U ALIVE

CHELSEA COUPAL

Thistledown Press

PREVIEW

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I searched for my grandmother
online the day she died.

I wasn't thinking.
Just did it
in case I stumbled
on some secret archive.

Riding bareback in
a dress as a kid. Her
bare legs warm
against horsehair.
Her sister
holding the reins.

The graves of two siblings:
Her brother, age seven, buried
at the Weyburn mental hospital.
I don't know why he was there,
how he died.
Her sister, age eleven,
buried at the cemetery in Mervin.

She died of an ear infection
spread to the bone.

In uniform in Ottawa
during World War II.
On her wedding day.
Living on the farm
with the first baby.

A month before she died,
I declined to visit.
Saw a friend instead.

When she died unexpectedly
on a Thursday, I hadn't seen
her in over a year. And now I
never will.

She's made it this long, I thought.
But I'd forgotten.
Life is a strange, sharp spark:
an anomaly, a comet.

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St. Peter's Abbey, Muenster, Saskatchewan

Some say don't feed the birds, but it's hard not to when they land
in the palm of your hand, plump as plums. February, late winter.

An evergreen curtain, bare-branch web, slow snowfall,
dishwater sky. Flakes melting on my face. I want even more birds

cupped in my hands. I want to reach out and grab them before they take off—
splash of wings. I want to feel their bones, the wheat-husk whisper of them,

pin-thin cages beneath black and white feathers—matchstick houses or
hyacinth heads. I want their heartbeats in my hands. That swell of belly,

warm-smooth as ripples on ponds in summer, against my cheek, and
pinecones, crackling-quiet, falling through branches, landing soft in the snow.

The birds flurry away, seed in beak, to eat where I can't see them. My skin
in the wind is dry. My eyes water, my lips split at the centre, bleed.

And the monks ring the bells. And the chickadees sing in the trees. And I pray
another bird, and then another, lands, gentle-steady as a psalm.

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Let's Do This Again

Hope you're staying safe and healthy. Are you guys ok?
We're doing ok, doing fine. These are weird times.
Swallow and smile hard on Zoom calls.
You're on mute, they say. *You're on mute. You're muted.*

Text friends too often or not at all. Virtual Friday drinks and say,
I feel like I'm in your living room. *Are you guys ok? We're doing ok, doing fine. These are weird times. Let's do this again.* (And then never do.)

Shop for a mask. Shop wearing a mask, disinfect the grocery basket. Shop six feet apart. Tug and touch the mask, and tug and tough it out. Squint to show I'm smiling hard behind it. Smile, turn off the webcam, mic on mute, read another poem that captures the mood.

Shop wearing a mask. Disinfect the shopping cart. *Are you guys ok? You're on mute*, they say. *Hope you're staying safe and healthy. These are weird times.* Tug and touch the mask. *We're doing ok, doing fine*. Swallow our hearts. We're all living six feet apart.

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The Slow Reveal

March is a month of nothing. It lands before rain,
before geese, before seeding, before tulips break
through soil, wavy-green wings.

Over and over, slowly, snow flows from a gravel-road shore,
winter's low tide. Mud keeps us humble, sucks us down.
And last year's objects reveal themselves.

A garden glove stiff, faded as a sparrow, frozen to earth.
You bend to inspect rust-brown spots in snow, notice
it's not flecks of mud. It's blood.

March might be the last month you watched your
brother play hockey. When his team lost in playoffs, he
unlaced his skates as he always had

and thought, *That's it*. That same March: the last whole month
your grandfather lived. Everything sticks, is messy and hopeful
in March. The farmers want a slow melt.

On a skiff of straw in the junk barn—spilled grease,
empty milk jugs, lost wrenches—you find a litter of
kittens born too early. One is on its own, so cold

it can't move, gulping at air that won't sustain it.
A death that lasts for days. Each morning the
standing water wears a shell, hard and thin.

Dawn's frost rims brown grass that hasn't grown in
months. But the sun rises sooner. The snow is
dotted with dirt and debris. It recedes

like an infected gum, further each day. Everything smells
like mud and cold and water, like mould and grass and
fresh air. The slow loosening of earth after sleep.

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About the Author

Chelsea Coupal's first poetry collection, *Sedley*, was selected for an Indigo Exclusive Edition and shortlisted for three Saskatchewan Book Awards. Her poetry has won the City of Regina Writing Award, been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and appeared in more than a dozen Canadian publications, including *Arc*, *EVENT*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *The Malahat Review* and *Best Canadian Poetry*.

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