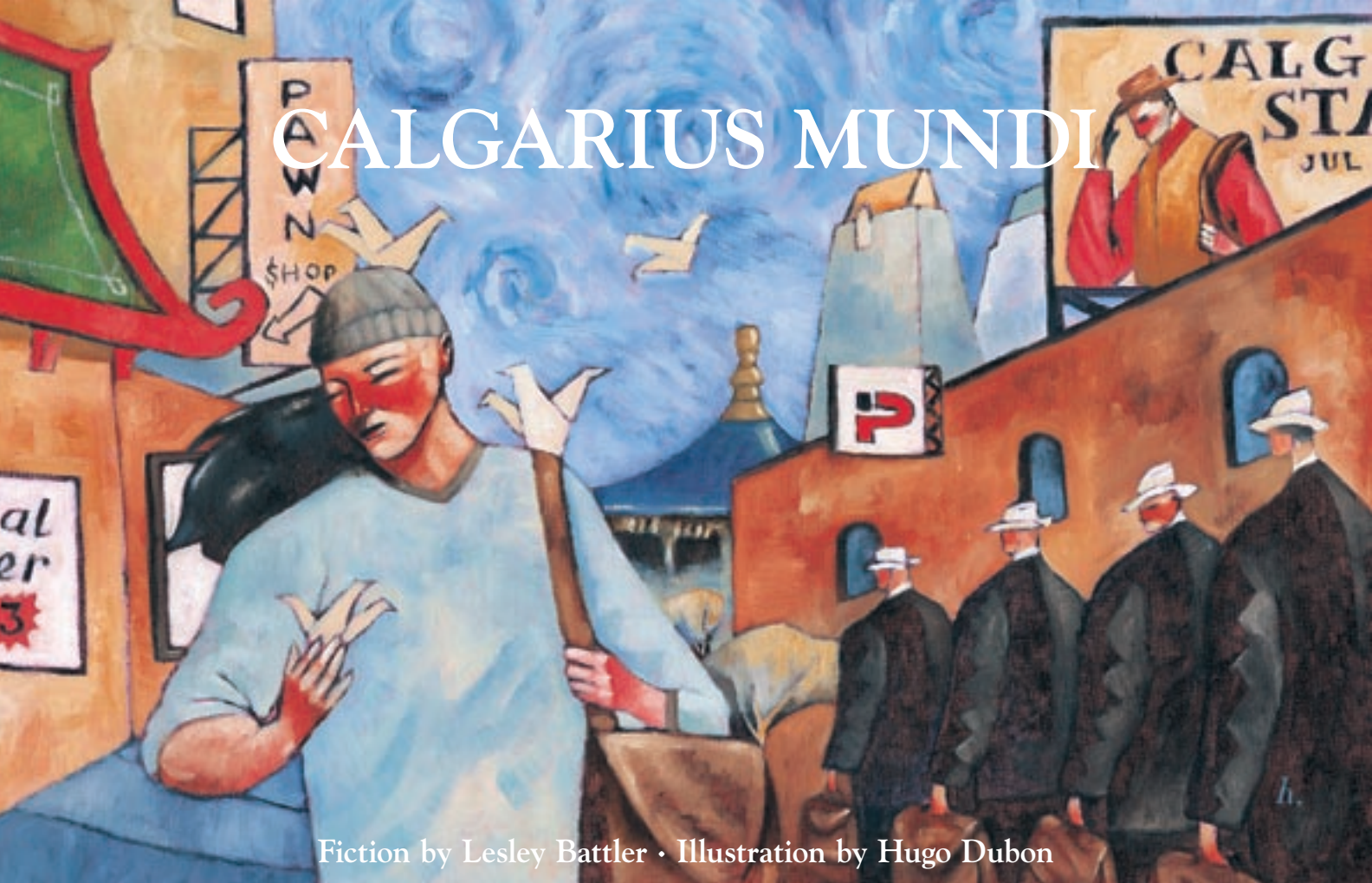


CALGARIUS MUNDI



Fiction by Lesley Battler • Illustration by Hugo Dubon

No one ever mentions the loneliness. In the time it takes to walk across Calgary, people will climb Himalayan peaks and sail balsa-wood rafts across the Pacific. Calendar pages will tear off in Capetown and Goa and Yogyakarta, and I have learned the hard way that the face of Calgary is drastically different from the three-continent version on my Ptolemaic map.

After skirting a strip of sports bars, Holiday and Comfort Inns, I drop to a footpath under a bridge. By the river, a dark wedge of park harbours hidden flowers, and trees dance naked in their last moments of freedom before dawn's reveille. Condos glow green as stockbrokers' screens. Office towers now drift into view, but the avenue is riddled with pawnshops, bikini bars and convenience stores as inviting as cock-fighting pits. "Cigarettes—Cheap! No GST!"

CALGARY FIRST APPEARED in the 1600s, drawn as a Dutchman's dream, tentative lines forming an outline of land, mythical as Atlantis, Antarctica. Horizon a hairline crack in the shell of the world. Mountains floating in the distance, downtown offices huddled as if warming each other. Silence, except for the planes rising like pterodactyls.

Ever since Voorhies first mapped the vast terrain of the city's limits, rumours have abounded that it is possible to cross Calgary on foot. In fact, the Greek geographer Terry

Tsiampouras insisted you could do it from the North as well as the South. But it was the great Bartolomeo Arduini who set me off on this journey. As a child, I spent long hours poring over his accounts of Calgary, lush descriptions of an island in the middle of a prehistoric seabed, bordered by giant mountains and inhabited entirely by exiles. And I dreamed along with him of finding a place among the Indians, Eskimos, Cossacks, conquistadors, chieftains, queens, kings. Soldiers, sailors, suffragettes. Monsters, mermaids, serpents, lions, polar bears, buffalo, giant beavers, fire-breathing horses. Every vision of heaven or hell conjured by humankind.

I suppose I never got over the *Excellent Adventures of Bartolomeo Arduini*. When the chance finally came, imagination snuffed out any common sense I may have once possessed. For instance, I never thought to question whether Marco Polo ever really walked across Calgary. Only after moving from the East to undertake this expedition did I realize that despite the lively and convincing account of his time as official emissary for Ralph Klein, Polo never mentioned the Stampede.

Approaching downtown, I shield my eyes as the wind gropes some yellowed flyers. Out-of-service buses rattle past as if dragging chains. One marked "Sandstone." At the c-train station a street-corner prophet declaims, "The game is rigged. Someone's got to be at the bottom and chance is

the midnight train. Is this the right stop? Is this a stop at all?" I move on when he shouts, "Fuck Bill Gates." Even though I can't remember when I last had sex, I still have some standards.

I walk to the point of exhaustion, now at the mercy of a Calgary caught between darkness and light, late night revelers still staggering from hidden doorways marked "Closed," police tape fencing off a pool of blood. Another border, and under the red and green eaves of Chinatown, all I long to do is click my heels together and walk up the steps to my duplex back East, turn on the light and shut the door to this disembodied world growing ever wilder. Follow the shining hardwood path to the bed, rumpled sheets suffused with Martin's warmth. Laying my hands on him, bringing his flesh to life. I have never wanted anything more.

ICE FOG CAULS THE SLEEPING BUILDINGS. This could be Tibet. Beyond Tibet. Trees bow like penitents and a weeping birch fades into the sky as I move like a tin soldier through crystal darkness. On the corner a lighted church sign says, "Redemption Centre," and I consider dropping off my water and Gatorade bottles at the entrance. A white rabbit crouches under the sign, standing his ground when I approach, even though he must be very late.

I have surrendered all Enlightenment notions of gravity. Snow falls any time, at any temperature. And what can heliocentrism mean when no matter where I stand, I'm blinded by an Inquisitorial sun? On foot, linearity is a fossil-fueled phantasm. Pedestrian crosswalks are merely riddles in the snow, shifting and shimmering like the surface of Pluto. Sidewalks turn into Sherpa paths and traffic signals are designed to strand you miles from the Cape of Good Hope. "Terra firma," a joke after slipping on the hundredth seam of ice. Glare ice, black ice, dry ice, ice on the rocks.

I've had to add more layers of clothing to my pack, including a new hat, scarf, thick wool hockey socks, down-filled mitts the size of bear paws. To make room in my pack, I finally pulled out the astrolabe, gazing regretfully at its warm wood finish, beautiful and precise as a musical instrument. After turning it over in my hands, I placed it on the frigid blue bench outside the Laurentian Bank. The astrolabe only takes up space, has proven useless in blazing a trail between leviathan SUVs. Maybe a panhandler has already picked it up as a good luck charm, or is strumming on it even now as I continue my expedition.

The streets are deserted and the buildings look as if they are moving along with the snow. I can't get my bearings. Something about the space, the distance, the low sprawling skyline. So different from the East, where I could see and smell the musty old mercantile buildings surrendering to lichen, hear my feet echo down cobblestones, run my hand along the linen-soft wood and stone, shaped to the palm of my hand. Here, I can't touch or smell anything.

I am downright lost now, and tears are freezing on my cheeks. A fragile sky washed in pink, blue and pearl extends forever behind a dark fort. I turn down a maze of side streets, narrow frame houses crammed close as wind-

breakers. Back on 9th Ave, trucks pull in and out of the Blackfoot Diner. Mind over matter, I order myself, while back-tracking to where I took the wrong turn. I can't afford any more detours. Along the avenues, boutiques and antique stores shun the old hotels scavenging along the sidewalks, wafting their beery breath into the street. I can't help but imagine how much warmer this walk would be with Martin.

As I make my way through Calgary, people sneer and spit, hurl rotten vegetables at me from car windows.

AS I MAKE MY WAY THROUGH CALGARY, people sneer and spit, hurl rotten vegetables at me from car windows. Sheep bladders explode at my feet. So many birds have been flipped at me, an aviary couldn't contain them. In fact, confused birds, not recognizing the spectre of a pedestrian, have landed on my head, apparently mistaking me for their version of a "Chariots of the Gods" runway. Well, no one said this would be an easy venture.

When I first approached Queen Isabella, cap in hand, she held her nose and said that walking across Calgary was a venture beyond the pale of corporate sponsorship. The Cathars, here known as Syncrude, Epcor, Talisman and so on, have declared walking an Act of Treason. The Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra has a better chance of surviving than me. In fact, some time last year I believe my passage was blocked by striking CPO ruffians brandishing picket signs, forcing me to detour into the street, so I wouldn't get caught in the crossfire and end up with a violin bow through my head.

Reaching a Bucharest-grey office building, I no longer care about my downtrodden pedestrian appearance and take full advantage of being an innocuous white middle-aged woman to enter the lobby. The security kid doesn't even look up from the computer game he's concealing from his bosses and I continue past the lazy eye of a video camera on my way to the washroom. Emerging from the washroom, I come out a back entrance leading to a parking lot cul-de-sac. Here there are no passages like the Strait of Gibraltar, only mazes and small islands blasted by strange winds. Zephyrus from the West, Boreas from the South, Notus of the North. And the Eastern bastard, Eurus. In Terra Calgaria, all ill winds blow from the East.

YEAR TWO, I THINK. The first thing I saw this morning was a dense, stately cloud arcing over the city like an eyebrow. Playful, skeptical and ominous all at once. I now know that chinooks are warm, powerful winds that swoop over the countryside. It's like being inside a Van Gogh painting, feeling the delirious brush strokes of the "Starry Night."

Tonight, the chinook is accompanied by a low light gilding the tops of office towers, promising just enough hope to make me feel twenty again. Behind my back, young women

tap out Morse code with their heels, then pass, swinging gold-clasped briefcases through a revolving door. A sound that segues into a heavy *step-step-step*. Businessmen on the Long March to the parkade. Most people only follow me for as long as it takes to claim their cars.

But in this eerily timeless light, I could be twenty years old, and blessed by all the Isabellas and Elizabeths in the world. Arriving in a foreign city for adventure, treasure. Or maybe love. Martin and me. Starting out, taking our first walk together. It's what every fool, every "expeditionist" wants, to be twenty for a second time. Just for one night, I'd like to keep the wind from scalding my eyes. Tonight I could drown in the tinder-dry air in front of the Moon River restaurant. Tears I can't shed, as I can't afford to lose the fluid. Memories I can't relive, feelings I have to shuck if I want to keep moving at all. This is Calgary, the New World. There is no East, no Martin, no family, friends, cats, garden, and if I were really twenty, I wouldn't be missing them.

The tabloids are blaring in Magellan's World News store. "Mother Gives Birth to Alien Child." "Homeless Man Finds Buried Treasure." (Nothing about walking across Calgary.) Everyone in the store looks like me, footsore survivors taking momentary refuge while secretly longing for miracles. Waiting for the day when odds are overturned, the natural order broken, "King Canute Turns Back the Tide." The day when your double helix unravels and drifts across the tumultuous bronze bluffs, like a wisp of fencing wire. I join the men in their noisily silent newspaper communion, flipping pages, looking for the last line that says, "Happily ever after."

NOT EVEN BARTOLOMEO ARDUINI prepared me for the Calgary Stampede, and I weave precariously around cafés, banks and stores dressed in hay bales, giant saddles, split-rail fences and wagon wheels. Air redolent with the pancakes and sausages of the outdoor breakfasts sizzling on every corner. Painted cowboys range across the great panes of the Bank of Montreal. I sidewind by bulls, llamas and covered wagons. Dan-the-One-Man-Band and Daddy-Long-Legs are busking in their usual corners, only now sporting Stetsons and bolo ties. I stop again, unused to so many people in the streets, walking, some even jaywalking, as if mesmerized by the seismic pulse of country-western music sounding through the city.

Instead of continuing my expedition, I pause at a large institution, or academy, bearing a name I recognize from Arduini, Tsiampouras, Voorhies and even Marco Polo. A line of people waiting to enter is already around the corner, but the bouncer believes me when I tell him I'm with the oil and gas company party inside. I unstrap my pack, pretend to rummage for ID and then say I just blew into town from Great Slave Lake for the party. The bouncer stamps my hand and ushers me in. I glance up at the banner over the door. "Most Fun You Can Have With Your Boots On."

After claiming a corner stool, I nurse a beer, feeling very alone and dorky, alarmed by the number of men in the room. Even more alarming, though, are the servers'

orange salon tans and surgically enhanced breasts. One of the servers is flitting through the room in a phosphorescent body suit with a holstein-patterned tail, something I don't want to speculate on. Another server climbs onto the table just across from my stool. She braces her legs and draws two bottles with spigots from the leather holsters strapped to her thighs. Men are lining up, gaping like baby birds while the server squirts a vile blue or pink liquid into their mouths. Communion ends with the ritual stuffing of bills into the holster.

I jump when a tall, lean man in a cherry red shirt taps me on the shoulder. And yes, he is bowing, he is doffing his cowboy hat, he is extending his elbow. "Wanna dance?"

I point at myself. "Me?"

The man's smile broadens.

My face falls.

"I don't know how to two-step or do any western dancing."

"Nothing to it," he says, glowing with confidence. "I can teach you. I do this professionally. I've been working the Stampede breakfasts around town and I'm just looking for a little fun tonight."

He leads me out to the dance floor, places his hands on my shoulder and waist, and lo and behold, I'm moving with him across the floor.

ARM-IN-ARM, Red Shirt and I walk to his downtown apartment. The light shifting every minute, sky mugging with wind, sun, rain, hail, snow. Duct tape marks the spot on an abandoned storefront, and down the way James Joyce is commemorated by a pub in the former Bank of Toronto building, columns and entablatures now exhaling clouds of beer and Van Morrison into the street. We turn down an alleyway and slink past the bold black geometry of fire escapes, stage entrances, stairs fleeing back doors. A construction crane slowly revolves over the rooftops while the Calgary Tower preens in the flattering glass surface behind Ark's pawnshop. I could be anywhere in the world, feeling my way down winding roads, turning into blind corners. Narrow buildings leaning on each other. Shutters, gables, weathercocks, secret gleamings of leaded glass. Street-level doorways leading to merchants, artists, alchemists, map-makers who look like the Jack of Hearts. A red brick road leads to another red brick road, leading to more brick roads. Walking. Walking down streets changing places over night, time measured only by the beat of my footsteps.

Finally heading southbound, thoroughly repentant and pounding the pavement, trying to make up for lost time. Every time I sniff my wrist and breathe into my palm, I can detect Red Shirt, an agonizingly familiar yet devastatingly un-Martinlike blend of sperm, toothpaste, mint, deodorant spiked with cologne. On the 1st Street bridge, a good-looking train has swaggered into town, flexing its biceps, in superhero red. My path, however, leads under the bridge, and the earth cracks open as I descend, concrete walls leaking like the stigmata of caves. Kelp-shaped graffiti washed up on rough surfaces.

Homeless men, cocooned in blankets, crouch over cardboard signs bleeding black marker, their lips soughing ceaseless vespers. “Spare change Have a nice day Change Day” This colony of homeless people frightened me at first, the way they seemed so organized and interconnected, pursuing me as if my clothes had all been chalked with a hobo’s X. But they all know my face now. The Mad Walker has become patron saint of the discarded, forgotten, shunned. Lost causes not even available as someone already took that position. Emerging from the bridge back into air and light, even the perpetual testicle festival at Buzzard’s makes me feel like Persephone on a day pass. But I avert my eyes, trying to erase that Stampede night from my memory.

Red Shirt and I eventually made it to his Bridgeland apartment. I remember standing awkwardly beside him in the rickety, off-white elevator. Next thing I knew, I was reclining like a queen under his billowing blue duvet. He was patient, eager to please me, and he was ten years younger than me, his skin tender under my fingertips. We fell asleep in each other’s arms. When I woke up, Red Shirt was dead to the world, and in the weird light jittering across the walls, I noticed how much Red Shirt’s apartment looked like my first student lair. I would swear he owns the same spineless maroon couch with the balding arms. His apartment seemed to shrink with each second, and I started noticing the photos studding his bookshelves, crowning the refrigerator. Smiling elders, school portraits of gap-toothed children, preserved in wood and pewter frames. And then I donned my jacket and affixed my back pack. The door barely creaked when I closed it.

Now heading southeast, where I don’t know what will face me, I can’t even trace how I ended up sneaking out of an apartment in downtown Calgary after making love to a two-step professional. I sniff my wrist. Red Shirt is still making his presence felt. The question isn’t so much why I did it, but why I left this man. What’s more, I could do it again. How did I become so nomadic? Does it only take 4,000 kilometres?

THE MACLEOD TRAIL. True enemy territory, red with Explorers, Expeditions, Excursions, Escapes, Grand Caravans, Navigators, Cherokees. Here, walkers are confined like cattle in a feedlot. Every day I scuttle over, through, around, gratuitous concrete barriers and bus stops and newspaper boxes and telephone poles and streetlights and kids in ratty bear suits handing out electronics store flyers. Bumping into mobile signs and sandwich boards advertising Taber corn. “100 Shrimp.” What kind of infernal shrimp exists in sub-desert? I try to quell Pedestrian Rage and remember what Arduini said about silence, exile and cunning. He was right; there is no other way to survive. For over three hundred years these beasts have controlled the territory, built an empire that demands more and more space and resources. All along the Macleod Trail, monsters with the torso of a unicorn, weasel paws, anchovy tails. Some look like hybrid sharks, others like

Voorhies’s huge, menacing aqua-dogs, jaws closing down on Madagascar. Some bear fur. Others, feathers. Snacking on galleons along the way. I am but an appetizer on the Macleod Trail. At the curving white spine of the Lindsay Park leisure centre, a Mercedes appears with a naked woman riding its back, followed by a Ford Ranchwagon jockeyed by the King of Portugal. By the time I reach the Round-up Centre, Year Five has slipped into the sunset, and the Cape of Good Hope is beyond belief.

And some streets coil into each other, and some wrap around a playground slowing cars to thirty kilometres an hour. And all are paved in shades of schoolyard grey. And some have trees and some connect to the major traffic corridor and some sluice down to the community centre with the missing “I,” so the sign says FARVIEW.

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Doors open into backyards and fences which lead to a parallel world of alleyways that contain RVs and Harleys and garbage cans and stacks of pruned branches; and some of these alleyway landings are neat and clipped and others are full of detritus. And vehicles careen down the streets and turn into the alleyways and some find their way to the Baptist church on the corner, and take refuge under the lighted sign that says FAITH NOT FATE.

Dogs bark and there are borders of petunias, pansies, lobelia, shaped cedars, grass mowed in diagonal lines and in straight rows, hemmed at curbs and walkways, and the Block Watch peers through bungalow walls. Motion-sensor spotlights wake the garages. And someone is playing Country 105 and someone else is shouting at his dog and in the distance the LRT cracks the thin air, and beyond the LRT are foothills and pines and the Rocky Mountains. It’s not Red Shirt and it’s not the fact that your feet hurt and you’re almost out of provisions. And it’s not the fact that no one knows you, or that you don’t know who the hell you are any more. It’s even more than losing your lover and best friend and sixteen years of your life, and being afraid to return to the city you love because it is now the past. It’s knowing that an entire life has no more substance or security than a few lines on a map, or a moment’s reprieve, and with each passing day it looks more and more like this had been your real road all along. 🏠

Lesley Battler was run out on a rail to Calgary, where she currently lives, works and does a lot of walking. She recently completed a novel about the transcontinental railway and the creation of Canada’s two new solitudes: East and West.