

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Celluloid Thirsty

by

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## Introduction

How does someone know that they stand in a given city? The answer, perhaps naively, is that they look for signs. These signs might be literal greeting signs—“Welcome to Calgary”—but they might also be restaurant signs, the outsides of buildings, or skylines. These markers and signifiers are crucial for a person’s understanding of a city. There would be no cities without them. Individuals and institutions with control over these signs and signifiers thus have an enormous source of power. What follows is a creative writing thesis exploring the implications and conceptions of a city as a text: the issues that arise from the question of how to represent a city, questions of why certain representational choices are made above others, and the motivations which reside in those choices.

I begin my project with the question: when you read a city as a text, how does power manifest itself in that reading? In order to answer my question, I set out to implicate myself in this knowledge production, by searching for the answer via creative practice. Doing so attempts to reveal the “tacit knowledge” which is “always implicated in human activity and learning” (Barrett 4). Tacit knowledge is distinct from “explicit and exact knowledge” (4), such as dates and historical account. I use Gerard Genette’s concept of the ‘paratext’ since it provides a framework for determining what a text *is*. I focus on the city of Calgary, given my experience of living and learning in the city. The result is a work of fiction I title “Celluloid Thirsty,” a narrative about a film critic encountering a supernatural being who embodies the spirit of Calgary.

I begin with conceiving of Calgary as ‘paratextual.’ Paratext is text surrounding a book, which can range from “titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications,

acknowledgements, illustrations, dustjackets, [et cetera]” (Chandler). I borrow Gerard Genette’s definition; he states that paratexts “...surround [a book] and extend it, precisely in order to *present it*, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: *to make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world” (1). The paratext prepares the reader to receive the book they will read. Not only that, paratext bounds a text, delineates it from the rest of the world. I originally conceived of Calgary as being a ‘paratextual’ city—but I also recognize that Calgary has a paratext of its own. When I figure Calgary as ‘paratextual,’ I figure it as bringing into relief other cities, or what could be called “Main Text Cities.” Calgary *makes present* these other cities. Calgary is often used as a filming location representing other American metropolises and locations. In the case of *Superman 3*, Calgary literally represented Metropolis. It *presented* the city of Metropolis to the audience. In the films *The Revenant* (dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2015, USA), *Inception* (dir. Christopher Nolan, USA & UK, 2010), *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005, USA), and *Unforgiven* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 1992), Alberta presents the Dakotas, a dream fortress, Wyoming, and Kansas, respectively. Rarely does the city (or the province) represent itself, which raises the question of what effect ‘being paratextual’ has on a city, and how that power factors into the fabric of a city’s own paratext.

I base my analysis of the power of paratext on Michel Foucault’s ‘power/knowledge’—power/knowledge being the network by which a subject uses knowledge to “shape social experience”; and then creates practices which “enmesh subjects...into relations of power” (“power/knowledge”). Power articulates itself through knowledge and knowledge articulates itself through power. Paratext illustrates power/knowledge, since it is a point where knowledge exerts itself over the reader. Paratext

influences the field of discourse, since it can signify the difference between perceiving a text as fiction or fact—a novel’s title, preface, and back cover all work to make present a *novel* as opposed to other textual forms. If the publisher switches the covers of 2 different books, as Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night A Traveler* depicts, then the reader’s experience of a book is completely altered—a fictional account confused for an historical account, and vice versa.

Calgary’s own paratexts might include road signs—currently, one outside the city says “be part of the energy<sup>tm</sup>”—which *presents* observers with the city. Buildings are also paratexts: the Calgary Tower on the skyline of the city *presents* the ‘reader’ with an image of the city of Calgary. Buildings must be read textually in this way, since without discourse, the buildings would be incomprehensible. Whether a building is a restaurant, or an office depends on a discursive designation— ‘office’ or ‘restaurant.’ How a subject interprets a building without a sign or title depends on an *a priori* knowledge of the building—the subject must *read* exterior or interior spaces *as texts* to determine their function. Thus, the power/knowledge of a city, articulated through paratexts such as buildings and road signs, determines a subject’s interactions with that city.

The paratexts I will explore, the film and the photograph, are visual in their role of creating Calgary. Postcards, image searches, vlogs, news programs, and other visual elements of the city are not only important in that they furnish the city’s character but are active agents within Calgary; they articulate power. Paratexts such as photos communicate the past, or at least knowledge of the past. As Susan Sontag says in *On Photography*:

...the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may

distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture (5).

Thus, power/knowledge exerts itself through photographs that *make present* the “given thing” Sontag mentions.

One of Calgary's distinctive qualities is its youth. It was first incorporated as a town in 1884, and then as a city in 1894. Thus, to invoke any age in the city, you *must* present photos or footage, because the city itself doesn't *look* or *feel* old, whereas in longer-inhabited cities such as London, Istanbul, or Mexico City, the history is palpable. This makes photos of Calgary more potent than photographs of other cities, where the very brickwork oozes history, place, and lineage. Since photography was already widespread practice when Fort Calgary was first established and became a city, there exists a wealth of visual archival material from which to observe the development of the city. What effect does a photographic history have on a relatively young city like Calgary? Those who control such paratextual images gain immense power; they control, at least in part, the memory of the city. The past of the city is *made present* by such photos. Sontag also argues, “as photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of a space in which they are insecure” (9). Taking Sontag's quote, I argue that the photographic history of Calgary helps the owners of the city take a space, the confluence of the Elbow and Bow rivers, and construct a *place* in it.

The cultural critic Michel de Certeau utilizes a distinction between *space* and *place*. Space is defined as the “container of everyday life,” yet also performs as an “active agent in it” (Buchanan, “space”). Images both contain and act on the lives of those who encounter or occupy Calgary. De Certeau defines ‘place’ as distinct from space, in that *place* is *space* that is invested with power (Buchanan).

As for a place such as a city, de Certeau says that “the ‘city’...is defined by the possibility of a threefold operation:” First, “the production of its own space;” second, “the substitution of a...synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions;” and lastly, “the creation of a universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself” (de Certeau 95). For de Certeau, the ‘production of its own space’ is the creation of *place*, which represses anything compromising that image of ‘its own space’ (95). The second operation, that the city replaces a ‘synchronic system’ with tradition, describes de Certeau’s differentiation between conceptions of time for the *owners* of a place, and the *subjects*. Tradition benefits the owners, since it emphasizes the repetition of history, the maintenance of the status quo. According to de Certeau, traditions attempt to *close* possibility. The OED states that the “synchronic” is the “descriptive, as opposed to historical or diachronic.” De Certeau uses ‘synchronic’ the same way he uses the portmanteau ‘nowhen’—to not mean the present *as such*, but the way a subject perceives the present. This means that conceiving time as a ‘synchronic system’ opens the possibility of spontaneity, change, and accident—all opportunities which a subject might use to improve their life. Finally, de Certeau’s third operation, this created “universal and anonymous subject,” is defined by a “finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties” (95). These properties are all grouped under the name of “‘the city,’ like a proper name” (de Certeau 95). They come from properties which were “previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects—groups, associations, or individuals” (de Certeau 95). For de Certeau, this ‘anonymous subject’ of the city is created from the previously fragmented community. Groups unify under the name of the city. For

example, Calgary's 'universal subject' might be a conglomeration of the oil barons, ranchers, and homesteaders who colonized the area.

The city is created from repressing what is *not* the city (the rural, other cities, fields, etc.), from a historical conception of time emphasizing 'tradition,' and a 'subject which is the city itself (de Certeau 95). I take these operations into the production of my fiction. The supernatural cowboy called Sam in the piece is the 'universal subject' of Calgary, and his goal is the furthering of his/story. He represses what 'isn't him,' and consumes it.

Calgary, like any city, attempts to maintain itself through de Certeau's three operations and paratext. When a city, any city, brands itself with a slogan and a sign, it uses paratext to *make present* the body of the city, repressing what is not the city. The managers, councils, and owners of the city utilize power/knowledge to create Calgary's 'tradition' and universal subject. Calgary's bid for the Winter Olympics is evidence of this. The games and all the discourse surrounding them have a global audience for whom the city performs, and the title, 'host of the Olympics,' carries its own expectations and implications for what kind of city Calgary is. The games connote wealth, openness, and friendly yet fiery competition on the world stage. The Calgary Stampede as well showcases the city's desire to be read as a distinctive *place*. The iconic posters of the Stampede *make present* the event, and by extension the city that it calls home. Still, who controls the power/knowledge of a place? The owners, such as the city councils, real estate corporations, or banks? Or the community, the living bodies of the place?

De Certeau's distinction between "strategy" and "tactics" helps answer the question of who manages power/knowledge of a place or city. These terms de Certeau uses capture the difference between decisions made by the powerful and the *powerless*. *Strategies* are



those ‘calculations’ used by those with the ‘will and power’ to release themselves from external whims (de Certeau, xx); ‘external whims’ are the spaces and institutions which subjects find themselves inside, such as banks, universities, governments, or shopping malls. *Tactics* are the ‘calculations’ made by those without the ability to free themselves from such ‘whims’—instead, they are subject to these institutions, and their decisions are improvised and fleeting. Strategies are used by the capitalist, tactics by the proletariat. De Certeau says, “a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over..., without being able to keep it at a distance” (xix). So, those in control of a place employ strategies to perpetuate their grasp, whereas those who employ tactics are those living within the parameters of said place.

For the Stampede, the ‘owners,’ those who profit, who ultimately decide the aesthetics of the events and the ticket costs, are employing *strategies*. Any individual who manages to sneak into the Stampede grounds employs a *tactic*. Control over the paratext of a city is decisive for the owners of a place such as Calgary, but tactics can be employed to subvert strategic plans from the inside.

In creating my fiction, I utilized de Certeau’s formulations of space, place, tactics, and strategy to characterize the oil-drinker character, the cowboy. The cowboy asks the film critic for a screenplay which will become another paratext for Calgary, in turn helping to shape power/knowledge relations for the city. Using elements only he can, the cowboy deploys a strategy to obtain the script he wants. As a settler on stolen indigenous land, the cowboy already knows how he can impose one narrative over another. As a white settler myself, a beneficiary of the continued occupation of this land, the story of the immense pain and continued suffering due to European colonization is not mine to speak.

Yet, I also don't want to elide the wound dealt by my ancestors and my continued occupation. Thus, I decided to situate my project in my own subjective experience, not through autobiography, but through creative practice. This creative practice aims to expose "embodied knowledge or 'skill' developed and applied in practice and apprehended intuitively" (Barrett 4), that is, tacit knowledge. I wished to create a work which *makes present* a Calgary based on both my discussion here and my subjective experience, since knowledge "is derived from doing and from the senses" (Barrett 1). By situating my creative practice, I seek to treat Calgary not as a *place* infused with power and a strategically deployed 'proper' representation. Rather, I treat Calgary as a *space* in fiction where power/knowledge relations can be tactically re-written, irreverent about the 'proper' or the expected.

An example of 'situated knowledge' in a creative form is the 2007 film *My Winnipeg*, directed by Guy Maddin. Maddin's film is a sleepwalking, playful pseudo-documentary about his relationship to the city where he grew up, as well as the stories which inhabit it and which others choose to read. While Maddin may use real locations and people at times, he takes liberties in every shot to mythologize, mix, and rewrite the city of Winnipeg. He experiences the city *as a text*, place as mediated *through* Maddin, and imparts that experience to film. *My Winnipeg* makes present a city distilled from autobiographical elements, such as his childhood spent in a hair salon, and from historical elements, such as the buildings which used to stand in the city. Importantly, Maddin also uses fictional elements to exert *tactical* control over the discursive field of Winnipeg.

The film depicts the struggle between the owners of the city, who employ strategies, and the residents, who employ tactics. In one scene, Maddin describes the demolition of the

Eaton's building and the Winnipeg Arena. Both buildings, which were Winnipeg paratexts, are replaced and different power/knowledge relations are created. Maddin may not have control over the direction the city takes, as we see with his dismay at the destruction of the ice rink, but he can seize control of stories through his creative practice. He summons into existence the aging "Black Tuesdays," who continue to play hockey in the Winnipeg Arena as it crumbles. He employs a tactical appropriation of the paratext; the Black Tuesdays, to the viewer of *My Winnipeg*, become part of the field of discourse which fabricates Winnipeg. This might not reverse the course set by strategy, but nonetheless embodies Maddin's resistance to the gentrified paratexts created in the city. Maddin destabilizes the *place* by using it as a *space*. Winnipeg becomes less fixed and 'proper,' less concrete, and more a series of associations and happenings, ranging from the senile hockey team still playing in a condemned Winnipeg Arena, to a Nazi takeover for a day, to a nightclub where all the most famous players of world came to drink the liquors of Winnipeg. Maddin uses the language of film to impart an ironically authoritative tone to his fictions, mimicking conventions of documentary, and inventing footage that appears to be taken from the 1920s but was Maddin's own construction. Thus, I seek to emulate Maddin's approach, by treating Calgary not as a *place*—with proper representations and fixed truths—but by treating it as a *space*. I wish to diffuse the accepted power/knowledge of Calgary through my own subjectivity, thus creating a paratext which readers map onto Calgary.

Knowledge is produced less by a concrete event than through sensory apprehension (Barrett 1). Maddin's Winnipeg is true to his experience, but only parts of it can be said to be true to the known place. However, any *real* place is irretrievable, since all experience must necessarily be mediated through subjectivity. No one person can be said to

have an *objective* view of their city. There exists only a spectrum on which one can approach total knowledge of any place, which, like Zeno's turtle, recedes forever. 'Situated knowledge' therefore becomes crucial, since it grounds knowledge within subjective experience. This experience reveals a truth which can go unnoticed in the search for an impossible total/objective knowledge.

Paratext then both bounds and *makes present* a text. Cities have and are paratext, since they are experienced as texts. A photograph resembles a city's text, so it becomes crucial for *extending* a city, that is, expanding it past its physical boundaries. The paratext of a city creates relations of power/knowledge which exert control over the residents, but tactically, residents can diffuse the power of a place—treating it as a space for play, irreverent about power/knowledge. This disrupts power relations, but only on a small scale. Situated knowledge is useful in its honesty about an author's subjectivity—yet situated knowledge is also, by definition, incomplete. My work aims to add to the collective image of Calgary, to attempt a holistic, though nonetheless fragmented, text. "Celluloid Thirsty" is a creative piece written by a white settler about the city where he lives, which admits that it needs supplementation from other fictions, other pieces, to reflect a more complex portrait of Calgary as a city-space.

## Celluloid Thirsty

Do you remember that old tv program? I would watch my heritage in minutes. I think I found it.

~

Cinema, like the city of Calgary, began with a train. While the Lumiere brothers in France didn't *really* make people jump and move in their seats during their 1895 screening of *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, those brothers got cinema moving with the story. The myth of cinema propelled it forward. Spectacle seekers flocked to that illusion, so lifelike as to threaten comfortable socialites.

13 years earlier, the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway station laid the way for a prairie metropolis.

Some cities fade in from black; no one point can be said to be the definite opening. But not Calgary, it opened within the span of one frame to the next, no dissolve, no transition, but with a hard cut. The North-West Mounted Police installing their fort at the confluence between the Elbow and the Bow rivers. The snap of Ottawa's fingers, the fire of a rifle, the first shovel striking the cold soil.

Inspector Brisbois's name was denied the legacy of a city and relegated to a road in burgeoning 'Calgary': the clear running river, named for a home in the Scotland old country. Cinema, also borrowing its title from a distant relative, named after 'movement writing' from ancient Greek. The two bastions marked by their borrowed names. As film developed and matured, grew nuanced techniques such as the crosscut and the close-up, Calgary felt the surge of willing homesteaders. Then, the mavericks found black diamonds, oil, in the Turner Valley fields. Calgary swelled with the booming black balloon.

Simultaneously, moving pictures fabricated the montage technique, crashing images together. Both the cinema and Calgary develop their storytelling techniques, furnishing homes for opportunists and artists. Unlike painting, which would leave behind the fingerprints of the painter, their soul, the photograph could pretend to a disaffected view of its subject. Calgary became solid, objective, a city unblemished by the hand of any one person, technologically captured.

Pre-cinema, the city existed somewhere between dream-visions, inhabiting the minds of a community. Fantastic beasts and creatures wandered the new alleys; early residents grew accustomed to the sight of the ghosts of their relatives, rabbit-bear hybrids which wandered out of their nightmares, living cutlery, dishes, and furniture—unnatural inhabitants cultivated by the belief and dreams of the community, imbued with mischievous intent.

This changed with the beginning of cinema. A dream-creature caught on film was a dead one. They could not survive the harsh reality of cinema, which sucked their light inside onto the emulsion-coated plastic. Cold and detached views of the world only served to eliminate nuance in the line between fact and fiction. Once filmed, that dream could travel outside the city, could be shown. This cold garden captured in the small flesh of celluloid. The multitude of individual photos adding up to the fabric of a motion picture—the way a city's citizenry adds up to a community. Concrete. The silhouette of a tower. Strips of film run past an aperture holding the tones of a moment. A subtle transmutation.

With the invention of sensitive chemicals such as those stored between the plastic of a piece of film, humans gained an ability to sustain their worlds. Objective reality was caught scuttering around under the glass jar of a convex lens. Calgary became a *real* city,

despite its fantasy upbringing. Although elements from the unreal past still crop up, somewhere near the confluence of the Elbow and Bow rivers. A being distilled from the fantasy of Calgary.

This dream-resident of the town gained infamy for his strange dietary tendencies. From time to time, he would feel the need to take a portion from the flank of a horse, usually seared and eaten with gin. Then his hunger multiplied, he desired rarer meats, with a fearsome red bile broiling within, and he salivated at the sight of a workman's arm. He realized what was happening before the deep longing for blood overtook him, and he searched for and drank the only fluid more potent: oil. The man satiated his thirst on great gulps of lantern fuel. When Turner Valley was discovered, he leapt at the opportunity to be part of the energy, siphoning away what he needed to quell his ravenous thirst.

Of course, he avoided photographers and cinematographers. He observed the effect a photo had on his mythical cohort and developed ways of evading those clear lenses. He realized that cameras did not simply capture a concrete moment, they helped shape people's perceived experience. Some of these creatures would survive if the photo didn't quite capture their image—and new creatures were born from the grain and blurs of amateur filmmakers. Rather than a hard-cold fact, the photo became another tool for understanding the world, but also a tool for shaping it. The oil-drinker realized this: a camera took two objects out of time: the object of the lens's gaze, and the place where the photographer stood. If the oil-drinker stayed on one side of the camera, the side of the taker, he might survive the onslaught of concrete life. He took up a camera himself, and shaped homes, the grass, plains, the rivers according to his desire, in order to facilitate his own continued existence. He created hiding places, shadows behind sheds, holes between a cabin's logs,

alleys which couldn't exist—for as a creature of dreams, the oil-drinker understood the nuance of light, secrets behind the trickery played on the bounded eyeballs of the living. Consequently, his photographing Calgary turned it into his nest. As long as he continued to add to the collective visual pool of the city, his perspective would survive, and his life would endure.

~

### MOVIE CRITIC WANTED

Do you enjoy films? Do you enjoy writing about films? Can you write 500-800 words about movies on deadline each week? Then look no further than the *Calgary Crier*, the city's oldest newspaper. We are currently on lookout for a sharp set of eyeballs who can tell the good from the bad from the ugly.

#### Key Responsibilities:

- Produce film reviews each week.
- Keep to the word count of 500-800 words.
- See large releases.

#### Qualifications:

- Preferable applicants have at least a bachelor's degree.
- Preferable applicants do not drink.
- Read and write well in English.

Apply today! Call the *Calgary Crier* headquarters, just off Deerfoot.

~

FADE IN. INT. SUMMER 1981. A BAR – NIGHT.



I'm hanging on the bar of the King Eddy. The drink? Where'd my drink go. The bartender seems to be ignoring my imploring. Am I in a noir? *Double Indemnity? Kiss Me Deadly? The Big Sleep? Touch of Evil?* Another drink, sir. Sir, I could use another drink. As you can see, I'm falling off the counter here. I'm a regular PI, a Bogart, I'm a Jimmy Stewart.

Investigating...what? This. Hold on. Who? Who are you, sir? A large muscle-clad one tries to hold me up. He pulls me off my chair. I don't think the bartender can hear me. White flash brilliant hurting stinging my eyes. I'll try a louder tone. Still no constructive result. I feel King Edward's door and then the grainy concrete outside. A hole has sprouted in my jacket. My burps come from deep inside the stomach well and I get that drink I was asking for. Did I vomit? No. Maybe. Tastes like stomach acid.

Getting home. I'm going to get home. What movie is this? I'm in a film. This doesn't happen to film critics. We sit there in the audience watching Events happening to the characters on screen. We mark them up or down based on their adherence to the secret shadow behind the light of the projector. That man called the director. The veiled conductor of long puppet shows. Those audiences think that we're vultures, harpies, aftertastes of the directors. Scavengers looking for scraps. They don't see the nobility of the critique. They see us as cannibals. We don't eat our fellow man. We only point and tell the folks watching what they see. Why they feel a certain way when they look that way, lest some ideological wool be pulled over their cataracted eyeballs.

I take steps. They're mine and they carry me forward. An alley, I can rest in the alley. What's that? A cowboy hat? A cowboy's hat is laying on the top of a dumpster? My hands heavy. I catch the edge of the dumpster, the hat. Whose hat? Who said that? A yelling? A gurgling coming from the deeper alley. I peer into the darkness. There're some

men in there. One crouches over the other. Are they making out? Red. Dripping and slurping. The top figure pulls several stretching crimson strings from the neck of the prone body. The top figure, did he see me? Is it looking at me? Is that a vest? It stands. Oh, oh no. I need to get out of here. I stumble. I drop the dirty hat, take it take it back don't mind me I'm gone, sir. I just got out of the King Edward. I didn't see anything. Bye, goodbye sir.

It stands with those wet hands staring toward me. I start away. Stumble away. I look back, I'm out of the alley. The figure? What figure? No figure? Go figure.

I still have my notes in my pocket. I also have a lighter, an almost empty packet of cigarettes, a worn pencil, and a jackknife. My dad's knife. I smell exhaust. Am I on the ground? When did that happen? Somebody's yelling at me. My elbows on someone's car. Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry sir. You see, I'm not really myself right now, someone just tossed me from the King Edward and I do not get tossed from anywhere except the green room. Did you see that? In the alley? I guess not because this car owner here seems only interested in his great capacity for mouth noise.

I don't think he hears me. I will wave to distract him and walk away.

My knees don't seem to listen to me either. Doesn't anyone listen to the film critic?

Oh, hold on. This man. This here Man. Yes. My friend. How do you do? You look troubled, my friend. Oopsie, now. The ground, again.

~

Summer, 1982.

THE LATEST IN MOVIE NEWS!

Everyone's been anticipating the newest film from director Luke XXX. This time, he's taken his crew to new horizons... in the north! Not much detail escapes the set of the esteemed director, but we do have some tasty info from our studio insiders.

The film began shooting in the fall in the Canadian city of Calgary. Notably, the city is set to host the Winter Olympic games in 1988. It's unclear if the whole of the film will be shot there. Plans are circulating that some exteriors may be shot in Wisconsin, standing in for the Alberta plains. Add to this that we found soundstages in Los Angeles, rented by a "project paskapoo." We have strong reason to believe that this is the picture's production name. The director refused comment on the project, and the lead actors have been kept under wraps as well. We do at least know one fact for certain: that it takes many places to make Calgary!

The city harbors some of the country's richest Men, who have taken issue recently with the Canadian prime minister's brand-new National Energy Plan to combat the recent recession. This tumult *might* contribute to the principle photography's handful of locations.

More on movie news.

*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, the newest project from Steven Spielberg, opens this weekend...

~

INT. 1981. MESSY APARTMENT – DAY.

I'm. I'm on a couch. Hello?

"Heath?" a voice. God, damnit. My entire torso feels like I ate a tub of pudding. I slug my legs down off the couch. Plant concrete feet on a cheap carpet. "Heath?" the voice calls again. A kitchen?

“Yeah?” I prod. He walks in. Oh. “Andy, buddy. How goes the battle?” I say.  
“It goes, Heath. Did you get let go or something? What were you doing bashing someone’s bumper, Heath?”

“Is that what I was doing? Son of a—” I scrape the grout from the corners of my eyes. I need to get to work, probably. “What time is it, Andrew?”

“You look hungover.”

“Oh, I’m not over anything yet.”

“What?”

“It’s called being clever.”

“Is that what you call that?”

“Are you angry? Thanks for letting me sleep on your couch by the way.” Andrew waves his free arm. I recognize the pan of scrambled eggs. Glistening, glorious curds of egg with a melting layer of cheese. Oh my.

“No worries, Heath. But seriously, what were you doing? I found you on the receiving end on someone absolutely ripping into you. I think they might’ve bust a lung yelling so loud.”

“Was I that bad?”

“I remember you had your stupid hick knife in your hand.”

“I guess, I did?”

“Listen. It’s eleven. You can use the shower, there’s a spare towel on the toilet seat but then get on out of here. I’m off to work and I don’t want to leave you alone in here. We can talk about yesterday later.”

“Sure, Andrew. Sure. May I have some eggs?”

~

APPLAUSE.

“And we’re back! I’m speaking now to Luke XXX, the director of such hits as “A Place Called Father,” and “Tales and Trails.” Listen I’ve really *loved* your movies—”

“Thank you.”

“And I was wondering if I could ask you a bit of a big question?”

“Sure, Dave.”

“We all had fun watching the nameless lead of *Place Called Father*, but what is the point. I mean really, the point of watching a man kill another?”

“Well, ah, you said it yourself. It’s *fun*.”

LAUGHTER.

“Guess I knew more than I thought!” LAUGHTER. “But really, you don’t *need* to show all that, surely?”

“I mean, no. But I think I realized that we need to push that boundary, you know? For example, Vietnam coverage showed folks horrible scenes. Real horrible. Something they don’t need to see. I think I can ease that by putting violence in my films. They begin to see that wound as part of everyday life. Then they can start to move past it and continue their day.”

“That’s really great. I guess we can start to get used to that kind of *exciting* stuff. Can we expect more of that in your next film?”

“Perhaps.”

LAUGHTER.

~

## INT. 1981. TAXICAB – DAY

The tear in my jacket is a real one. The taxi smells like cigarettes. In a taxi trotting down McKnight. *Taxi Driver*. Is this driver a Travis Bickle? Does Calgary have any Travis Bickles? Scorsese depicting the alienated workers of a country forced into a morally bankrupt war. The backing music: Horns like breathing. The city breathing like a dock worker in a 24-hour diner, drinking coffee with some flask-dispensed brandy. New York is a city like a sandcastle—becoming whatever it needs to for the playful toddler in its midst. I mean the real *New York City*. That physical space full of concrete, sewage, and songs. No one person can really find *that* New York. Individual myopia distorts and twists the sights and senses of any given location, no matter how iconic or mythical. New York burbles and scuttles around like an amoeba, processing the tinier lifeforms wandering in its midst. Always mobile, always rearranging the parts within, despite any notion of semiotic stability. Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* turned New York into a cesspool of greed and disenchanted souls wandering the streets without direction. The citizens know that their storekeepers are crooks, they know all the so-called adults are in on a great joke. Just that no one has power to change the situation. Travis Bickle decides to make a *difference*. Certainly, he does—to someone. Jody Foster or the audience.

Now is there anyone like that in Calgary? What kind of taxi driver does Calgary produce? How many taxi drivers are *Taxi Drivers*? Calgary is ripe for mythmaking. We circulate the oil-slicked legends of ye olde Cowtown. This historic outpost for the North West Mounted Police. A police fort. That's how this tale began. Even then that's only the written tradition. Some versions of this myth feature the sandstone-centered mass as a big ole closed book, one giant cover hiding the pages inside, never to open. The title could read

“A New Hub for Global Capital,” or “Here There Be Oil.” Meanwhile the sentences and punctuation wiggle and try to escape, try get out from underneath the suffocating streets and cardboard. These are only myths of course, blurred to my own squinting subjectivity. This particular subject sitting within a taxi smells an odd fishy scent. Where’d the cab driver get fish?

I’m sure Hank won’t mind me coming into work late today. I mean, I still have my notes and I can write up my review. I pull out the small wad of lined papers.

The coil binds the top of the notebook, slightly bent from sitting inside my pocket. I flip through, coffee stains crinkle the leaves. I look at the scrawled title on the top. I saw last night the film called, ‘Raiders.’ *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Directed by Steven Spielberg. ‘exciting.’ ‘inventive practical effects.’ ‘villain utterly contemptable.’ ‘woman lead is fantastic.’ ‘charming.’ ‘at times horrific.’ To what exactly do these notes refer? I saw a boulder. I saw the most extreme version of an archeologist in the history of the discipline. This reads like one of those corny serials I watched as a kid.

It matters little that I can’t remember the film. I’ll write the film’s praises. Take your kids.

~

“And now, we continue our survey of upcoming releases for the Fall ’83 season.

“*Never Say Never Again* comes out with *Never Cry Wolf* this upcoming weekend on October 7<sup>th</sup>. Next we have the highly anticipated project from esteemed director Luke XXX. That’s *A Thirst for Oil* for October 14<sup>th</sup>.

~

INT. 1981. CALGARY CRIER OFFICE LOBBY – DAY.

I open the doors to the *Crier*.

“Afternoon, Carol.”

“Heath? What are you doing?”

“I’m about to write up on the new Steven Spielberg flick.”

“I don’t think you are, Heath,” she says.

I pause. “I don’t think I quite know what you mean, Carol.”

“You don’t remember? You’re fired.”

~

“CALGARY — We’ve been industrial, we’ve been progressive. We’ve even been the home of fat steers. Now we’re going to be energetic. But when all is said and done, nothing can compare to being phenomenal.

“That was how the city was branded back in 1912 in a book simply called *Calgary*.”

—*National Post*, 2015.

~

INT. 1981. KENSINGTON PUB – DAY.

My dad’s knife. I open it, I close it. A wooden handle secured to a steel frame, with a built-in spring and a flicking mechanism that compliments an index finger. The knife itself has an uneven edge, sharpened by my old man himself so many times over the course of so many winters.

Where’s Andrew? Tardy as always. I seem to drink too much before the man even arrives. I figure if I want to get drunk and kick a car bumper I might as well do so with the aid of a wingman. I swirl the quarter-full pale ale. I close the knife; I open the knife.



“What kind of wood is that, friend?” says a voice to my left. I turn and see a mustache underneath a cowboy hat. The hat yellows closer to the forehead, days of working sweat streaking outwards from the skull.

“I don’t know,” I reply. His get-up reflects a dedication to the craft of the West. Or at least that’s the message he sends. I note the hat, but he also wears a calfskin vest and a bright red shirt; his Wrangler jeans held up with a buckle proclaiming the 1979 Nanton Rodeo champion, and do I spy boots of ostrich skin? I look up at the man and tuck my dad’s knife back into my pocket.

“A nice piece of steel you got there,” he says with a smile, warmth like the colour of a bay horse. “Mind if I sit down?” he points to the empty stool next to me, the seat a crisscrossed network of worn, cracked leather. A black line of dirt plots underneath his rough-edged fingernails. I wave to the bartender.

“Be my guest,” I say, but he’s already sitting. Where have I seen this guy? Probably in every western made before 1970. I signal again to the bartender. “Hey, man, please.” The tender shrugs me off, nodding, talking to another customer at the other end, a fake smile saying, ‘just a second, numbnuts.’

“What brings you here alone, friend?” asks the cowboy.

“I’m meeting someone.”

“Left you in the dust?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I just have time.”

“Funny you saying that, I have just the same.”

“Time or a tardy pal of your own?”

“Time’s got me. Good company, eh?”

I try to look at him again, seeking a sign that this man is not just an impersonator of John Wayne's cousin.

"It's not polite for a man to stare, unless he's got a good reason to." He motions to the bartender, who steps over after a single gesture, a ripple of recognition passing his iris, he grabs a pint glass and fills it with prairie grass coloured beer; the glass claps on the counter.

"Sorry, I just—are you serious?" I ask. The cowboy pulls a flask from his coat. He unscrews the steel cap and dumps a generous pour of thick black fluid. He swirls the two together a bit, though the black substance lumps and sinks towards the bottom. The cowboy takes a swig.

"Come again?" He sucks the foam from his mustache with his bottom lip.

"Are you serious with," I gesture up and down at him. "This? And did you just add oil to your beer?"

"Of a kind. And if I take your meaning right, then I'm only as serious as a border collie's tux."

"That gives me no answers."

"Is that what you're looking for?"

"Uh, yes."

"What do you do during the day, friend?"

"Oh, so you're not answering my question then—"

"Sure I will, but what's your vocation? Where's your life spent?"

"Well, I was a film critic."

"Was," he quotes back at me. "Interesting use of the past tense there."

I gulp the rest of my beer. “Listen, this *was* fun, but I’m going to call a cab,” I say, getting up from my stool. “Thanks for the chat Roy, or was it Sundance? I guess you’re a bit old to be Billy.”

“The name’s Sam, friend,” he says, still smiling at me with a half-coral smile. He reaches out his hand for a shake, I presume.

“Right. Nice to meet you Sam.” I leave.

~

“...Mr. Lindsay, a former film critic of the *Calgary Crier* has still not been found. He recently wrote the script for the newest Luke XXX project, *A Thirst for Oil*. Despite this newfound fame, he never made public appearances. We certainly hope he is safe and sound, knowing that Calgary may always be indebted to his contribution to its image. Calgary Police are currently offering...”

~

EXT. 1981 KENSINGTON – DAY.

I walk to a payphone on the block’s corner. The ringing of quarters, the dial-tone, the ringing on the other end. Andrew’s voice answers a hello with a raised tone at the end.

“Andrew my buddy, pal buddy friend o’mine. Where were you? I waited like 45 minutes.”

“Heath? You asshole, *I* waited for you an hour and a half—I went straight to the pub for the time we said. I’m worried about you, man, you sounded broken up on the phone. Are you feeling better? Maybe not if you’re forgetting how time works.”

“Andrew. Andrew, wait. I don’t know what the fuck happened. But I do seriously got something I need to talk to you about. Listen, I got fired from the *Crier*.”

“Shit really?”

“Afraid so. I’m going for a walk now, all right? I’ll meet you later, somewhere we can’t possibly miss each other. Your place?”

“I guess so. Take care of yourself, Heath.” I clump the phone in its place, hanging for the next patron. I set off towards the Bow. Figure walking along the one ancient landmark in this city might impart some sense of stability.

I see a bumper sticker on a green Oldsmobile: “Let the eastern bastards freeze in the dark.” Ouch. That energy plan doesn’t go over well, evidently. And why should it? We’re all freezing in the dark across this continent. The money’s dried up, predictably, inevitably.

I arrive at the edge of the Louise Bridge. Her five arches planted within the mud of the Bow. The river itself carries the waters of the Rockies across the hills. I lean on the railing separating me from the edge of the wide waters. The Bow tumbles, surging forever without recourse. An infinite forward march. In the days before the Europeans arrived, to slaughter and occupy the land in the name of something, people accepted the river, and didn’t bother to make amendments. They let the river assert its own character, and the people and the river got to know each other. Those people remain, albeit recovering from the arrival of this new brutality. The pale, hungry people felt the river would enjoy this bridge, bypassing its galloping muscle.

Before filmmakers really figured out how to carry a narrative through moving pictures, I know they used film to capture the minute movements of the ephemeral and temporary, which meant they could capture the ghosts of their visions. The mystery of the horse’s gallop elucidated by Muybridge’s series of cameras, and later smoke, moving water, and the collapsing of concrete and brick. Moments trapped and relegated to the

memory of witnesses now bore into the future via the light captured between strips of celluloid.

The camera could harness this river, turn it into an objective resource, a space to be used, rather than the tumultuous and ever-changing face of a person.

“Figured you’d have a look at the old Bow?” I turn to face the cowboy. “Funny that, I had the same idea.” What’s he playing at? Did he follow me?

“Uh, Sam, wasn’t it? I don’t know what you want or why you’re following me, but I just want to say that I don’t want to buy anything or come to your rodeo, all right?”

That he met with a chuckle. “I don’t want to sell you nothing, friend. I just figured if you were out for a stroll, I might join you. See, I have some need of a moviegoer such as yourself. Seeing that you’re not riding for anyone else at present, I might ask you to ride for me.”

“Are you offering me a job?”

“A partnership, you might call it. I need someone to help craft my story, and I can find no better way than those stories in the movies. Especially the great old Westerns. Cowboys and Indians.”

“Oh no, sorry, wrong guy. I don’t make films, I just watch them.”

“Exactly, so you’ve seen the ones I want.”

“You want films? Go to a theatre, see the classics, you don’t need me.”

“It’s more complicated than that. I’ve had, well, trouble capturing my own story. It’s time for another set of eyes. It’s simpler if I hop off someone else’s story. *You* could give me one. Anyhow, they don’t make movies much here in Cowtown.” He looks at the river a moment, considering. “At least, not yet they don’t.”

“I see. So, you’ve probably seen a fair number of westerns I take it.”

“You’re correct. I’m a child of the western.”

“So, what do you want from me?”

“Only your attention. I want to direct your attention towards where I might point it.

Then you can write your little reviews and get nice folks to read them.”

“I don’t really know where you’re thinking I’ll publish anything. I lost my position, remember? I’d best be looking for jobs rather than taking weird quests from random cowboys. No offense.”

“What if I paid you triple what the *Crier* gave you for a review?”

I tense up at the word ‘triple.’

“Here, Heath, take a look at these photos and tell me what you think.” Sam holds out a wad of photos. I take the pile; some are ancient, going back to maybe 80 years. Black and white records of a then-barren Calgary. Well, that’s not true. I can see fields and the grasses; some deer traipse around in the back; the river; a tent village marks the settling Europeans. Hardly barren, only missing concrete and the sandstone to come.

“What are these?” I ask the cowboy.

“Just some photos that I took.”

“You took these?”

He chuckles that warm almost soothing laugh. “Not in the way you’re thinking. They’re from the Glenbow.”

“Great, okay, so you’re giving me stolen photos from a city institution.”

“I’ve been a patron of the Glenbow long enough, they let me take liberties with their collections.”

I look at the photos. They capture the city from its origin to as recent as last year. The metropolis grows throughout, the skyline grows higher, the Calgary Tower erects itself in the midst of the sandstone center.

“Okay, what am I supposed to do with these?”

“Write a review,” he says, a smile underneath his mustache.

“Of what? This isn’t a film, and there’s no story here.”

“Sure there is. Make one. I feel connected, having been here my whole life. There’s plenty of stories here. Mine included. Is it so much different to review a story told through still pictures?”

“I mean, I’ll give it a try. But I want the money up front.”

That smile never leaves that mustache alone, seems to relax on his upper lip, always propped up by the grin. “You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Lindsay, but for you it’s worth it.” With that, he pulls from his back pocket a healthy stack of bills which he promptly holds out to me.

I look at him again, trying to catch behind his eyes. I only see brown irises nestled in a bed of crow’s-feet. “All right, I’ll write your review,” I take the cash. “Where should I bring it once it’s done? Do you want to meet?”

“Of course, friend. How about the King Edward? We can meet just outside and then celebrate with a drink. Meet me there tomorrow night, and we’ll discuss our new partnership.”

I nod. Looking at the photos, I wonder about whether or not someone could rig a camera to watch the city, with the film flying through the aperture for years and years, capturing the skyline’s growth and decline. The way the city breathes, expanding upward

into the sky with new blocks of brick and drywall, and lath and plaster falling to the ground as the condemned constructs meet the earth.

“Sam, why do you even want this?” I ask, glancing back at him from the photos. The Bow River continues to rush. A breeze carries cold drops of water from the surface of the river into the air. Cars whiz past me, standing alone on the Louise Bridge.

~

A postcard. The new Saddledome proudly cradles the skyline of downtown in its seat. Two white bears with matching white cowboy hats, Hidy and Howdy, wave hello in the bottom corners. On the back, a hasty scrawl.

“Hi mom. Sorry I couldn’t tell you where I am. Just know that I’m ok. I decided to take a break for a while. After all, I look better in print anyway. That might be why I miss my old job. Did the *Crier* give up the critic’s column completely? I really hope you’re doing well. I’ll come home soon—I promise. I’m in a new place. It’s a dream. Reminds me of Calgary. Love you

--Heath”

~

INT. 1981. ANDREW’S APARTMENT BUILDING – DAY.

The hall lights up with the sound of my knuckles hitting our door. Nicotine stains line the tops of the walls, the smell of ammonia wafts from the sterilized and stained carpet. Footsteps, and the chain slides on the other side of the door. Andrew opens his apartment, bags under his eyes.

“Howdy,” I say, with a small wave.

“Howdy back,” says Andrew, gesturing me ‘come in.’



The apartment remains as I left it yesterday. Andrew's clothes scatter, mostly socks at the edges of the room, tossed off after collapsing on the couch, perhaps. But he's done all his dishes and the kitchen the size of a closet shines immaculate. A bag sits near the arm of the couch—containing a multitude of lenses with all sorts of focal lengths. A glimmer of light shines off the round edge of his camera's solitary eye.

"How come you always find your way into my apartment and I haven't seen yours yet?" Andrew asks.

"You wouldn't like it. Just a crummy little place. Heating's bad. How's work?" I reply.

"I'm going to snap sometime if these oil assholes don't get off my back. I mean, they're nice to the reporters, but as soon as I try to get their photo, all that cheer disappears, and they act like I'm trying to steal their soul."

"Are you still covering those guys? Their endless rage over Trudeau is lucrative for you guys, huh."

"I guess so, but they could treat their photographers nicer. But everyone's mad at the guy. I don't know about you, but I can't barely talk about the wind without someone blaming Ottawa if a chinook happens to be a bit chillier. I hear 'the goddamn east is killing us' from the oil barons at work in the morning, and when I'm trying to relax later, the same lines come out of my folks. They just loop on repeat and I get the feeling it won't stop until the recession finally stops. Anyways, ranting, sorry. I'm also sorry again to hear about the job, Heath. What happened?"

“Technically speaking, I can’t remember. The run in with Mr. Booze that day made sure of that. But, hey, I figured it all out, don’t worry. A weird cowboy asked me to do a review for him, so there you have it. I have a sort of job again.”

“A cowboy?”

“I don’t really know what else to call the guy. He dresses in buckaroo duds and didn’t tell me anything about his life except that his ‘future was intertwined with Calgary’s future.’”

“Freaky. Let me know if you want me to come along next time, I’d love to do a portrait.”

“Sure thing, boss. Look at these photos with me. It’s the city from the beginning.”

Andrew and I scour the photos for details. The details which disappear from the city and those we didn’t realize were so old. No credits scrawled on the backs. Blank and anonymous. The photos all taken from odd angles which might have been possible, except for the height of Nose Hill, which lent a bird’s eye view of the young buildings. A fire passed through the city in those early days, memorialized by the new fireproof Paskapoo sandstone downtown, a tan-shade of tombstone. The pictures preserve an essence of the past the city forgot. But the composition in one of those early photos, the city in the middle of the frame, a lone tree in the foreground, citizens wandering in Victorian clothing and work shirts staring into the camera, squinting for the sun in their eyes; a photo like this is beautiful. In an otherworldly way. In the sense that the photo shines with a light from an impossible source. It seems either backlit or projected, the same way a theatre goer perceives the silver screen. A projection. A small wooden building features in the earliest of the photos. Where would it be? The city is unrecognizable. A road and a line of white tents,

no city. It could be the first photo taken of a built log residence in the town under Fort Calgary. A man, face shaded by his hat, stands in the doorway, framed by the lintel and the black abyss of the shack's interior. Canvas tents line up beside the building to the left, and a dog looks-off camera on the right side of the house. The man's arms hang at his side.

"Hold on, let me look closer at that one, Heath," says Andrew. He focusses on the photo of the man close up. "This one's a character. Jesus, I don't know about you, Heath, it gives me the heebie jeebies. It's like that guy is staring at us."

"He looks like John Wayne at the end of *The Searchers*," I say. Some poor old relic of a time past. There's a longing in his stance, like he came looking for something and now realizes that it is long lost, irretrievable.

Andrew continues looking at the picture, and wanders into the kitchen. I slip a sheaf of paper onto the coffee table and begin to scribble my judgements.

~

Welcome | *Bienvenue*

Calgary

be part of the energy™

~

EXT. 1981. OUTSIDE THE KING EDWARD HOTEL – NIGHT.

The King Edward waits for night to fall. The gas-filled tubes sleep, perhaps dreaming of illuminating nights of lovers or incoming crowds of hockey jersey-clad celebrators.

I spend all my spare time in bars. Drinking. Where do I even get this thirst. I swear this is my last time. I'll wander parks, visit esoteric shops and antique stores. I'll go see those places and reconstruct this city in my mind. Since I arrived, how can I even say that

I've lived in the city? I can't remember quite when that was. The flux of the sprawl, the spirit of unfixed elements, as if the periodic table here moved according to the will of some mogul or board of directors. All the while the shop owners and artists and reporters trying to make sense of the city's bounds are lost, wandering in the untampered agendas of so many conflicting interests.

"Howdy there," says the voice of Sam to my right. He's sincere when he says that, I can tell.

"Sam, hello," I reply. "I have a beautiful little slip of paper here for you. And your pictures back."

"Perfect. Really good work there, friend."

~

EXT. 1981. OUTSIDE THE KING EDWARD HOTEL – NIGHT.

"Heath, I want you to write a film—maybe direct it?"

"What?" I ask. Like a lasso, I notice, the bolo tie and the way it hangs lank around his neck—like the header before the steer, waiting for the gate to open and the chase to begin.

"I want you to write a film. I need a script. See, the issue with my fingers is they can't get the vision I need out. I'm close to succumbing to a sickness, Heath. I'm sicker than a circling vulture above a starving calf. I want you to write me a film. Make it about me. Yes, I know that sounds crass, but I think a man talking about himself is just about the best way to waste time. I would be running round and round a corral until I was broke."

"But, you did pick me up in a bar. You know there's folks in Hollywood you could talk to. All with talent and, ahem, skill, for making you whatever you wanted to be."

“Yeah, but what would be real about it? Those guys are liars. Dogs. They’re best directed toward a hundred head a’ cattle. Guide ‘em into a pen. I don’t need that.”

“It doesn’t sound great when you say it...like, that. Most people, me included, don’t really appreciate when you call them cattle.”

Sam hangs his head and throws up his hands, mock surrendering. “Forgive the way I talk—wasn’t really raised to paint my words and so I just talk with the words I got. Will you do this, Heath?”

“I’m a critic. I don’t write scripts.”

“Oh. Well, you could have fooled me.”

“Excuse me?” Always off guard with this guy.

“I’ve read your column, friend. You’re a screenwriter through and through. Those reviews of yours are chock full of directions.”

“Those are *reviews*. I’m helping readers think about the movies we watch. Are you kidding?”

“Sure, but that carries a good deal of weight, to think.”

“Any thought?”

“Thinking is a burden, friend. I should know. You should know. It ain’t easy. It ain’t cheap. It comes with effort and directed focus. Am I wrong? That’s why you help. You’re lightening the load for readers—giving them direction.”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, Heath. I realize you’re in a pond of denial right about now, but all right, it’s just fine.” He talks in a smooth wheat way, speaks like the surface of grain in a silo,

pouring into an auger. “I can make it a good deal for you. How about I get you your job back at the *Crier*?”

“You can’t possibly do that.”

“I know some of the folk up top there. I think they made a mistake. You might agree. But I’ll have a word with the fellas and get you a fair deal. What say you, friend?”

The denim wreathed cuff followed his hand reaching to take my hand.

I can’t imagine another way for this to play out. Like a script was in my hands and head already, I shake the cowboy’s hand.

~

INT. 1981. ANDREW’S APARTMENT – NIGHT.

“Heath! How’d it go?” Andrew greets me as he lays out each of his camera lenses.

A bottle of cleaning solution and paper towel sit idle next to him.

“You have cameras, right? I need to use one. I’m making a film, Andrew.”

After blinking, Andrew shakes his head, and opens his mouth. “Heath, Jesus. What! Fuck! Heath! Okay! You’re making a movie!”

“A film, Andrew.”

“Yeah, yeah, critic belt, got it.”

“It’ll be about a cowboy. He’ll be treading the streets of Calgary looking for his horse, which he lost after an ambush from the NWMP—yes Andrew, it’s a period picture. The cowboy will look around this fresh city overlooked by a fort palisade and notice a woman leading her horse over to the Bow River.

“Howdy, he’ll say. Did they say howdy like that back then? Who cares. They do from where I’m standing. Howdy, she’ll say back, though she won’t look up from the task at

hand. The Cowboy looks at her saddle and realizes that she's from one of the ranches on the outskirts of Calgary.

"Can I give you a hand? He'll say to her. Uh, no, she'll say. Fine, fine darlin', he'll say. Who are you again? She'll ask, looking up. Her eyes will widen for a moment before a crack comes from her throat and she'll laugh at him.

"What's that for? He'll ask, and she'll say, I don't know who you are, but I get some idea, and the idea makes me chuckle. She'll continue: you're a filthy ranch wannabe, you're out here in the harsh wilderness of Rupert's Land looking to make a legend out of yourself, aren't you? You might've grown up reading penny dreadfuls after your Latin tutor went home to his meager spread and you ate a large expensive dinner that got cold. Mister I bet you came out here with something to prove to someone and at least the most foolish story I've ever heard.

"Sorry ma'am, the cowboy will toss out, defeated. Thank you darlin', she'll mock. You probably never had your clothes soaking with sweat, you probably never lost a fingernail on the job, you've probably never looked from outside a fence your whole life, you probably don't know how to fence. I see you, sir. I know something about you, and I would appreciate it if you let me water my horse and let me get back to *my* ranch—we don't have any *dudes* in coweduds—don't try to court a person when she's busy and in the middle of looking to sell off some 50 head. Good day.

"Wait, Andrew, this part's good. Don't go.

"And in that time the cowboy will not quite be able to see, and he will rub his eyes and then he'll tip his hat to the woman and set off again. In that time too, he'll remember that he didn't lose his horse in a gunfight, but that he tried to tie up the animal and when he

thought he'd done it, the horse only had to jerk once for the jumbled halter to come loose and fall. He remembered that he'd simply stood confused and watched the horse go.

*“Os opprime! Pro dolor!”* The horse walked away, entirely uninterested. He watched it tread casual. He remembered, after she said it—though it was a gunfight with himself—just that after she said all of that, it happened that he couldn't tie knots for all the conjugations in Rome. And so, he'll continue the search for his ride since he doesn't want get home before too late, and then he will see his horse—under the buttocks and chaps of another.

“Wait, let me write this down,” I say, grabbing Andrew's typewriter.

GRANARY OWNER

This yours?

COWBOY

Yes.

GRANARY OWNER

Found 'em wandering my granary and started quick on the oats.

COWBOY

Sorry

GRANARY OWNER

Sorry yourself mister, you owe me seventeen dollars.

The cowboy thinks damn if only it was just a gunfight. But no, no riding off into the luminous arch with a smoking barrel. He shakes his head, remembering he's never even fired a gun.

GRANARY OWNER

Until then, until I get my seventeen dollars, the horse stays with me.



COWBOY

Where am I supposed to find seventeen dollars?

GRANARY OWNER

The bank? With duds like those I bet you're a fat cat. I bet you're loaded with cash, if not at the bank, in a chest somewhere in town. You're probably a businessman out here to find advantages in the lack of competition and potential capital you could exploit from your ventures. Heck—you've probably got a badge from the NWMP letting you do business, like me. Go get me seventeen dollars.

And the moment the granary owner's words leave his lips, the cowboy remembers that he's got a safe with one hundred dollars in it buried on the outskirts of town, but he doesn't want to walk that far, and he could go up to the fort and ask the inspector for seventeen dollars. Maybe the two of them could have a coffee and resume their discussion of potential routes to trade with Montana men.

“Wait, wait Andrew. I promise this part's good, just wait. Just imagine it on the big screen. It would be killer!”

“Very well, the cowboy will say to the granary owner, and he will tip his hat and set off towards the captain's quarters. He will check his pocket watch with the exquisite silver chain. A gift from the Hudson's Bay Company after he brokered a favourable deal for them. The fort will be there, standing guard over the wild roses and crocuses.

“The cowboy will arrive. The Inspector will probably be in the midst of lecturing an officer, whose eyes will glaze and roll in his antipathy and exasperation.

“Inspector, the cowboy will say, do you have a minute? The Inspector will shoot his head in the cowboy’s direction.

“In a minute, the Inspector will spit.

“In a minute, the cowboy and the Inspector will nurse cups of coffee, dregs floating in their reflections. What’s your business, *shade*, the Inspector will ask. I came for 17 dollars, Inspector. Scoffing, the Inspector will say, Isn’t that lovely? I would love 17 dollars myself, hell, I have a pen, why not make some money?

“Very funny, friend—the cowboy will say.

“Listen here *vaquero*, I don’t owe you or any of you shades anything—you think I enjoy having to deal with your antics day in, day out? You’re all vampires, bloodsuckers. I don’t know if Ottawa sent you to mess with my operations, but I’m trying to make a humble, respectable city here.

“You named it after yourself, sir—the cowboy will point out. Then the Inspector will say Brisebois is a sign of my respect for this land. I wouldn’t give my name to just any plot of dirt. This is a ripe place to receive my blessing, and the Lord’s, of course. People like you and Macleod are just envious of my accomplishments. Like I said, bloodsuckers, flesh eaters, you’re all so full of greed, selfish, that’s what you are. Don’t you know what I give to this frontier? I fought in a war, damnit. I don’t think any of you have faced the cruelty I have. You all think you can depend on the government for your house and food and clothes without paying your fair share.

“Don’t I recall you taking the only iron stove, inspector? When it snowed and showing no signs of letting up? You snuggled up cozy and left your men out there in the devil’s blizzard.

“There’s no devils out here except you, Shade. and I promise you that.

“Didn’t you also take the only jacket of bison belt?

“You keep out of it, shade, phantom flesh-eater, you know, the men talk about you.

You might think I’m the only one on to you but the citizens of humble and wise Brisebois are perceptive. They won’t put up with you. You think they enjoy having ghosts walking around in broad daylight?

“I actually have a gift, shade. The Inspector will pull out a box with a round fixture of glass. It’s a device that fixes the world. It’ll fix you too. What does it do? It captures whatever it sees in front of it on silver. You won’t be able to slip between lives anymore – I’ll make sure you stay the same flesh-eater you secretly always were. And you won’t escape. Care to see?

“The cowboy doesn’t want to see, but moving is not an option, he is of course at the mercy of Inspector Brisebois’ eye. The inspector will raise the box to his face and open a compartment in the back. A flood of light will pour into the plate in his back.

“Flesh eater, bloody piss drinker, fingernail swallower, foot boiler, neck fryer, ice sucker, I got you. I have you. Here on this feat of man’s reason. And you know, the French have perfected one that does this continuously, taking images one after another as fast as the train’s engine – and once we have that, you’re finished, you’ll never get this photograph, the portrait of your true self, your flesh, cannibal. That French camera has tracks and tracks of some petroleum compound recording the light entering that there eye of the camera. I don’t think you will be able to withstand it. So, run. Run, shade. I got you. Forever. You’re done, over, fixed.

“And the cowboy will get to his feet, and although he stumbles, Brisebois will have gone. The office dark. Cold. Oven out, the faint trace of a fire going to sleep in the center. Only a feeling will remain in the Cowboy’s stomach. A prickly sensation on his tongue. A burning at the onset of teeth and gums.

“What are they thinking? They’re cursed thoughts. That cursed camera. What of cinema? He’ll taste gun powder popping burning his gums and he’ll picture Brisebois’ supple arm, the ranch boss by the river’s fingers, and his horse’s flank. He’ll feel the sweet blood running down his gullet, dripping grease from his chin.

“This can’t be it, this can’t be the end. He will hunger for nothing but the meat of his neighbors. He’ll need to stop—before too long, his place will be lost in the city. They will not forgive such a creature. Don’t they see? Inspector Brisebois is at least as hungry. Would they forgive him? They know he is what they call a shade, but the minute he sates his desire the city will use it as their chance to sate themselves. A town of Donner dinner parties.

“The Inspector will get what he wanted. The photo is something the Inspector can show. He’ll never be new, he’ll never be fresh, never a novel person. Just a seen face, a locked box with nothing inside.

“His arms attached to his torso will lose all feeling – the cowboy disappearing – the burning will supersede his palimpsest memory: the gunfight, the Hudson’s Bay Company, the dogs of the NWMP; the “flesh-eater” remains. The only character under the Cowboy’s skin. In a blind craze of fiery desire – a lamp. Asleep. The filament quiet. The cowboy will smash the glass, throwing it against the wall and twisting the filament holder off and knocking the oil to the back of his throat. A gasp of air casting mist into the cold air, he will arch his back and bring the flammable liquid to his lips, and it will burn a hole in his throat,

spreading to his shoulders his elbows. He'll guzzle. He'll cough. His chin wet with the petroleum.

“The cowboy will straighten up, wipe his hands on a buffalo coat hanging on the door, which he'll swing open. He will turn and pick up his hat, push the bands and fold it out, the hat resembling its original shape a little more. He'll see the frame of the door, the moon lighting the Fort's courtyard brighter than the office interior walls, a black frame for a blue photo – glance of red and yellow in the united lamp spackling the door. The cowboy will tentatively step into the image. The courtyard cold in the spring night. He'll glance around. Where to go next? Where will take him? The hunger. He will knock on the living quarters of the NWMP.

“Oh. Goodnight, Andrew. Too loud? Sorry.”

~

...Decades after the release of *A Thirst for Oil*, the screenwriter remains missing. Close friends and family report not having seen him since right before production began on Luke XXX's infamously non-violent film. The director stays busy, though none of his films reached such box office heights as *A Thirst for Oil*. Friend of Lindsay, photographer Andrew Adams, had only to add that the last night he saw Lindsay, he was deep in the work of the script.

~

INT. 1981. ANDREW'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

Heath has given up the dingy typewriter for a quiet, lined notepad and pen. The pages scatter the floor, mingling with Sam's historical photographs. He writes:

The cowboy sits atop a bronc. The animal blowing great bellows of steam from its nostrils. A crowd cheering without sound. The cowboy steadies, breathing in precise intervals, grasping the rope around the bronc's neck whose eyes dart and roll, the white stained pink around the edges, shot, burning. The rider, the cowboy can smell blood, fast chugging round the arterial tracks. He wipes sweat from his eyes and saliva from the corners of his mouth. He waits for the moment the gate opens, silent horn blowing.

The cowboy throws up his free arm and the brown takes off, rocketing into the air. Shooting from the moist earth and cutting the air with sharp kicks. The wall of the auditorium lit up with the cowboy on top of the jerking and bucking creature. You can't see his face for the cowboy hat's shade. The audience gasps. The audience grabs their seats. The cuts.

The horse kicks, the screen cuts. Low shot. High shot. Legs shooting. Cowboy's hand whipping. His body rocking. Flail the top of the spine. The rider topples, dirt spewed from his landing. The horse sleeps away, gallops to the end of the arena chased by a pair of rodeo clowns

"What is that really you?" the theatre manager asks Sam.

"Yep. Well, partially." The cowboy leans on the door frame of the theater.

The piano player sounds a triumphant triptych as the cowboy waves to the silent watchers, himself soundless. He mouths something. Cut. A black field with white letters: Thank you! Yeehaw!"

"Yeah, OK, that's definitely not you."

Sam nods. The film cuts back to him, the cowboy, Sam. Smiling. The wide circle reveals itself wrapped around the edges of the shrinking frame, until it darkens more and

more, closing in on the Cowboy's face finally and circling his eye before it goes out like a cigarette.”

*The End* shines in white ornate lettering.

Heath leans back in the wooden kitchen chair, the rounded legs creaking in their worn fittings. The coffee is cold. He's looks out the window. I'll have to give this to him today. Down dawn begins. The purple horizon a great violet bar above the city. Cut with jagged edge skyline.

The end. What an interesting invention that was. A silly invention marking the end only if you weren't a human. You would need to be an event, or some building, but even then, the atoms – the universe has a quaint way of persisting even after any perceivable physical trace is long gone.

~

The skyline of Calgary, jagged. Cuts the land from the heavens. Nothing hides behind the Fairmont Palliser. A bystander walking past might miss that.

~

EXT. 1981. 9<sup>TH</sup> AVE – DAY.

I arrive at the base of the Calgary Tower, glitized up in a suit I stole from Andrew. I ride the stretching concrete tube. What city is complete without a tower? Obelisks in reference to humanity's mastery over gravity? Or bravado? A cowboy waits for me at the top. The restaurant.

I find him gazing far into the outskirts of Calgary, a field stretching forever. A coffee mug in front of him, along with an empty plate set with more utensils than I know what to do with.

“Howdy.” I call. He sees the gathering of papers first. Close-up on his eyes. His haybale eyes point down, and switch back up, a crinkle like leather.

“Well, let’s have a look, Heath my friend.”

Medium shot: I keep my eyes on Sam as he reaches out, and I do as well.

Close-up, the papers moving hands. Cut / my eyes still on Sam. Cut / Sam’s eyes. Cut / a switch again to a medium shot: the table center frame, as Sam opens sheets of paper. I pull out a chair, the coffee breathing steam in the center of the frame, Sam on the right and I’m on the left. Cut / I sit and rest my fists on the table. The waiter says, would you like a drink to get you started? Sam says, get this man something strong. I say, give me a coffee as well. Cut / Sam reads, but glances up for a moment and smirks. Cut / back to me, a close-up. We hear the cowboy rustle pages. Cut / a medium shot of me now, slowly zooming in. Cut / the coffee bubbles float in the center of the frame, a circled black abyss, bubbles in the periphery. Cut / my same zooming shot again, I am staring at the coffee. Cut / the coffee, the small bubble domes sometimes pop, shifting the configuration, making even smaller settlements. Cut / my face and shoulders. Cut / the coffee, a close-up, a sheen of iridescence swirls on the black surface of the circle, the shot pulls closer to the coffee at the same speed as the shot zooming in on my blank expression, the corral of molasses liquid first starting small, growing as the camera pulls closer, a widening hole in the middle of the frame. Cut / my expression, we hear Sam turning a page, close-up, closer. Cut / close-up, the coffee, water, abyssal circle, the cowboy takes his coffee black, with rainbow spills. Cut / my face. Cut / the coffee, the glistening coat of color swirling, seeping into the black field. Cut / my eye. Cut / a pond polluted fills the frame, the coffee cup unseen, only its contents. Cut / my pupil.



“Alrighty,” Sam’s voice ropes off the silence of the coffee with loud colors.

“And?” I say, looking up.

“I would damn near say you did a perfect job, Heath.” His smile cradles the mustache, which looks like a bird midflight.

“It’s not very good, you know. The plot is beyond contrived, the character is flat and inconsistent, the setting doesn’t stay still. It’s at best a pre-pre-draft. Sam, it’s terrible. I of all people *know*.”

“Heath the critic knows. And you, the filmmaker, know that it doesn’t quite matter that it’s bad to a sparkly note-taker, but it matters that it works.” Sam says. Smiling. He takes a sip from his coffee. “Mmm! Finally.” Sam glances and sees a waiter walking over.

“Sam, I don’t think you can make a film from this.”

“Don’t you worry, friend. I’m honestly used to this. Each one of you misunderstands. See, I am a rancher, I am on the rodeo circuit, but I’m also a businessman, I found a good deal of petroleum an age ago, and it freed me to develop all I needed and wanted and so, this is business, I want to buy your product. I scout for reserves and you’re one such reserve, prime, ripe, ready.”

“Reserve of what?”

The cowpoke smiles and the waiter takes the empty plate, replacing it with a full one. A steak medium rare with a parsley garnish, peppered with a choice collection of imported herbs. Sam picks up his fork and knife, sawing a chunk and taking up a pink pool inside the singed crust. The cowboy forks the meat and chews, while I watch.

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