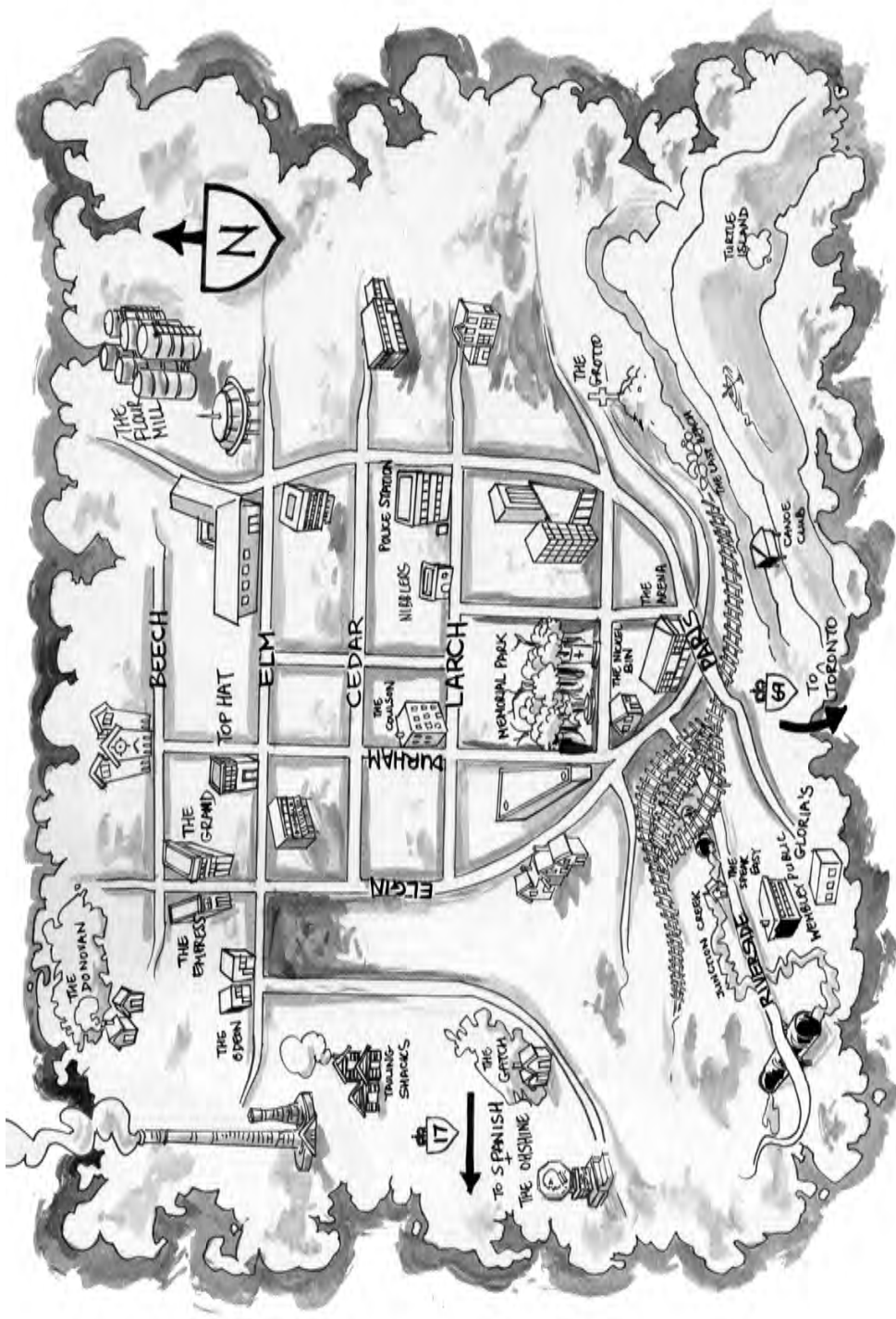


MATTHEW
HETTI

THE
CITY
STILL
BREATHING



THE FLOUR MILL

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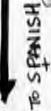
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MATTHEW
HEITI



THE
CITY
STILL
BREATHING

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first edition



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
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Canada

Published with the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Coach House Books also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Heiti, Matthew, 1980-, author

The city still breathing / Matthew Heiti.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55245-283-7 (pbk.).-- ISBN 978-1-77056-355-1 (epub)

I. Title.

PS8615.E377c58 2013

c813'.6

c2013-904091-9

The City Still Breathing is available as an ebook: ISBN 978 1 77056 355 1.

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'Used to be, the invisible man was invincible in school.
But now.
He wanted to be a scientist and discover things.
A cure for cancer. New stars. New planets.
Somebody in Toronto already beat him to the discovery
of penicillin.
And now.
Just sex and poetry.
And a taste for leaving.
Every time he walks down the street that leads out of
town, his thumb breaks out in a rash.'
– Patrice Desbiens, *L'homme invisible / The Invisible Man*

'Here comes
Here comes another hard winter in Babylon
Where have you gone?
Damn you and the horse you rode in on
What star did you fall down from?
Why'd you have to be so cruel?
So cruel.'

– Kevin Quain, 'Winter in Babylon'

He just doesn't know what to do. Wally Kajganich standing on the side of the road shivering, wishing he hadn't stopped the van. It's been a cold day, the kind that punches you in the gut every time you step outside, and the coming night is promising worse. The water's turned to ice running down the rock, hanging in long fingers over the ditch. There's no snow on the ground yet, but that's not what makes the ice stand out – that's not what made Fisher call out or Wally hit the brakes. It's pink. Rosy explosions trapped beneath the layer of frost, racing down to the very tips of the icicles where the tint seems darker, more like some fancy lipstick red.

Nothing's been said for about five minutes, just two men standing on the gravel shoulder over the ditch, staring, and then Fisher opens his mouth once or twice before finally saying 'Well' without a question mark. Wally rubs his hands together, looks back at the transport van – police markings faded though he's put in two requests to have her repainted – and then walks farther down the shoulder, muttering 'Shit.' Fisher shuffling behind him like some lost puppy.

They find a point where the embankment is not so steep and the two men climb up the surface of rock and frozen moss, the exertion forcing clouds of vapour around their heads. They make their way back to the top of the ridge and do some more standing and staring.

'Hey, Kag, maybe it's this thing.'

Fisher's pointing at a little stone man perched on the lip of the embankment – the kind of thing you see up and down every highway and back road – making some kind of joke, which Wally knows because he's got that little twist to his lip he only gets when he makes lewd suggestions about women they drive by or female prisoners.

More sounds come out of Fisher, but Wally's got him on mute and is turned, looking back into the trees – evergreen and naked maples, thick and dark like a storybook. He's got that little tingle, that whisper behind his ear that used to make him think he could've

been a good cop. Leads his eyes, tracing down the scarred trunks to the ground, telling him, *Look, look, it's right in front of you.* But all he can see is an ocean of cracked and browning leaves. *Look.*

A hand on his shoulder. 'C'mon. Celia's making me dinner.'

And it's just as he turns around that he spots it, the shock causing him to grab Fisher's hand, and the men stand, holding hands and staring down at an opening in the pile of leaves. An eye staring back up at them, frozen over like a marble.

By the time they get the leaves cleared away, Wally's hands are aching and he's got them locked over his mouth, blowing into them like a bellows – rhythmic wheezing in and out. Fisher looks at him and then down at the body and then back at him again.

'The hell you doin that for?'

He pulls his hands away, sliding them inside his jacket and under his armpits. 'My goddamn Raynaud's.'

Fisher steps back, wrinkling his nose. 'Your hand disease?'

'I'm not an effin leper.' Wally takes his hands out and blows into them, but Fisher's looking back down.

A cold wind rolls over the embankment – the brown hair lifts and waves in the wind and for a second the gesture's so easy you'd almost think he was just resting. But the skin's gone bone white, the lips frozen, curling back, and those eyes don't shut, and Wally wonders what kind of a man would lie naked on a rock or what kind of a man would put him there like that.

'Hell of a thing,' Fisher says for the fifth time, each time like it's just occurred to him.

Wally's only seen a body once before, seven years back now, two for the price of one. A car gone through the guardrails into a ravine out near Spanish. A yellow Beetle. You'd never expect to find such peace in the middle of all that mess, but death has a way of looking easy. Still, it gets stuck in your craw. Like this body, almost unmarked, glazed like some Italian sculpture he saw in a book once. But the throat opens in a smile, coal black along the slash. Blood frozen up the chin, following the jawline and then running along the ridge of

the ear onto the rock, spilling down the slope, joining with a stream, finally freezing into a sheet of ice. Long bloody fingers.

‘What d’you mean it’s not working?’

‘I mean it’s not working.’

‘It was working before.’

‘Not working now.’

Wally tries the key again, but this time even the dashboard lights won’t blink. Effin scrap metal. That’s what they give him – won’t paint her, won’t service her. He wants to get angry, tries, but only some kind of numbness rises up from his belly. He stares out the window at all that asphalt in either direction. No one’s passed them the entire time they’ve been here.

‘Effin shortcut my ass.’

‘Well, there’s no traffic, is there?’

‘Yeah and no help either.’

Stuck on this side road, still at least an hour west of the city. He can feel Fisher twitching, his big mouth winding up, but he gives him a look and grabs the radio. He cuts through the static and gets the dispatcher on, arguing with him about their unit number, reporting the body, explaining the dead battery, clarifying the battery and the body are two separate dead things, trying to give some idea of their location on whatever back road they happen to be stuck on. Back to static.

‘What does he mean, “We’ll get to you when we get to you”?’

‘He means we’re special constables driving an empty prisoner transport and they only give a shit about real cops.’

Fisher zips his jacket and pulls the hood up, arms crossed and sitting glumly. ‘This is the wrong kind of special, Kag.’

It’s just past five and the light’s got that funny look when you know the bottom’s about to drop out on the day. Wally balls up his fingers and toes, trying to urge some feeling into them. The temperature’s still dropping in the cab of the van.

He swings the door open with a squeal of rusting metal.

Fisher bitches while Wally gathers wood, but when the pyramid is built, he wants to be the one to light it. Wally lets him grunt over the matches for a few minutes before taking over and getting the whole thing burning. He slowly gets some feeling back into his feet and hands, watching the chimney-red, pumpkin-orange flames, the little twist of blue playing in the throat of the fire. He pushes a big dead piece of maple in, lifting a cloud of sparks, lighting up the outline of the body a few feet away.

‘Don’t see why we gotta be so close to it,’ Fisher says.

‘So we can keep an eye on it, the van and the road.’

‘Creeps me out.’

Wally looks across the fire at the younger man. Fisher’s big arms wrapped around his legs, knees pulled up to his chin, his whisky-coloured face just barely visible, eyes darting nervously. Wally laughs, a single short bark. ‘Didn’t you come in from the Wiky reserve?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Shouldn’t this be your natural element ... nature?’

Fisher’s eyes swivel to Wally, twinkling, and he gets that twist to his mouth again. ‘Christ, Kag, we live in houses now – you know that, right?’

The firelight catches the dark shapes of trees, dragging long shadows out of them – the forest leaning in, crowding next to them at the fire’s edge. There is no wind, the only sound the popping of the wood.

‘What d’you think – ?’

But Fisher leaves it like that, shaking it off with his head and burrowing down into his knees. Neither man has broken the heaviness to say much about it. To speculate about the why and how. Haven’t used the words *him* or *body* or said anything about *dead* except on the radio. Something about the silence feels appropriate, or maybe it’s an excuse to ignore the other feelings creeping in with the night.

Wally tries to imagine cutting Fisher’s throat, watching him die, taking off all his clothes and leaving him here, on the rock above the road. It doesn’t fit. He just can’t conjure up that much hate for

something. He tries to imagine coming out here, naked in the wilderness, and cutting his own throat, wanting to do that. It doesn't fit much better, but his stomach doesn't turn over at it.

'Maybe an animal done it.' Fisher's eyes on Wally again, something almost hopeful in the tone, like this might undo it, or make it more understandable.

Wally sees the fear coming in on his partner, the body making a space for itself next to the fire, and he clears his throat and starts the way the old-timers always started with him: 'Knew this one cop, working late, stalled out on a country road.' He gets into the one with the hook in the door handle and then the one about the knocking and the boyfriend hanging in the tree, and then the one about that Myllarinen kid who killed his own parents with a box cutter, true-story-I-swear, and at the end of it Fisher's fear returns to its normal ever-present level. They sit more easily around the fire, almost cozy, like camping if only they had some effin marshmallows.

'Ow!' Fisher grabs his cheek and looks around wildly. 'Something bit me.'

Another something hits the fire with a hiss. A pause and then the sky's vomiting pebbles of ice – fire sputtering, miniature explosions off the rocks and the metallic *ping ping* on the van below. Fisher jumps up and runs for cover, but Wally's yelling brings him back.

'Take the feet.'

He's already got his hands under the armpits – the feeling of the flesh, cold and hard, coming through his gloves. Fisher's looking at him and the body like he's gone nuts, shouting over the rushing sound of the hail all around them.

'Where are – ?'

'Take the feet!'

Wally starts to drag the body, but Fisher grabs it around the ankles, lifting the stiff thing between them. They struggle down the embankment, hailstones cracking off the body, ripping small pockets in the frozen skin. Wally, unseeing through the downpour, bangs into the back of the van, stumbling and losing hold of his end. The head hits the gravel, bending the neck forward at an unnatural angle,

the gashed throat yawning open toward Fisher, who lets go of the whole thing.

Wally swings the rear doors open, but Fisher can only stare down at the body. He's not saying anything but Wally knows he's asking why. Why why why.

Fisher peers through the slot into the back of the van. 'Celia's not gonna be happy with me working at no Deluxe Fries.'

'It'll be fine, Fish.'

'It's in the handbook. You don't fuck with a ... a crime scene.'

'You rather we leave it out there – get all torn up or some animal make off with it?'

'No ... just rather keep my job, is all. Rather we didn't have him back there. Guess he's better than some of the shit chuckers we drive around with.'

Wally slides the slot door closed. 'It's not a him anymore.'

The two men are sitting in the cab, wrapped in the coarse wool of the emergency blankets, breath already frosting over the windows. The gunfire rattle of hailstones has slowed. It's quiet, almost peaceful. Wally feels his eyes shut.

Then out of nowhere – a woman singing. He opens his eyes and sees Fisher fiddling with the tape deck.

'What the eff is that?'

'It's my Crystal Gayle.'

'Fish!' Wally slams the eject button. 'We might need the last of the battery for the radio.'

'Oh.' Fisher wipes his nose and rolls the snot nervously between his thumb and pointer finger. 'We gonna freeze to death in here, Kag?'

Wally takes in his partner, sees the joke but feels the concern underneath it. 'They say if you wanna make it through a cold night up north, best thing is to hunker down in a bag naked with someone else.'

Fisher looks at him with a big grin that moves back some of the worry he's been sucking on. 'Love to see them find us all here in the

morning – three buck-naked men in a van.’ He puts his chair back, reclining, scratching his smooth chin with a bare hand before shoving it back in the mitt. ‘Drive em, drop em off and drive back, but goddammit, Kag, if you didn’t have to stop on the coldest day of the year. Just you getting cold feet, I guess.’

‘What the hell about?’

‘Your date.’ Fisher giggles like they’re thirteen years old.

‘I don’t have a date. It’s just lunch. Anyway, you were the one hollerin.’

‘Cold feet is why you stopped, is alls I’m saying.’ Fisher sighs and the joke’s gone. ‘Be eating dessert right about now, I guess. Celia’s apple pie, apples off her dad’s farm, still warm. She probably did a fresh loaf of bannock too – never ate the shit growing up, but she makes it so thick and flaky, it just melts. The side, she’s got some carrots with butter and a bit of honey ...’

Wally listens to Fisher working his way backwards through this meal, sharing each dish, the smells and textures, his voice becoming thicker with every slice of rare steak, mouthful of garlicked potatoes, murmuring into the easy ritual of setting the table, the hiss of a beer cap coming loose. Opening the front door, the warm rush of air as you cross from the rest of the world into your own little piece of it.

When Fisher moves off to sleep, Wally breathes on the window, drawing a circle with his glove and rubbing a porthole through the frost. He’s hoping for the moon, a few stars, just a bit of light so he can know which way this van is pointing. But he can’t see anything. Only this great hungry darkness.

He thinks about the body in the back and tries to make a story for this man. Thinks about the lonely kind of life you’d have to live for this lonely kind of end to it. A plain face, no identifying marks on the body, no identification of any kind, nothing to call his own. Probably middle-aged, halfway into some kind of life, some kind of career. Nothing really fulfilling. A failed relationship, the usual wreckage. No kids. Colleagues, people to shoot the shit with – talk about the hockey game – but no real friends. Drinks too much. Watches too much television. Spends too many evenings alone. No

devastating failures but no real sense of accomplishment. Had some potential at one time, now no real value. No real loss.

He pulls off his gloves, blowing into the bowl of his hands. As he pulls away to rub them, he sees his fingers already going yellow-white with the cold and then the shine of the ring he probably shouldn't be wearing anymore.

A wind is kicking up outside, gently rocking the van like a cradle.

Wally wakes because the feeling's gone out of his hands and feet. His fingers feel thick as he pulls them out of the gloves, jams them under his armpits and holds them there. Then he takes off his boots and socks and rubs at his feet, unsettled by the feeling of not feeling when his numb fingers touch his numb toes. Nothing he's doing brings the sensation back. He looks over at Fisher, head rolled on his shoulder and a line of drool down to his chin.

There's the creak of metal from the back, and Wally turns his head to the slot to listen. A sudden cold gust, like an exhalation, seems to leak in around the seams of the slot and he wonders if one of the rear doors has been left open.

He reaches out and fumbles with stiff fingers at the slot, finally getting the catch and sliding the door open to see two marbled eyes pressed up against the opening, staring at him. A second exhalation from the other side and Wally is hit by a coldness he's never known.

He slides the door closed again.

He falls back into his seat, his breath coming out in a cloud, already disbelieving. He wants to open the slot, to prove it's just his twisted imagination, but he is paralyzed by what he might find instead. The numbness crawls from his fingers and toes inward, turning his legs and arms to stumps.

It takes minutes or hours, but the cold seeps deeper into him, silencing each organ, stopping his blood, shrivelling his penis, slowly turning his body into a great weight. His head is being dragged down by this weight, to stare at this pale, useless thing attached to it. He knows the flesh is dying, but all he can feel is this great fatigue at the long road being put behind him. No real value. No real loss.

Lights and colours reel around him, igniting this useless body, and when he finally hears a knock at his window, Wally finds he can move again.

The cavalry is an asshole named Simpson who makes a lot of noise about taking their badges and dumping them back on the side of the road before he finally gives them the boost they need and tells them to take the corpse in anyway. There's light coming over the hills as they take off down the road to swing onto Highway 17 and head back east into the city. Fisher's been driving and talking a mile about his big plans for the future: '... I get back I'm gonna put in for the big time – provincial, city, don't give a damn. No offence, Kag, driving with you is fine, but I'm just done with all this shit. Don't know how you put up with it so many years.'

Wally nods and checks the speedometer. Fisher's all amped up and driving too fast as usual, but this time he doesn't say anything about it, turning to the window instead. He puts his hand on the glass, thinking through this sensation, the cool surface against his palm. Outside, a light snow has begun to fall, settling on tree branches and dusting the highway.

'They don't hurry up, not gonna find out anything about this guy's story.' Fisher adjusts the mirror and brushes at his hair. 'The first snow covers everything.'

Wally slides the slot door open and looks into the back. The hold has a padded bench on each wall and a bucket under one of these benches for emergencies. The first rays of sunlight are coming in at an angle through the rear windows, splashing across the floor. He notices he's been holding his breath only when he sees the body laid out, a thin vapour rising as it thaws.

He turns back to the window, watching for the big coin monument on the hill to let him know they're home.

Normando sits on the tail of his Warlock, bow legs dangling, sun coming up. He uses the fender of the truck to pop the cap on his Northern and takes a long pull of warm beer. Scratches his belly through blue-checked flannel, looks at the twenty-foot head of King George looking back at him. Damned big thing. Bunch of damned wood with some silver paint – doesn't know that but it's what he's heard.

A red two-door pulls up, kicking gravel. Laughter and teenagers sliding out. The girl skips up to the pedestal, suddenly self-conscious as she poses underneath the damned big thing while the boy Polaroids her. She's in her pyjamas, for chrissakes. Normando slips off the tailgate, knees cracking, and limps to the edge of the hillside, the town spilling out before him. His back hurting like it always does, only worse.

He breathes it in, the fall air and dead-looking trees on the neighbourhood lanes, the black rock hills jumping up, leaning over the houses clustered around and beneath them. He has gone up and down every one of those streets. This is his town.

The long keen of a whistle and an old itch tells him the morning shift's going underground. He turns back to King George, the face on the giant coin glowing in the early sun. At its base, those two damned kids rolling around on the ground like it's *their* town. Like there could never be nothing else around that alive.

Behind them he catches the black smoke coming off the smelter. Getting on fine without him.