In the spring of 2019, my father quit drinking. Diagnosed with late-stage liver failure, he’d been told to get his affairs in order—an impossible task in the squalor he had come to call home. These prose poems chronicle part of the summer after his diagnosis: a summer spent mired in checklists as we cleaned a very big mess.

My father is alive and sober to this day.
Arrive

We pull up to the cabin. My brother goes in; I wait. The seatbelt’s a border on my chest: on one side, a wine-dark sea and my father, adrift in a glass half full; on the other, me, arms outstretched as the last wave laps him through. His robed figure sways on the porch, unleashes a stream—*don’t look, Teen*—and my three old-world syllables blur to a half-grown me in the vintage Chevy, no belts on these musty trampoline seats to keep us contained. We launch. My brother, my father, and me: trusty trinity, keepers of mirth and sweet coffee, early mornings breathing out ghosts on our way to the car on our way to the league on our way to this breathless morning piling into a car so sleek my father’s like a dog in clothes in the backseat, not the least for the clouds of white fur drifting off his sleeves. The real dog’s called Butter. Always there are cars and dogs and always, in the end, us three. Four if you count Miss Fluffypants there. We’re off to the Airbnb.

Make Camp

Five doors down, our heads bump on low lights. Mason jar fixture a booby trap in a barely-there bathroom. No screen door in front, no door door in back. Dog-smelling water the dog won’t drink. Bedside reading: *A Tale of Two Cities*, the Coles Notes. I always prep for tests. Could write the book on the gently coaxed shower, the gently coaxed shave, the gently coaxed Dad, I’ve hired a team to deal with the cabin. My brother coughs. A scritch in the ceiling—my father smacks the clapboard with a coat-padded arm, thuds back to his seat in a shimmer of dust. *It’s fine, don’t get up. Just a squirrel.* My brother and I, half-risen, open our mouths in mutual wordlessness. *Guess I’ll have to clean that bathroom of mine,* my father says finally. *But that’s the whole point,* I say, *don’t you see?* As though there were anything obvious about where these lines converge.
Germinate

His grandmother lived in a dank brown house like all the houses he’d live in. White braid, black bread. He watched her with reverent hunger. Could not choke down the lardy slabs in place of yellow-smeared Wonder, but oh, that unwound braid was wondrous, a nightly flow down her flannelled back like a channel to the old country. Hair’s dead, we all grow ghosts. He cut his own braid in his twenties. Found a coin-sized spot on his scalp and paid the ferryman early. Imagine my father’s mother’s mother crouched in the hull of a dank brown boat, her belly full with another to fill and the fields ahead of her empty. She never cut hers, bore that weight til she died. Meanwhile, my father’s scalp’s gone to seed. White fluff poised to scatter, but this late, what will grow?

Start a Mission

My brother departs and here I sit, a freshly stitched transplant. Not much heals in a rented house a cigarette’s flick from hell. Hot, but the A/C’s blocked behind an ocean of a couch, my father sunk in its seafoam folds, gulping cbd to keep from ceding to the itches—a travelling circus beneath his skin, red tents springing up wherever his nails descend. Could use some distraction, he says at last. There’s dvos in the cabin. Face fogged with drugs or embarrassment, he fumbles for his keys. Fog of fur around sharp metal, fog of the past in each sharp breath. I scribble the first of many lists and slip out the unscreened door. Bugs at my arms, damp air licking. I walk, and his world eats me.
Nurture a Silence

Butter had a sister called Honey. Eighty-six pounds of lumpen blonde, a sack of Yukon golds, rotting. Runt of a monumental litter but clearly the brains of the op—she knew when to sound the alarm, which was often. Butter barked only in echo. Twin dog beds like vast lily pads in the swamp of my father’s squalor, double dew claws hanging off uneven legs like tadpoles. I think of that trio, a hundred square feet for each creature, wine boxes closing in. Honey died in winter and by spring my father was dry. He calls her Butter’s sister now. To spare his big girl the pain, he says, of hearing that sweet, lost name.

Enter the Belly

I breathe through my mouth and shoulder the crooked door free, a firefighter late to the fire. I seek DVDs and a little cloth sack full of drugs and a dog brush called Furminator. The brush gets straight to the undercoat without cuts. The drugs purge water. Without them, my father will bloat like this home which is actually three homes, trappers’ shacks stitched with the comic slop of all his renovations. Never a car without cardboard, a floorboard without shims. I crawl on the crawling mattress, foam cracked where memory fails. O little cloth sack, o silver discs like all my childhood allowances blown up to worthlessness, where’s the treasure in this chest? Or did he swallow the key?
Translate

I called him Pink Bear, which only sounds literal on paper. Overwashed, restuffed, sewn up, he’d long ago gone grey. My father’s muse, murmuring nothings whose sweetness my four-year-old ears could not swallow. What did he say? My father wiggled the bear at his own ear and squinted to catch the whisper. Pink Bear says … it’s bedtime. Pink Bear says … I love you. Pink Bear says … the cacophony of those trains is a god-danged outrage. Bare but for a sheet against the heat, my mattress rumbled. Somewhere, close in the blanketing dark, a cold heft growled.

Refuel

Smoke pours through the window as he butts out on the porch. Shrunken head silhouetted in sunset, coat-swollen shoulders sagged. At night, he falls asleep to the glow of gangsters and gunshots: that swarthy machismo still awes Little Timmy in his sixties. I press the pillow over my head as my mattress quakes. For fifteen years the trains shook our bungalow past midnight; let The Sopranos blast and squall through walls as porous as time. In the morning I’ll pour him the last of the cream, gulp my own coffee black. I’ll scoop the sodden grounds with bare hands, bite my burnt tongue bloody.
Put to Sleep

They rolled him up, afterwards, swaddled his heft in flannel. Thirteen years old when he died. Poor Duka, a blood-brown mutt who bore our kitchen floor cuddles bravely. Half a dog’s lifetime past Butter here, who lolls golden, homecoming queen, as we stroke and coo on the grass. Rented yard hissing with sea breeze, we clink steaming mugs above a pink belly, drink to this pleasure-drunk creature whose quivers mean nothing but more, more, more. That kitchen floor was cold but it sparkled: I remember flecks of gold among the cracks and drifting fur. My father’s mug of wine, my Coke, our laughter, Duka’s paws twitching. How later, I’d find them both dreaming, bald head sunk in the softest sea.

Love Thy Neighbour

Three lungs between the two of them. Rez cigs on the deck as hazelnut creamer pales deep mugs. G’s got the crossword, D. R.’s phone shrieks a full tune for each text from the grandkids; both working ears reside on just one head, and it isn’t hers. My father feasts on eggs and hash through G’s smeary reminiscings: The number of times I had to haul your dad home hand in hand! The three of them chuckle wheezily: Neighbours musta wondered ... I slip inside to top up my coffee, picture the men in slouching retreat, G’s gin-fogged noggin’ calculating: brave the plank bridge or opt for the slick-but-solid slope of ditch? Then I remember: the front yard’s reserved for coffee. D. R.’s rule. They only ever partied out back. Where the gravel ran flat.
Call the Professionals

A hundred bucks for a hundred k in a white van stamped with a little red house and black letters. Puroclean: The Paramedics of Property Damage. Pat peers at my father’s porch through the woozy grass. Tromps up the back steps, shoves through the door, rustles inside with the unperturbed necessity of a squirrel. Comes out grim: You’ve got yourselves a full-blown biohazard there. He plucks a prehistoric weed from the dirt pile once meant to build a foundation, flicks the fluff as I stammer my thanks. He shrugs: Shoulda seen the last place. Basement so full of bottles you’d slash your feet on the second step. This is kids’ stuff. One day’s work—you’ll see. Best three grand you’ll ever spend.

Gulp It Down

Three years he’s weathered with no flush, gush, or froth. He drank from Evian bottles. Kidded about mice missiles though how he would manage enough force to kill when he couldn’t lift a full jug ... Bathroom blocked off with a laundry basket, long johns on the floor. Number one off the porch, number two in the men’s room at Johnson Memorial, where he bathed himself with baby wipes when the clog at home grew too monstrous. So deeply lodged, that undergrowth, that Pat has to call in a plumber, enlist the help of a bigger beast—a snake—to swallow it whole. Old toilet brown as a rotten tooth, pipes shot through with tree roots curled like so many helpless fingers. Place a thumb in a baby’s palm and he’ll squeeze; the force will shock you. Like the first swift slurp beneath a fresh lid: All gone! All gone!
Feed the Beast

We gobble scabby omelettes. Rings of soured cream spread like mouths around a bitter black. I slice bread, watch my father’s salt, picture him plucking kernels from my popcorn twenty-some years ago, spelling our names in batter, coaxing onions into sticky-sweet huddles I’d sweep from my plate like so many worms. After my brother and I left home he ate a banana a day, no more. He gulped his bitter sweetness. Crumbled teeth gave way to fillings dark and shiny as bullets, and the dental hygienist—a favourite story—marvelled aloud at his black, hairy tongue. As though his were an animal hunger.

Build a Legacy

At sixteen, my brother tore up every weed, every sapling and pissa crisped blade. Backyard one vast trench for a war he’d never fight. We grew up indoors, starved of the sun but gluttoned as my father never could be—he who picked sugar beets at ten, sweetness sown for richer tongues. My brother planted nothing. The gutted yard grew mud slick. Now I rake years’ worth of petrified dog poop from my father’s lawn. Rain rolls in, we’ll eat shit soup, he quips. A family recipe.
Stage a Sacrament

Five masked angels flap up and down my father’s driveway. Inside, an enormous fan roars like the breath of God. Out blows the overflow: brown blankets laid flat on the grass, then rolled up like vast cigarillos; petrified pie like hunters’ tack unearthed from a stubborn drawer; the glint of an ash tray—black glass, his father’s, once—stashed in the small pile marked *keep*. The fan roars harder. Soon I’ll smell supper. Concentrated thyme won’t sate a hungry belly but kills every critter inside with indiscriminate swiftness. We’re to keep our distance till the pump runs dry. Then walk, awed, into emptiness.

Cull a Wardrobe

So many hoodies. His sweats were only ever cold. Waistbands widen with the phantom pregnancy of the late-stage cirrhotic—double drainings left him dry. We laugh a lot, the two of us, and the Klean-All washers laugh with us, all ten, metal mouths swishing soapy filth as three years’ worth of Gimli Basic Needs boils down to three bags full. As for the cast-offs—well, there are other winos too weak to work a coin slot, shedding biannual soilings in lieu of a new season’s skin. Sometimes they had a deal at the thrift store: all you can wear for ten dollars. But what’s the deal with these mounds and mounds of pristine underwear? Dog hair and blood stains for nine straight barrels, then nothing but clean blue Ys.
Buy an Afterlife

Garbage cans and a hamper. Tupperware poised to snap. Plates and spoons, two by two, for an ark that’s finally stopped swaying. I stand in the dark dry snug with my phone while my brother swoops through IKEA. Vast white walls and a ceiling so high you could stack second chances for miles. WHAT DOES A PERSON NEED TO LIVE? I’ve written, fingers smudging a list that twists like the coils that bind its brethren: names of doctors, names of drugs, names of the sickness that blooms my father’s blood beneath thin skin. Shit, I say, bedding! Shit, coffee mugs! Let’s take it one room at a time, my brother sighs. I tilt the page, seeking space, and write through all the lines.

Shift Gears

My uncle was a farmer. Hands so vast he could have sculpted this condo with its sandcastle smoothness, dropped floors, and vaulted ceilings. Six foot three on a shrunken day and voice high and guileless as a boy’s as he flings me the keys to the F-150—Sobeys is three blocks away but no one walks in Gimli. I drive for yogurt. I sleep without dreams. My aunt drops perogies into a pot while my uncle plays the stocks from the couch, CNN droning through the wall as I drift on his office daybed. Prairie folk don’t take siestas; prairie folk gulp coffee at midnight, tut at grim news tickers, dole out dough to a niece whose father holds no ties to them, blood or otherwise. Think your dad will be hungry? calls my aunt. Like the answer is ever no.
Accept a Disease Model

The paper destroys it—or, more precisely, the Styrofoam carton that steams like a diapered baby on my lap. I’m sitting shotgun, my father drives. I have paid for this food with its poisons. Gravy fries and chili dog, the gravy canned, the chili volcanic. He claims he can’t eat the fries and the dog with the Styrofoam leeching through, but we’ll see. If it’s true, I’ll reorder, go back with tinfoil, cringe my apologies to the plump owner who keeps my father’s sauerkraut in the diner’s fridge free of charge. Not to worry, he told me last week. I know how it goes with the chemo. Nothing tastes good. I didn’t correct him.

Find the Words

He calls his gp My Little Pony. Pink glitter thermos the size of an urn. Flip-flops and yoga pants, sharp nails tapping our fate onto an unseen screen. The name’s a secret, of course: in this chilly room he’s timorous, my father in his smoky parka, bruised hands clasped on his lap. Ousted from the church at thirteen, he drifts on an oddly buoyant faith: to her face he’s all deference, then cracks up the instant the door clicks shut. Just remember, Tim, it will never, ever get better. Some bedside manner! That’s not what she said, I grin, except it kind of was. On my lap, two sets of paperwork: one says he’s dying, the other says, maybe. She printed the first without thinking, then shrugged. Well, I’ll give you both. My father clutches his belly as he chuckles his way to the car. Can he live with such a liver? Lame effort. But oh! Timorous. That’s a keeper.
Face the Music

You know you’re a slob, my father says, when they bring in a Hazmat team to clean your bathroom. His yellow teeth flash between puffs. They’re smoking a lot this morning—G, D. R., my father—each ragged tube a vestige of a party long departed. Memories curl into pipe dreams: now that the place is spick and span, he’ll open the floorplan, jig up his mixer, paint the trim the seafoam green of a 1950s Fender. Okay, I say, so let’s do it. Now or never, right?

Reform

If life’s one long party, balloons will burst. What’s better: to squeeze a grape of all sweetness or leave it to die on the vine? Wine turned to water for my prodigal father, who sleeps clean and dry in his palace of promise. We work and work and work. Level the bulges, fill in the cracks, sand the walls for primer. Watch the gleaming white for drips. Pray the flood is over.