confirm or deny any of the rumours, and she ended the interview when asked why she did not write more about what was obviously a very fertile and powerful personal past. A growing number of her readers, stimulated by

the mystery, believed the poet already had. Though very few explicitly scoured her poems for evidence of the truth, most could not help hearing echoes of her past, sub-voices rising out of her work's sewers that murmured accounts of ancestral repressions, banished inheritances, personal curses. Didn't this meditation on the etymology of "minaret" speak obliquely to the deeds of a domineering father? Didn't this lyric on Virginia Tech articulate guilt over abandoning her mother? Every poem was a portal, every image a clue. Responding to the story's surprising legs, an online indie rag announced their plans to dedicate an issue to the encounter between the poet and the mysterious woman. They put out a call for submissions seeking "poems, stories, videos, comics, polemics, flash games, prayers, oil landscapes, tattoos, etc." inspired by the twenty-second clip and four images of the poet huddling into herself on the floor at the foot of the stage.

No one looked to the Poem for evidence of the poet's past, and never again did the Poem come that close to being read in public. In fact, the time of the Poem's very minor presence in the world was growing short. At a Dadaist party held at the University of Calgary to raise funds for the English Student Association, a cut-up version of the Poem was mashed together with the "Body" section from Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body" and the chorus of a popular Cee Lo track. The Poem also heavily influenced a piece in a self-published collection of *Star Wars*-themed poems, in the section that professed to be Luke Skywalker's juvenilia, though Bob A. Fet, the author, did not admit this influence in his acknowledgements. One of the poet's more highly regarded colleagues at UNB was struck by the Poem's very corporal description of a minaret and he wondered, if the poet had a more global reputation, whether or not that description would warrant a *fatwa*. He started a story that explored this speculation but tossed it when the research led him somewhere else.

Perhaps most notably, the Poem inspired the managing editor at *The Varsity* to write a post on his blog titled, "I Hate Poetry!" The post received over three thousand hits, a handful of Facebook thumbs-ups, and a pair of re-tweets. The managing editor had been approached by a group of his fellow students who wanted to restart the "Poetry Corner" in the arts section of the paper. To supplement the proposal that outlined their vision for the new poetry-dedicated feature, the students had submitted photocopies of old issues to provide a sense of their project's heritage. Reviewing the proposal, the managing editor's frustration had grown poem by poem until, five pieces in, he reached the Poem and had had his fill. What he hated about poetry, he shared on his blog, was how you had to read into it. He included a stanza from the Poem mid-rant to prove his

point. It was a confusing passage about binoculars and birds that he had found particularly disturbing. “I mean, I get it,” he wrote, “at the basic level, but it’s like the main point is just to make you feel stupid.” The stanza on the screen was stripped of its fellow stanzas and maker, its fellow poems and page, its name and what it named. Now, the managing editor concluded, was the age of “If you’ve got something to say, just say it!” Now, “[t]hings change so fast it’s immoral to mix up the facts with metaphors and ‘meanings’ (and whatever the hell else these bastards are after).”

That was the Poem’s last appearance. Unless you count the time the poet misremembered the Poem. She was on a daytrip to a bird sanctuary organized by the Rec Tech at the senior’s home she had lived at since turning 83. The AI caregiver who guided the poet through the fluttering and chirping holograms asked if such vigorous life inspired her to write and the poet said yes. Once, even, she had composed a poem about a man who watched birds from a rooftop, and his wife was there, too, and it was the poet herself who had given them the means to see those critters anew. Or maybe the last appearance of the Poem occurred when the strain of payments and pain and hunger wiped out the clearing the Poem had opened inside a reader when, reading into the Poem, the Poem read into her. Or maybe it was in the thick clouds of smoke that rose from the blaze that destroyed the last copy of the last book to hold the Poem. Or in the eyes that struggled from miles away to discern the origin of those flames. Or in a totally unconnected convergence of sense and distance, of gaps expanded and gaps smashed, as a different set of irises dilated to catch a different passing of a different form in flight.

[Daniel Scott Tysdal](#) was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, and raised on a farm. He received a B.A. (Hons.) from the University of Regina (Saskatchewan) in 2003, an M.A. (English) from Acadia University (Nova Scotia) in 2006, and an M.A. (English in the Field of Creative Writing) from the University of Toronto in 2008. He is the author of [\*The Mourner's Book of Albums\*](#) (Tightrope Books, 2010). His first book of poetry, [\*Predicting the Next Big Advertising Breakthrough Using a Potentially Dangerous Method\*](#) (Coteau Books, 2006), received the ReLit Award for Poetry (2007), the Anne Szumigalski Poetry Award (2006), and the 2004 [John V. Hicks](#) Manuscript Award. It was also shortlisted for the 2006 Brenda MacDonald Riches Award. He currently lives in Toronto and teaches creative writing at the University of Toronto Scarborough.