

Earthen  
stories

# Earthen stories

Katherine Koller

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To my brothers  
George, Robert, John  
and in memory of David

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|-------------|---------|--------------|-------------|------------------|
| 5           | 430     | 2            | 19          | 2,310            |
| FULLY GROWN | GALLONS | MILLION BTUS | POUNDS      | POUNDS           |

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Canada



Good is as visible as green.  
John Donne

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## You Can Have More

Mavis could not sleep. At night, she wandered her yard soundlessly among the nocturnal creatures. Already this summer in the light of the moon, she had observed a porcupine munching on fallen apples, a skunk weaving through the daylilies, an escaped chinchilla nibbling the sweet peas, a coyote strutting down the lane, and deer grazing in the pocket park across the street. Alive and moving, they consoled her.

But tonight, she heard the gate creak open. Soft-footed, she followed the stone path and hid herself under an arch of clematis vines. Equally quietly, but very quickly, a boy upturned a hill of potatoes, set the pitchfork back against the fence, pocketed the spuds, folded the dried plant top into the compost bin, and let himself out. When the gate clicked shut, he saw her. Even in the dark, she could detect hunger in his hollow eyes. He ran down the alley, long-limbed and swift.

By the time Mavis limped down her driveway and under the lane lights, there was nothing to see. He must have ducked into another yard.

A few nights later, nine potatoes bulged in the boy's pockets.

"You can have more," Mavis said, guarding the gate this time. "Squash, tomatoes, carrots."

"Let me out," he said, voice thick with panic.

Mavis pushed the gate open, and he ran off. She called after him, "Come back in the daytime."

A few days later, he did. He was maybe fifteen, but very stringy. Her own son, at that age, seemed to need food every waking hour. Retired now, her son wanted her to move to his home in Australia, to spare her from subzero winters. Mavis feared only loneliness.

The boy stood still. "You said carrots."

She invited him to her patio, but he wouldn't move from the gate, so she went back for her tin of carrot muffins, then opened it to offer him one. He took the container, grabbed the lid, snapped it back on, and ran out the gate.

The next time he came by it was dusk. He appeared more comfortable in the near dark, or maybe his belly was a little less empty. He held out her muffin tin.

Mavis didn't wait for a response, or thanks, but believed that returning the tin to her hand said what he meant. She asked, "How do you cook potatoes?"

"Microwave."

"You can do squash in there, too," she said. "Cut it in half, scoop out the seeds, put some butter in the cavity, and cook until soft."

He concentrated on her next instructions.

"Decide which one you want, and twist it until the stem breaks off," she said. He slowly freed a medium-sized kabocha.

She said, "If you keep the seeds and dry them, you can plant them in spring."

His eyes flashed at her.

"Next time I see you, I'll have soup. You can warm it up."

His eyes scanned the ground now.

"Are you alone?"

He nodded. And then he left, the squash under his arm, running, as usual.

As dark fell three days later, he came once again and waited at the gate. Mavis, in the kitchen, took her time gathering the soup, her sweater, her cane. She flicked on the garage outside light. He flinched, but stayed put, darting glances all around the yard.

"Every space is planted," he said.

"My husband," she said. "He put it all in."

Mavis spent every living moment wondering how to survive without her Max. His Volkswagen van was full of bagged mulch for the flowerbeds when a truck ran a red light right into him. The accident did not give Mavis any time to prepare or say goodbye, and so her

husband's garden, as old as their marriage, contained both comfort and hurt. His presence remained in the jaunty slant of the duck decoy on a stump and the fine pruning of the lilac. His absence she felt most keenly after nightfall, which attracted mosquitoes and other hungry ones, including this boy. She held up the tub of tomato soup.

"Could you dig up the rest of the potatoes?"

He took the pitchfork and began at the row farthest from the gate. Mavis brought boxes and a glass of water. After, he carried a box of potatoes to her garage. Another full box of potatoes, the soup, and a small jar of butter went into her red wagon, and the boy walked away with it. This gave Mavis a chance to step down to the alley in time to see which yard he entered: four doors away, the place that belonged to an old bachelor everyone called Fred the Fireman. Max and Fred used to trade perennials, raspberry varieties, and bags of apples. When Fred died some years ago, his tidy little house went to rentals, but Mavis hadn't noticed anyone in it lately. Until now.

After two weeks, and no sign of the boy again, Mavis picked and washed some carrots and apples and baked a loaf of bread. She filled a sturdy-handled brown paper bag and, with her cane, strolled down the alley in a scented wind that recalled a mountain holiday with Max when they were young. She still thought of Max and herself that way, even though the mirror regarded

her as an old woman. An urgent hammering on metal disturbed her, and the memory of Max in the mountains faded away.

Workers were erecting a construction fence around her old neighbour's yard—in preparation for demolition, they said. Mavis asked permission to see Fred's apple tree one last time. Max had grafted a branch onto their own, and it still produced. The workers were cleaning up for the day and let her in.

Wrecked outdoor furniture and waist-high weeds. The raspberry canes, overtaken by Manitoba maple saplings. The heirloom apple tree, still vigorous, but soon to be bulldozed. Glass knocked out of a basement window. Steps crumbling. No sound from the doorbell.

By way of farewell, she stepped through fluffing dandelions to touch the trunk of the apple tree, to acknowledge its vitality, and found her red wagon underneath. The box of potatoes, one-quarter full. The soup tub, washed, lay on top. She added her bag to the box, then pulled the wagon through the weeds. The workers opened the fence wider for her, then banged the fence closed and pinned it. Mavis, upset at missing the boy, forgot to offer the workers an apple from her bag until she was halfway down the alley and their truck was already gone.

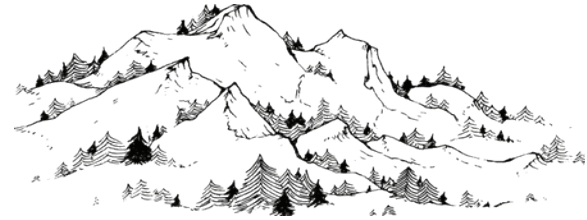
She never got to say goodbye to Fred, either. Max was the one who found him when he noticed that his outside lights were still on during the day, which was

not the practice of thrifty old Fred the Fireman. Max went around to the front of Fred's house and looked in the living room window. There was his friend, lying on his couch, very much at peace. Max was sad, but also glad to be the one to find him and call the firemen to knock down the door and notify his family. Fred would have wanted his friend Max to take charge.

As Mavis trundled her wagon into her own yard and secured the gate, a gusting wind blew leaves from every tree. Like a kaleidoscope pattern, like memory, Mavis thought. She wondered if she had enough time before first frost to harvest all that Max planted. She worried about the dark winter pulling away the light, unsure how to enter that tunnel without Max. She felt closer to him here, in the yard, witness to the natural falling of the leaves that nurtured the soil.

Her next thought was for the boy, the hope he was safe.

Mavis bent to empty the wagon and, inside the potato box, found the clean butter jar full of dried squash seeds.



## The Red Morgan

The red Morgan cruised by, stopped, and backed up. Charlie dropped the rake and pulled out his phone to capture that beauty with a photo. The lady in the tan leather passenger seat leaned forward and called out to him, "Hello dear, can you help us?"

Charlie was sixteen, but he looked twelve. Sensing the driver's consternation, Charlie resisted caressing the lines of the antique vehicle with his sweaty hand. Instead, he scanned every detail of the burlled walnut dashboard while directing the couple to a quilting store next to the tea shop in the leafy Kitsilano neighbourhood where he did yard work. Charlie even offered to hop in the back seat to make sure the driver found his way. The man shook his head but let the kid take one photo before gearing up. Charlie's shot focussed on the lady: her face in the afternoon light under the oak leaves in the gleaming red Morgan.