

Our Bodies of Water

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Abstract

Our Bodies of Water

Emily Crompton

Our Bodies of Water grapples with the double vision of Atlantic Canada: in one hand, the rich economic and cultural history of the easternmost provinces and, in the other, the rampant rural poverty. The poems use the histories of the region's settlers—the English, Scots, Irish, and Acadians—to understand how the provinces' prosperity has decayed over the last century. Modernity's impact on the province is addressed by topics such as the collapse of viable industry, the impact of global warming on coastal communities, and the youth population migration towards Central and Western Canada, colloquially "goin' down the road".

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	v
Our Bodies of Water	1
Treitz Haus	2
On Seeing Grand Pré at Low Tide	3
To Ross Island's Fish Fluke Point, by the Thoroughfare Road	4
Crowe Brook	9
The Broken Bridge	10
Kiack	11
An Undergraduate Divorce	12
Iphigenia	13
Old Dog	14
Exeunt	15
You, Icarus	16
City-Walk	17
The Reel	18
Bodies of Water	19
Medusa	21
The Haunting of Ester Cox	22
A Conversation with my Grandmother	23
A Study	24
New Zoning	25
Supper in St. John's	26
The Cave	27
Elegy on a Future Death	28
The Witching Stick	29
Calico	30
The Revolution	31
Ode to an Ode to Tomatoes	32
Petitcodiac River	34
Mary	35
A Literary Life	36
Tantramar again, again, again	39
Epilogue	40
Notes	41

Our Bodies of Water

Treitz Haus

Jacob Treitz and his sons
turning oblong stones over in their hands,
into place, into a foundation,
building the puzzle-house.
The hewn beams interlock,
the wrought nail-fingers hold,
palm against palm, a home.

They placed the door-eyes looking
out to the Petitcodiac river,
remembering the boat brought them there,
imagining the boats to come.
In the century since,
while the house sat looking out towards the ocean,
a whole city grew up at their back door.

On Seeing Grand Pré at Low Tide

after Bliss Carman

As we come around the bend,
my mother says this is “the quintessential
coming-home view”,
with the quilted valley laid out
and the mountain rising up like a bowl on the far side.

She smiles at the sight and,
to show that I am making an effort,
I edge forward in my seat and squint,
until I can almost see something like home
leaning out at me from the distance.

To Ross Island's Fish Fluke Point, by the Thoroughfare Road

i.

I pass among the opened palms of sea
scallop shells heaped by the wharf, the white
hearts catching the sun, before my feet
crush the shell back into the sand, like
some fallen leaves. The Thoroughfare Road:
a strip of mud through the seaweed and rock
leading down to the five-foot ribbon
of water, and up the far side.

I walk

to the bank, where I tie my boots into
a yoke, stuffing in my wool socks and cross,
my toes driving a stake in the sand, finding
footholds in the folds and creases of rocks,
across the slip of ocean that keeps Ross
island barely an island at low tide.

ii.

And that seaweed, spread on the stones of
the Thoroughfare road: the plum laver sheets
laid out on the sand, the bladder wrack's rough
knuckles knotted into a forest for crabs,
the shining sea lettuce lace wrinkled in
to lime clumps, the dulse hanging from holdfasts
in ropes off the rocks, each oxblood strand slick
with salt water—the latest food fad
for suburban moms and health food stores,
forgot the Passamaquoddy, who paddled
to the island, pressed the bared ocean floor
with their foot prints, gathered the damp *talsol*
from the bedrock, and laid it out to dry
on the sun-steeped shore.

iii.

It's a little short of one thousand steps
to Chalk Cove. The road—two dusty scores pressed
in grass—made a maze with puddles, webbed
with bluets, cuts through the wood, a snarled nest
of branches. Flies: black flies, horse flies, deer flies,
now sheltered from the coastal winds, surround
me, bite me, hound me like summer snow. I
move on, slow, until the incessant sound
of screaming flies is broken.

A white crown
of rocks marks the cove. The wild flowers fade
to stone to stranded fishing boats; each hull
half-rotted, holes showing through to ribs, each name
sun-sanded from the bow. The keel, a gull's
home: three eggs laid on the sheltered ground.

iv.

At Rockweed Pond, I break to eat by fists
of coiled ferns. This place is the soft skull
of the island: the marsh held by twisted
roots of grass against the salt ebb and flow
which, as I sit, fill the pass with ocean;
it will be four hours until I can cross
again. The shallow stream, a dream broken
by high tide, the waist-high waves even now strong
enough to rip me from my feet.

Each year

a local or tourist strands themselves
in Fundy Bay or, worse, stands too near
as the seventh wave—the strongest wave—breaks
and sweeps them off the rocks, carries them clear
away from the island, out to the sea.

v.

This pile of sticks used to be a lighthouse,
used to be a pile of sticks. Even when
it was still standing, like those Chalk Cove boats,
I could see through the other side. Back then
there was no light, except the sun that shone
straight through the lattice work of hanging boards
and missing shingles, now scattered along
the base like molted scales.

But Grand Harbour
still gleams behind the wreck, as it has lapped
in spite of the empty cod trawlers, like it
sparkled despite the empty weirs, or laughed
against the shore even as the once full
wharves dwindled to a couple dories—will
still roll when all of us have left.

Crowe Brook

Before the man with the fishing rod came,
the Fynch kids made jokes about fishing.
They pushed over dead trees to build bridges
over the strip of water they called Crowe Brook.
In summer, with their scuffed knees sinking into moss,
they palmed handfuls of gritty clay onto rock-and-twig dams,
and set their paper boats spinning onto new lakes.

On the day that the man with the close-cropped hair
cast, and floated his fly on the seam of the water,
the three of them watched
and thought him foolish for fishing in such shallow water.
He told them that the brook was called Mull Creek;
and, as they watched him slide the feathered fly
from the lip of an eight-inch trout,
they wondered about the fish
who had lived beneath their bare feet
watching as every mud empire rose
and fell.

The Broken Bridge

I've never been here at high tide before.
They say, if you do jump in, your body
gets pulled out, right out, to the door
of the river, past the estuary,
into the Bay of Fundy. When the tide
turns, your body comes back, right back up to
the Tantramar. The push and shove means you'll die
pre' quick, but it'll take a week to find you.

And, since we're giving the honest-to-god
definition of ambivalence, I
just wanted you to know that it's not will
but inertia keeping me on this ledge,
and, if, by chance, I were set in the sky,
I wouldn't scream—I'd stay perfectly still.

Kiack

“My mother used to eat this every Sunday on toast,”
my grandmother says, palming the smoked-stiff fish.

She works the paring knife along
the edge of the neck where
she cut the head just a moment earlier.
It sits now, gaping up at us
with misty sunken eyes,
the gills distended where
the fisherman threaded the rod
through the bloody gills.

At the lip of skin,
her swollen knuckles working,
she finds the corner and pulls,
turns the skin away from flesh—
the mottled scales settle on the table.
She opens the body like a book,
and scrapes the crumbs of dried innards out
and frees the spine with surgeon precision.

A food instead of fish now,
she shaves a sliver of the dark flesh,
gives it to me saying:
“Your mother never liked it
but try it anyway.”
Against my tongue,
it’s sweet with salt.

An Undergraduate Divorce

Anyway, he got the cat—
the one with the mirror fur,
all the markings reflected back onto themselves.

When I picked him up for the last time
I could feel the scar
Where they had sliced him open
A \$1800 butcher-seamstress combo.

I remember in the vet room
they had his and her kleenex boxes,
and how, when they brought him out in a cone,
he nearly skittered off the table,
and, when we went to pick him up,
the vet accusingly held up a plastic baggy
with a chewed-off hiking boot lace,
as if we had fed it to him.

I left the cat, the one with the back like a Rorschach test.
In my mind, when I turn him into the light,
I can see my own failure.

Iphigenia

Absolve me that I bore one thousand ships
upon my breathe. They stole my lungs to fill
their sails and shaped their hulls with adam-ribs;
unseamed my wrists and from my veins they built
their tangled maps. The way the moon hangs high
at midnight makes me think my only vice
was your thin voice—the strangest rhyme that I
misheard: a wife instead of sacrifice.

My blood is shed upon the beaten ground:
the dust is silent, still. My blood spills red
into the waves: no steed springs from the spray.
My blood is brushed on every door, around
each frame: the people rising from their beds
find every first born son is saved.

Old Dog

As I lace up my boots,
my old dog comes and rests his head on my knee.
He knows the routine for morning walks.

I touch his grey muzzle,
the velvet-soft spot of fur between his eyes,
and lift my suitcase through the door.

Exeunt

My grandfather dies on July 30th, 2016,
a month after he voted “leave” in the Brexit referendum.

At ninety-two, it wasn’t unexpected
but it seemed too convenient to be true.

I flew into Heathrow two days after, on August 1st.

The whole time I was there, my aunt talked about the “EU Rule 50”
and Nigel Farage, who is their family friend;

we argued almost everywhere,
except at the flint church, at the funeral itself.

It was not an open casket funeral
but I was allowed to look at him once at the funeral home.

Even through the sheer shift of cloth,
and with all of the low lighting and scented candles,
I could still see the skeleton wafting up through his skin.

You, Icarus

after Alden Nowlan's "I, Icarus"

I saw Icarus in the museum.

His wings poised as if about to stretch
and jump into the air.

The detail of each feather so fine
and every line of wax as if
Daedalus has just pressed it into shape.

And the hairless face,
contorted with sadness and rage—
his heavy bronze feet anchored by two steel rods
to a block of granite.

City-Walk

When I walk through the city,
I am ashamed to see that even
the trees can lay down roots
under the patchwork roadways.

That I have complained
about the starless sky,
swabbed with the casino lights
or the morning call of garbage truck,
while the trees turn their leaves
peaceably towards the sky,
waiting for the stream of sun
to reach down between skyscrapers.

The Reel

A man is playing a fiddle in Sherbrooke station,
a reel that rises and breaks through the hall,
enough force to stop her near the turnstile.

She could go and see the fiddler
and, after she had listened a bit
and he had noticed her,
they might talk about home.

She continues instead,
and when the metro comes from both sides
she hears a lost ocean.

Bodies of Water

From the 25th floor of the Sherbrooke St office,
I can finally see the Saint Lawrence River.

When I first came to Montreal,
I tried to get to the water.
By Hochelaga, the sidewalk ended with
“identification required”.

Along Ville Marie, it was fences.
In the Vieux Port,
where the water was right there,
a pier holds you up in the air—
the whole Island is a trick of
pretending not to be an island.

But up here, I can see it:
all the hulking cruisers and tankers,
and the buzzing motorboats,
and to the south-west,
the white-caps riming the Lachine rapids.
To the north-east,
all the way to the tip of the Island,
and beyond that, to Quebec City,
to the throat of the estuary
where the water of the Great Lakes
the Saguenay, Manicouagan, Outardes, Sainte-Anne-du-Nord, Montmorency, Saint Lawrence,
Ottawa, Grass, and other rivers,
meet, in the Gulf.
The Northumberland Strait
cleaves Prince Edward Island into the ocean

but it can be seen from the l'Aboiteau Beach
where my mother is walking;
along the Avalon Peninsula,
where the Gulf is just the Ocean,
my sister watches the Quidi Vidi brewers
chip an iceberg stranded in shallow water.

If I could go dip my hand in the water
I am sure that every molecule would pull tight
and whisper to the others:
this plasma is part of us too,
and signal all the way through the rivers
and the Gulf and the Ocean
and my mother and sister would know:

I am here

 and here

 and here

 and here

 and here

and here.

Medusa

I burrow my feet into the secret damp
beneath the burning sand

and, when even that becomes too hot,
I wade into the water. At low tide

I can walk one kilometer out, dipping into ditches
and swimming over crab-kept kelp fields,

to the sandbar and the next and the next,
until I am standing on the final slip of land.

I watch my oil-slick sunscreen float out
and out and out until I am cool at last.

The Haunting of Ester Cox

In a semi-circle around her bed,
her priest and her frightened parents watch as
Ester Cox swings her bloodied fists against
the wall until the grey paint flakes away
and her knuckles spit heavy blood on to
the shard of teacups she smashed last night that
made her parents call on the father.

“There!

You see it! A ghost!” her mother points to
the wall—ignores the blood and that girl’s
weeping—and the priest agrees: “A ghost.
Poor Ester—she’s such a quiet girl
but it’s most certainly a ghost you’ve got.”

A Conversation with my Grandmother

“David McKay passed away last week— he went to school with your mum at Acadia and his daughter went to school at Dalhousie with Benjamin (I met her at Ben’s graduation). It was an awful crash, up near Campbellton, not even a stone’s throw from the exit I used to take to visit Aunt Margie—that’s great Aunt Margie to you (do you remember her? She died when you were quite young so I’m not surprised). It was a real bad crash though, I heard, because of a moose that was licking salt right off the pave and I guess he swerved to avoid it and drove right into the ditch and into a pine tree; you’d think they’d have better guard rails (you’ve got to be careful when you drive back to Montreal; the roads are real dangerous). I’m going to the funeral with Evelyn Kemp (of the Annapolis Valley Kemps). Evelyn’s son James and David were good friends before James died of a heart attack and I know he (I mean David) went to the funeral and was really nice to her. It’s so awful, you know, having these young people pass away; just last week we were at Georgie’s funeral.”

A Study

You sit here, conch-curved, your cold feet folded
into the couch corner, sheets stacked and spread
across your table, the varnish eroded
with coffee stains. The hair on your head
wants cutting, and your face is a five-day
o'clock shadow, but you won't let her give
you a trim, cause they cut it the wrong way
last time: a small tragedy of living.

Last year, we sat here, quiet and calm,
cradled your mug into the crook of my palm,
and compared coffee, notes, gifted wool socks,
until we ran into silence. A lapse
maybe but your hair was shaved short and the map
of your skull told the still room all your thoughts.

New Zoning

It starts small:

new zoning for an out-of-bounds school,
face out toward the reservoir,
then a Kent, for easier foundation concrete
and siding for, the mansions set in *Baron Heights*,
their cubicle lawns walled with hedges
against the dairy farms—who fail,
slowly, and, as residents complain of
the fresh-turned manure in spring,
they sell their grazing plots and corn fields
to new developers.

On and on, the slow and steady east-coast dream:
strip malls from sea to shining sea.

Supper in St. John's

At Quidi Vidi,
we watch an iceberg glide in
to the mouth of the harbour.
Coming closer,
drinking the sound of the waves,
easing the ships under cloying arms,
it grounds—
but, unperturbed, slips up the street,
eats the row houses to muted colours,
creeps up to us, eager and careful at once,
until everywhere is in the iceberg:
the daffodils preserved,
the bowl-headed tulips are still,
in my hand, my fork
unclasping the fine petal of cod
turning to snow.

The Cave

As we go deeper into the lung,
the woman next to me wraps
her white cashmere scarf 'round her shoulders
but I, far from home,
press the cold handrail into my gut
and lean closer:

the dripping stalactites stretching
to touch the pancaked stalagmites.
In another section of the cave,
they have already met
to make a glistening column.

The summer heat from above
finds a way through the maze,
like feathered breath,
warm and alive.

I understand now:
my neighbor so loved
the cave it came to live in him
years after he'd left it.

Elegy on a Future Death

When you are dead
I will write you out.

I will tell your upright father
how you only drank black coffee.
I will tell your catholic mother
that you never had sex.

When you are dead,
I will remember you,
which is to say
I will set you cold and smooth
in a half-page poem

The Witching Stick

Magic—

the kind that even a desperate Christian will use
(besides chanting, miracles, and transubstantiation)—
to find water.

The stick on a stair,
that I take in my hands
will, perhaps, bring me to a sidewalk
and dip—
an impossible well,

or better:

waltz me through the streets
and home, through the doors,
to the mystic, relentless dripping
of my kitchen faucet.

Calico

A purred-rug, unravelled,
strung out on the ledge
in the echo of hydrogen combustion
that has travelled here to meet
the soft fingers mothering the fur
in the first morning light.

The Revolution

Max, we could do it: plant a pine tree in
our backyard, have it gesture to us over
the fence gilded with morning glories.

We could repaint the hopscotch courts and we
could leave our crusts of bread on our window
ledges. On Tuesday night, we could roll out

our little thunder to the quartier curb
(they are composting now) and in the summer
you'd only have to deadhead the roses.

Ode to an Ode to Tomatoes

“and, on the table, at the midpoint of summer, the tomato, star of earth, recurrent and fertile star, displays its convolutions, its canals, its remarkable amplitude and abundance”

Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to Tomatoes”

In Shediac,
on top of a small hill reclaimed from a swamp,
my father grows five kinds of tomatoes:
Scotia, Beefsteak, Nova,
Roma, and Sweet Million.
When I was a child,
we ate gazpacho, salsa, marinara.
and, when we were lazy,
we would eat them right off the vine
the way we might eat apples in fall.

During my summer working at a farm,
fenced in on three side by the Tantramar dykes,
I would spend forty minutes every other day
cutting off the suckers
and tying up the vines into green lattice work,
minding the purple carpet of basil below
and the flimsy ceiling above.
When I got tired, I’d sit inside,
and read about the tomatoes:
how our tomatoes were mostly indeterminate
but the ones from the store were determinate,
because they are easier to love and to grow.

In Montreal, I grow spicy rocket in my window box;
I harvest Red Russian kale from down the road
and soft arrows of lamb's quarters from the back alley,
but I stole my tomatoes from
the front-yard garden at the corner
of Berri and Cherrier.
I did it in the dark
and shoved the fruit into my jacket pocket.

One night, when I was walking home,
I went to steal some of the tomatoes
but the window, usually dark, was lit
and there were people inside,
so I went straight home, tomato-less.
And that night the first frost came
and stoles the tomatoes anyway.

When I think of what else I can tell you—
I could say that basil and tomatoes are companion plants,
that tomatoes are poisonous to dogs,
but I can't quite tell you the way that
the skin of a tomato gives under my teeth.

Petitcodiac River

When I was a child
my mother told me not to go down to the river
because, under the lattice of sun cracks,
the mud was heavy and would hold me,
and the river itself had strong currents
that would pull me down and drown me.

The only currents I knew
were the ones my father grew:
red and black currants for jelly and juice.

At the walking bridge
where the Humphrey Brook met the Petitcodiac
I would climb up on the rails and look out,
my eyes searching for the spindly hands
waving up at me from the wine-murky depths.

Mary

I had the world placed in my hips while sand
was heaped over my feet, my hair was thick
with weeds, left limp across my shoulder span—
I waited for some spirit; I think the trick
was: not to sleep until the Sun or man
came up or down, to pulse my blood out with
the surf, to wear just white, to know my hands
were meant to carry another's treasure.

Oh God, absolve me, that I wore the moon
like ugliness, that I did not make it
long past midnight, that I forgot that verse
that might have saved me—please, sing me soon
Isaiah, back into my bones, please knit
that legend: the one where I am the earth.

A Literary Life

For KR

Every pause, a question
in her voice,
that my school mates and I laughed at:
I arrived home late (?)
I had a good weekend (?)
I took the bus home (?)
I went to the mall (?)

At fourteen, rumour was that she had:
an eating disorder,
some family troubles,
a twenty-year-old boyfriend,
an abortion—
the same list of things for which
we laughed at her.

Every year, a suicide:
first a bipolar student,
then a young athlete,
then it was her turn.
Like for birthday parties,
the whole class turned up
to the parlour.

Before the bric-à-brac funeral arrangements
(the stuffed bear, the school photo, the white lilies),
the closed casket I stood on my tiptoes to see.
Her parents played sad pop music
and most of us cried.

For every death, a cuckoo
pushing the memory out
to the nest's edge—
Ted Hughes pushes Marianne Moore,
the school said it was a tragedy.

The morning after the funeral,
in the methodical gossiping
and high-rising terminals,
I thought I heard
each school girl chirping:
“survive survive”

or perhaps,
“alive alive”

Tantramar again, again, again

(after Douglas Lochhead and Charles G. D. Roberts)

Six months after they stop printing in the Maritimes

The Globe and Mail run the story: “Will Sackville’s dikes finally fall?”

This is only news to those in central Canada.

The last dozen barn roofs plucked by the wind,

the wrapped hay left out in the snow,

the CBC’s flagpoles dismantled, the air bereft of the signals.

A spring storm, the surf breaking over the dykes.

Knock knock of water on the front door,

the soft suck of mud at the heel of our boots,

the back garden furrowed and seeded with salt.

Epilogue

after Léonard Forest's "Prélude"

Sometimes I wonder if the time I'm walking
laid in front of me or behind.

The golden sandbar stretching like a cat
before nestling into the sea

reminds me that, although a rosary is a circle—
every bead is a new incantation—
angels or saints might get bored of listening

and phrases, like swinging doors,
can return empty.

Notes

“Treitz Haus” is modeled after Treitz Haus the oldest structure in Moncton sitting on its original foundations. It is located at the bend in the Petitcodiac River in Moncton at 10 Bendview Court. The House was built by Pennsylvania Dutch settler who came to the region following the expulsion of the Acadians from the area in 1778. The House is now owned and managed by the City of Moncton and is used as a museum and tourist information centre during the summer months.

“On Seeing Grand Pré at Low Tide” is written partially in response to Bliss Carmen’s “Low Tide at Grand Pré”, although the imagery specifically references the drive into Greenwich / Port Williams, Nova Scotia—located ~ 10km from Grand-Pré.

Ross Island is located off the coast of Grand Manan and can be accessed via a tidal throughway on foot or vehicle for ~2 hours at low tide. The island was originally a seasonal stop for the Passamaquoddy to fish and gather and seaweed. Later, Loyalists built homes on the Island but later abandoned them in favour of Grand Manan. The lighthouse itself—usually called the Grand Harbour Lighthouse as it faces out to Grand Harbour, Grand Manan—was built in 1879 and was kept by a keeper until 1963. The lighthouse suffered due to powerful storms and a failure to upkeep the structure.

When we were young, my father would drive us in old Land Rover Defender to the lighthouse in the summer but, as we grew up, we would make the ~2 hour walk across the island to lighthouse. I was fortunate to see the Grand Harbour Lighthouse before it collapsed in 2014. As I note in my poem, the remains of the lighthouse exist on its concrete foundation as “a pile of sticks”.

While there are probably places called Crowe Brook and other places called Mull Creek, this poem draws inspiration from an unnamed brook which flowed into the Petitcodiac River near my childhood home in Memramcook, NB.

“The Broken Bridge” refers to the old bridge at the end of Bridge Street in Sackville, NB. Although it has been decommissioned, it is not unloved and remains a popular place for locals and students alike to watch the muddy comings and goings of the tide on the Tantramar River.

Kiack is the colloquial name for dried Gaspereau (also called alewives), derived from the Mi’kmaq name for the fish, ki’ak. They are miserably bony and small fish and were generally used as fertilizer or eaten by poorer families.

“Iphigenia” was first published in *The Dalhousie Review*.

“You, Icarus” was first published in *The Antigonish Review*.

From *The Dictionary of Canadian Biographies*: “Esther Cox began experiencing unexplained phenomena in late August 1878 after being assaulted by her boyfriend, Bob MacNeil. The manifestations of a poltergeist continued for more than a year...The poltergeist took different forms, expressing itself originally through the movement of bedclothes and other articles and through loud rappings. By October 1878 manifestations were more aggressive; furniture was tipped over and Esther complained of being pursued by objects, especially when in the basement” (2018).

“The Study” was shortlisted for the Atlantic Canadian Writing Prize.

“New Zoning” was inspired by the urban sprawl surrounding Moncton, NB, particularly between Moncton and Irishtown. From 2010-2012, the centrally located Moncton High School was found to be unsuitable for students and teachers due to black mold and asbestos. Students petitions for student consultation and the municipality eventually passed a motion in support of protecting the historic Moncton High building (ideally as an arts centre) and building a new school within the city limits. The Government of New Brunswick’ preceded to build the replacement just outside of city limits ,near agricultural land.

The Petitcodiac River runs from Petitcodiac to Shepody Bay and passes through Salisbury, Moncton, and Memramcook. The twice-daily tidal bores mean that the sediment is constantly

suspended in the water between Moncton and Shepody Bay. This makes the water an opaque red-brown colour and give the Petitcodiac its nicknames: the Chocolate River. The walking bridge is located in the Riverfront Park, on the border between Dieppe and Moncton.

“Mary” was first published in *7 Mondays*.

“A Literary Life” is written after Ted Hughes’ poem of the same name.

“Tantramar again, again, again” is written after Charles G. D. Roberts’ “Tantramar Again” and Douglas Lochhead’s “Tantramar Again, Again” and *High March Road*.

Epilogue is partially a loose translation and partially a reinterpretation of “Prélude”, from Léonard Forest’s collection of poetry on Acadie, *Le pommier d’août*.