

POETRY

# When we first arrived, 1983

by Gabriela Halas



"A Painter" by Paul Sprung

*America* opened —  
Prairies unfolded in ever-arriving  
distance. Air untarnished, fresh.

Our eyes followed waves of power lines,  
their undulating surge of promise.  
Impenetrable words  
crowded the air  
like dense boreal. We needed to split the tongue,  
slit like seismic lines;  
corridors of language connected,  
fragmented. Government placement  
in small-town Alberta. *Ameri-ka*,  
*Kanada* — an immigrant knows  
how to replace one  
for the other. Old words ruptured —  
new ones formed like plaster  
around our mouths.  
We drove north  
where my father, with his six-month-old English,  
found work in oil-rich mines.  
Bowls of earth carved  
like a god's terraced garden. Drunken spruce sank  
in sedated chaos  
like our immigrant thoughts —  
where nothing is as it appears.  
I remember taking my thumb and forefinger,  
traversing an atlas; stretched to shape  
our tiny country resting along the buckled spine  
of the Rockies, hardly filling an eighth  
of this new place. Nearly treeless lawns, in awe —  
the gentle slow arc of water,  
watering. Every house had a spare room  
or three. Fenced front and back,

our own private country's small walls  
stood in perfect symmetry.  
Our father spent twenty years  
in shift-work at the machine shop; an informal United  
Nations. Our mother, a lifetime cashier,  
her daughters the first to go to school.  
Nearly forty years later,  
the newly arrived,  
as we once were,  
find fences,  
straight,  
are not flush; weighted  
like walls. They are meant  
to be climbed.  
Threats shouted in *America*,  
*Canada* — twists of the tongue.  
Words crowd the air  
like rush-hour traffic.  
We are all born somewhere  
we do not end up.