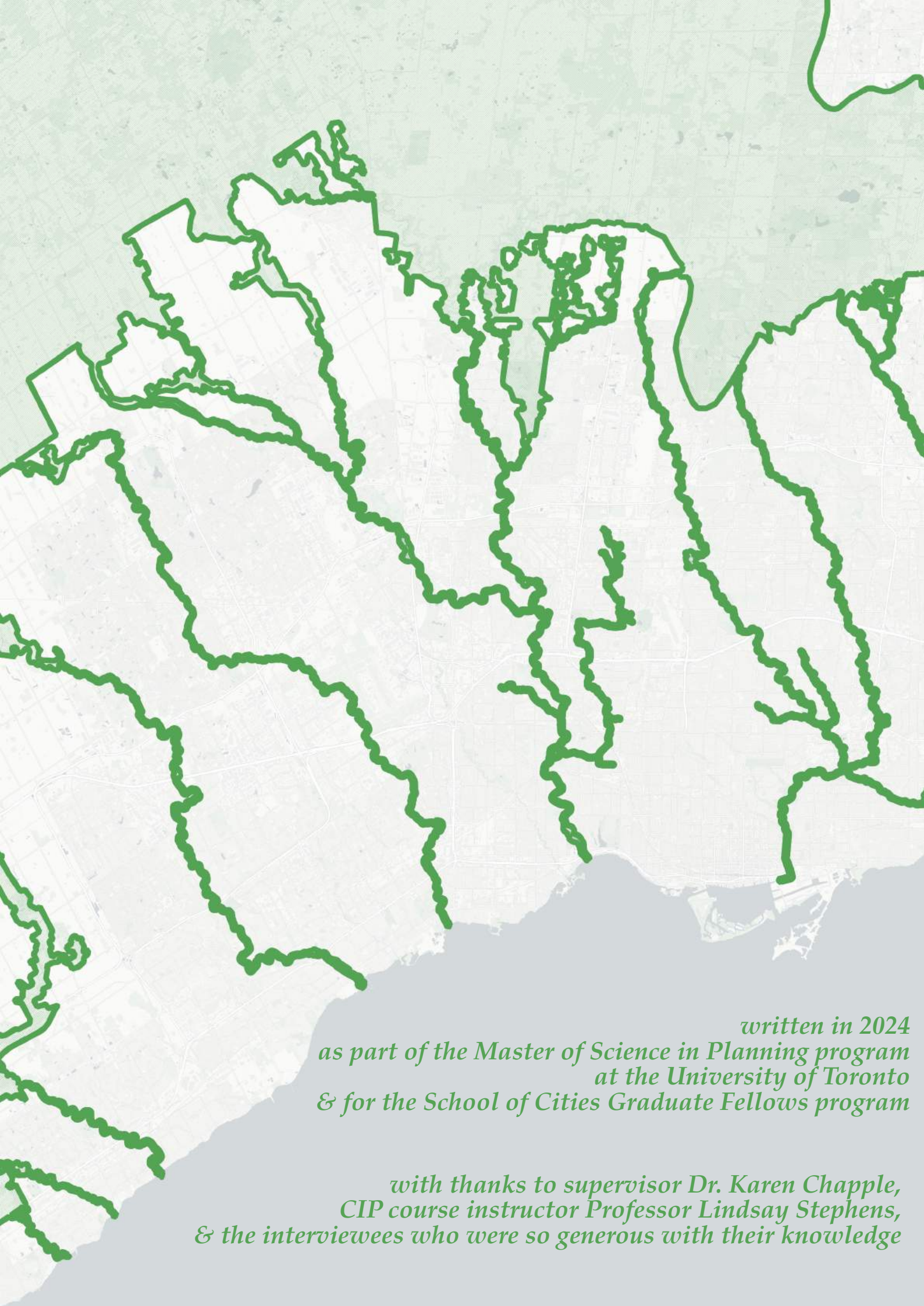


Lines in the Land

*A play by
Ameer Idreis*



*written in 2024
as part of the Master of Science in Planning program
at the University of Toronto
& for the School of Cities Graduate Fellows program*

*with thanks to supervisor Dr. Karen Chapple,
CIP course instructor Professor Lindsay Stephens,
& the interviewees who were so generous with their knowledge*

NOTE ON CASTING

The cast of *Lines in the Land* is comprised of four actors of unspecified gender, age, or other characteristics. While the play primarily uses unnamed characters, actors cycle through a range of personas, portraying some of the people residing in, around, or affected by the Ontario Greenbelt.

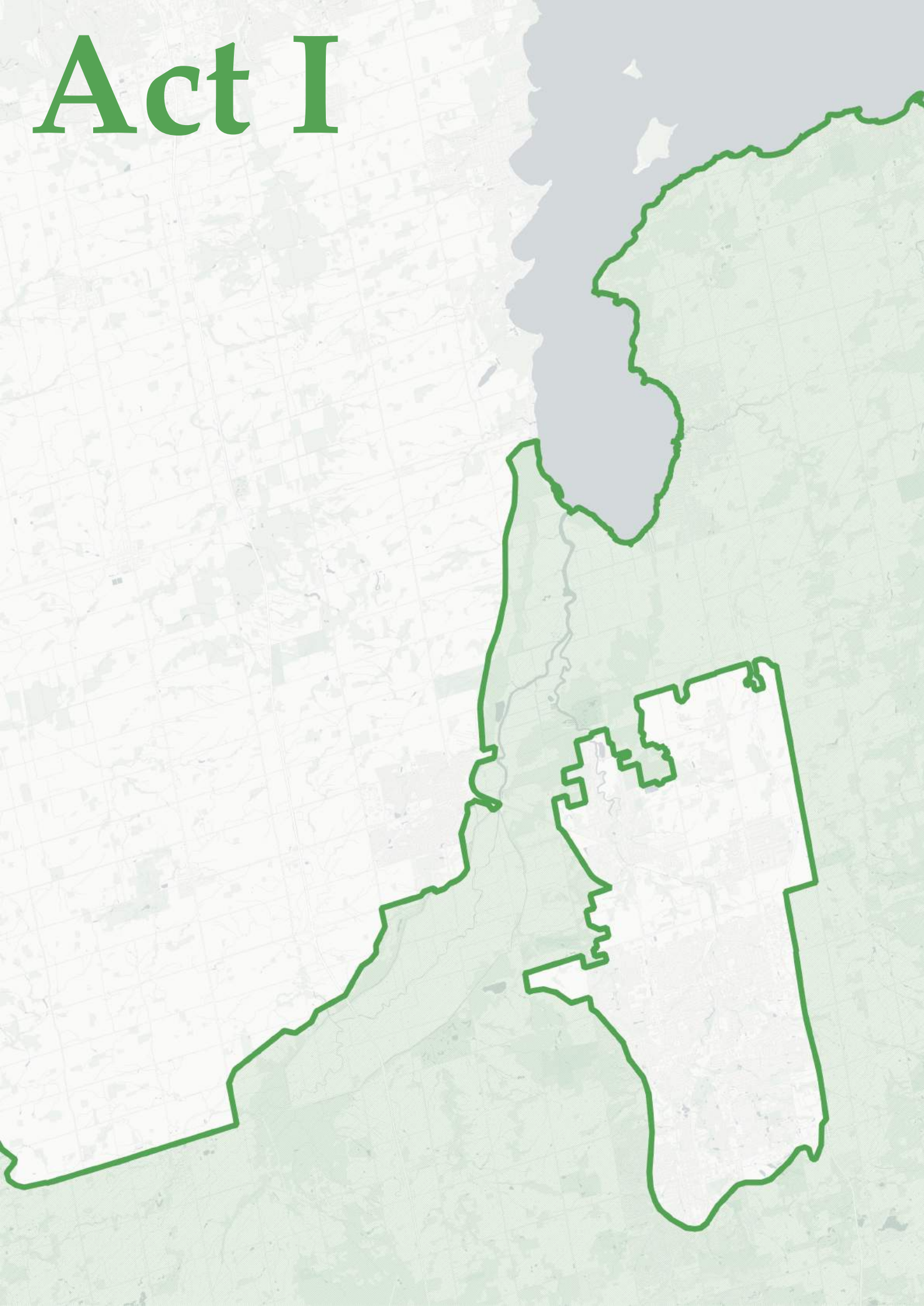
The four characters in Act I Scene 9 are named, taking on more fixed personas for the remainder of the scene. These characters are written as gendered and with characteristics that may not align with those of the actors. Changes to some lines are welcome, so long as they are within the intention of the dialogue and scene. Mariam's zodiac sign should be whatever the sign is a month from the play's performance.

Additionally, in Act II Scene 2, there are two characters, the PREMIER and the TEACHER, who can be portrayed by the actors playing THREE and FOUR or taken on by one actor entirely. Creativity and flexibility in production are encouraged.

NOTE ON STAGING

Act I Scene 1 ends in two land acknowledgements. While these lines are written for Toronto, they should be altered and adapted to suit the constitutional and traditional realities of where the play is publicly read or performed. If decided by the director, producer, or theatre company, this scene could act as the land acknowledgement for the show. Again, adjustment and adaptation according to place, as well as the best practices at the time of production, are encouraged.

Act I



ACT I

SCENE 1

(ONE and TWO stand on a dark stage. It seems perhaps they are nowhere, standing, maybe floating, in nothing... existing before the Earth and before the Universe. THREE acts as a narrator.)

THREE

In the beginning, there was...

ONE

God.

THREE

In the beginning, there was...

TWO

Everything.

(ONE and TWO are telling contradictory and opposing narratives of how we got here. There's a slight tension between them.)

ONE

And God said, "Let there be light" and so there was light. And He saw that the light was good and so He separated light from darkness.

TWO

Everything, in a singularity - unimaginably hot and dense, infinitely hot and infinitely dense.

ONE

He created Heaven - a firmament to divide the waters above and the waters below.

TWO

Then, the universe expanded in a bang - space itself expanding, cooling, quarks and gluons forming protons and neutrons, then the elements.

ONE

He gathered the water into seas, revealing the dry land of Earth in which he planted life. He made the sun, moon, and stars to mark time.

TWO

Billions of years and the universe ever-expanding, gravity brought together the elements to form larger clusters - galaxies assembling, stars forming, planets and moons collecting.

ONE

He created fish for the waters and birds for the skies and land animals, each according to its kind.

TWO

On Earth, the first single-celled organisms developed. Prokaryotes evolved into eukaryotes, cells forming symbiotic, mutualistic relationships - connection, multicellular organisms.

ONE

He formed Man from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him. He created Woman from Man's rib. He placed them in a garden, commanding them not to eat fruit from a tree of knowledge.

TWO

Earth's waters were rapt with diversifying evolution, unimaginable sea creatures in many shapes and sizes. And then, aquatic-bound life broke free of the sea and took to the land.

ONE

Woman is tempted into eating the fruit, Man following suit. They have disobeyed God and so He casts them out of the garden and they and their offspring populate the land.

TWO

Animals roamed the land and, through, despite, and because of mass extinction, climate cycles, and evolution, homo sapiens emerged as a species 300,000 years ago.

THREE

Oh, how time flies. And so what happened next?

TWO

Homo sapiens spread across the Earth - touching nearly every part of every continent. Genetic changes here and there altering complexion and appearance.

ONE

Tribes and civilizations rise and fall. Languages evolve, develop, converge, diverge. Storytelling, oral

tradition, handprints painted on cave walls, vases sculpted.

TWO

Tools developed. Irrigation derived. Agriculture honed. People fed.

ONE

People famined. Wars fought. Rulers, religions, and self-interests distinguished and divided.

TWO

Weapons and medicine. Walls and bridges.

ONE

Music and theatre. Paintings and novels.

TWO

Food, cuisine, spice. Empires.

ONE

Empires.

TWO

Empires.

ONE

Empires.

TWO

Rising. Spreading. Killing. Enslaving.

ONE

Conquering. Dividing.

TWO

Conquering. Exploiting.

THREE

(breaking their spiral)

And then?

ONE

Then?

THREE

(earnest)

After empire?

ONE

(confused)

After empire?

TWO

(whispering to ONE)

Is there an 'after empire'?

ONE

Well, I mean, after some. Ish.

TWO

What comes after some empires-ish?

ONE

(surprised, doubtful, as though only
now realizing)

Peace.

TWO

Peace?

ONE

Peace. Fighting slows. Independences gained. Laws
written and abided by.

TWO

And so people live in systems.

ONE

Rough, broken systems.

TWO

Some, maybe even many, doing their best to work toward
something better?

ONE

Of course. Humans suffocate the planet with their
carbon emissions through globalized food production
and excessive waste, sprawling cities built around
their obsession with the combustion engine, and
consumption that sees them bingeing landfill-destined
fashion and plastics like there's no tomorrow,
numbering the tomorrow's they have left.

THREE

Grim.

TWO

But they tinker, don't they?

ONE

Oh they tinker. They tinker around the edges. They
call for change. They sign petitions. They put up lawn
signs. They pingpong between political parties.

Sometimes, they enact change. Often late, and often not enough, but it's always welcomed by the animals, plants, the land, the waters, the Earth, the Universe, and their children to come.

TWO

Empire is self-preserving. You want something preserved? Give it to Empire.

ONE

There's no giving to Empire. Empire takes.

THREE

(proclaiming)

The land we're on today...

ONE

The land we're on today is municipally administered by the City of Toronto, a creature of the Province of Ontario - the Province created through the Constitution Act, 1867 (formerly the British North America Act, 1867) which established Canada as a confederation, royal assented by Queen Victoria - Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India, Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and Defender of the Faith.

TWO

It's empires all the way down. Empires preserving.

THREE

(proclaiming again)

The lands we're on today...

TWO

The lands we're on today are the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples from across Turtle Island. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

ONE

We are grateful to be here on this land and recognize the historic oppression, violence, and genocide of Indigenous peoples and the ways in which it is ongoing.

THREE

It's all about land.

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 2

(In a clearing in the woods.)

ONE

This is the spot.

TWO

It's gorgeous.

ONE

Isn't it?

TWO

How'd you know about this place? You've come before?

ONE

My camp came here - I must've been eight. It's funny coming back, now that I'm older and bigger. Back then, I thought we'd walked for hours into the woods, that we'd only happened to discover this clearing by following the sounds of the river or some mesmerizing bird. A magical place. Totally secluded. Nothing but nature.

(a distant car honk, he chuckles)

But suburbia's just there, huh?

TWO

True. It feels the same though. We could lie down here and just pretend we're somewhere north. Muskoka, North Bay, Moosonee.

ONE

There's something... I don't know.

TWO

What?

ONE

Something sad about it. Coming back and seeing it different.

TWO

Different how?

ONE

I don't know. Smaller somehow? Not so tucked away.

TWO

You're looking at it wrong.

ONE

Am I?

TWO

You are. It's actually a bit of a miracle. Suburbia was there two decades ago and it's still there now. But this part of the land - these woods - they stopped the encroaching suburbs and kept these woods exactly for the things you said - for camps to come and to sit in wonder of nature and feel like they've left the suburbs and the city behind. An escape.

ONE

An escape.

TWO

An escape.

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 3

(In an office, by a water cooler.)

THREE

An escape.

FOUR

An escape?

THREE

We need an escape.

FOUR

From?

THREE

The Greenbelt. This government is suffocating us in. We're meant to build more homes but they've gone ahead and locked us in. Prime land - locked away!

FOUR

Prime *agricultural* land. Maybe this is for the best. We can still build housing. There's plenty of land that's not locked up behind the Greenbelt.

THREE

People want space. Comfort. Luxury. Big lots, white picket fences. The Canadian Dream.

FOUR

Is that even a th-

THREE

"Prime *agricultural* land" - don't be ridiculous. You know what's prime? The rates we'd be paying out to the farmers whose lands we can't develop. Those suckers would love to cash our big paycheques for their lands. What's there now? Dirt, mulch, and hay? Cow patties? No Greenbelt and we'd snatch up that land, pay the farmers enough cash to get out of the industry or go somewhere further and buy an even bigger farm if their heart's so set on the whole thing, and we'd build subdivision after subdivision of the types of homes every Canadian is desperate to get a hold of. A win on every front.

FOUR

And so why don't we do that? Why don't we get rid of the Greenbelt?

THREE

I'm not a fan of rhetorical questions. This isn't kindergarten. Let's hear it.

FOUR

The costs we as a society would bear would be immense. I mean, the environment's one thing -

THREE

Ah, the environment.

FOUR

Is one thing. An important thing, but one thing. But you talk about these farmers moving further out. We've got a huge province, a huge country - surely, there's plenty more land for them to farm. And they're pesky so close to our cities, getting in the way of homes and stinking up the place with noise and manure. But! Agricultural land isn't endless and you can't get it anywhere. Go north of Lake Simcoe and that's the Canadian Shield.

THREE

Ah so we are in kindergarten.

FOUR

Grade 6. That's when you learn about the Canadian Shield. And you know what? The Canadian Shield isn't made for farming. It's down here in Southern Ontario that all the good farmland is and once it's used up, dug up for homes, there's no going back. And if we're not feeding ourselves, we open ourselves up even more to the whims of the world. Beef from the States, berries from Mexico, grain from Ukraine, cheese from the EU.

THREE

You're appealing to my politics, aren't you?

FOUR

I make my point.

THREE

Point taken... So agricultural land is important and we need it in Southern Ontario because after all -

(singing the classic jingle)

Good things grow in Ontario.

(clearing their throat)

But that doesn't change the fact that we're in desperate need for housing. There's so much finger-pointing at us developers, which is frankly ridiculous given we're not doing anything we're not allowed to do. We build as much as we can within current laws, regulations, and guidelines; and the homes we build are desirable - just look at how much they're going for - and we can't keep up with demand; and we've got plenty of councillors, planners, and governments giving us their green lights and thumbs ups. We're the ones at least doing something to address the housing crisis. Yet, fee-fi-fo-fum, we're the baddies.

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 4

(Along a forest trail on the Escarpment, overlooking Downtown Hamilton.)

ONE

And what's your point exactly?

TWO

Point is: there's only another month of nice weather. If you're dragging your feet now, imagine dragging your feet in the snow.

ONE

Okay fine, let's do another couple kilometres today then.

TWO

Yes! Brilliant!

ONE

Why did I sign up for this stupid challenge anyway? They give us like a badge or something? You know I can make you a badge if you want one so bad, yeah?

TWO

That's exactly the enthusiasm I've been looking for! Okay, we keep following the markers.

ONE

Who puts these up anyway?

TWO

The markers? The Bruce Trail people do. Right?

ONE

I don't know. I'm asking you.

TWO

Yeah, the Trail people... Or is it the Greenbelt people? It's not the Province, is it?

ONE

Again, no clue.

TWO

I mean, all I know is it isn't Ford coming to personally do it himself.

ONE

Well not in this part of the province of all places.

TWO

Right. Hamilton. The Hammer. Steeltown. Ontario's Armpit.

ONE

The orange wave never turned to orange crush here in this little socialist republic.

TWO

Socialist republic?

ONE

Fine, maybe not quite.

TWO

Especially not on the Mountain.

ONE

"The Mountain" - I still can't believe they call it that.

TWO

Oh this again. We get it - you're from B.C., you've seen *real* mountains, and the Niagara Escarpment doesn't even compare.

ONE

It's a mole hill.

TWO

A pretty, pretty mole hill. With trees and little waterfalls and trails like this one that I just know you're loving every minute of.

(ONE smiles.)

TWO (Continued)

You're cute when you smile. Even if it is begrudgingly. Come on, I think I hear a waterfall up ahead.

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 5

(In a municipal council chamber,
after hours.)

FOUR

We're cash-strapped.

THREE

Every municipality is and you know who's to blame? The Province. The blame lies squarely on the Province. They download all these responsibilities, all these financial burdens, onto us but they don't download the requisite finances along with them, do they? And so we end up needing to half-ass everything. Do we improve our parks or fill the never-ending slew of potholes? Recreation programs or more frequent bus service?

FOUR

Money doesn't grow on trees.

THREE

No, it doesn't, does it.

FOUR

But it does grow. In those empty fields.

THREE

Explain.

FOUR

Houses. Residents. Property taxes. Get the equation right and suburbs bring a bigger tax base, economic activity, and we draw business to our town.

THREE

Suburbs? That's your solution? You look around at the state of the country and the world and think "Let's do more suburbs!"?

FOUR

We're in a housing crisis, so we build houses.

THREE

The McMansions entailed by opening development on those lands are not going to solve the housing crisis. They're not even the most efficient way to house the greatest number of people. You want to address the housing crisis - mid-rises, apartments, and condos.

You're really living in this binary world where it's either no housing or sprawl?

FOUR

Non-binary development. That's new!

THREE

Ha. Very funny.

FOUR

If people wanted condos, they'd move to Toronto and I hear that's not the most popular move right about now. They've got condos coming out the wazoo and those rents are skyrocketing. Doesn't seem to be solving their problem in the all-knowing wand-waving way you propose. But Newmarket is Newmarket. It's not Toronto and it's not Europe. Next you'll want bike lanes.

THREE

I mean, yeah, that would be nice.

FOUR

We've got certain incentives and so that means building the type of house - the type of home - that'll bring in a new population of Newmarketites.

THREE

I thought it was Newmarketers?

FOUR

Whichever one it is, more of them is good. Growth is good. And we can't have that unless we're inviting them in with shiny new homes that they can own. Own.

THREE

I don't know if homeownership is all it's cracked up to be.

FOUR

Well, and I mean this respectfully, your opinion doesn't exactly matter when you're in the minority and that's what folks are looking for.

THREE

Hm.

FOUR

People are immigrating to Canada to have a little slice of it they can call home and if they can get out of renting a closet in Toronto, they will.

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 6

(In a living room. ONE and TWO sit on a couch. TWO has a laptop open.)

ONE

Move the map out. We can't be picky about where we live.

TWO

We're not being picky.

ONE

Well, we're not being realistic if we think we'll get anything good under a million south of Sheppard.

TWO

Leave the city?

ONE

Babe, trust me. I get it. Living in Toronto was your dream. That stupidly adorable Scott Pilgrim obsession of yours basically cemented it. And we had that - student houses, questionable roommate situations, your dingy basement 'suite'.

TWO

It wasn't dingy when you'd come over. What was it - our fifth date? You lit that place up just being there.

ONE

And you nearly lit the place on fire with that burnt lasagna.

(TWO chuckles.)

ONE (Continued)

But doesn't it feel natural to move out? We're being adults. We're buying a house, or at least trying to. That's a big deal! And we talked about how we see our lives in five or ten years - the family we want to have. I don't see us doing that in the sort of house we want, not in Toronto. I mean look!

(ONE points to the screen.)

Can you believe these numbers? Sold over asking! By that much?

TWO

I don't even know how to rationalize that. Like growing up, I'd measure everything in chocolate milks. The \$20 game I was begging my mom for was, like, 14 chocolate milks or whatever. And then, I got a job and I measured a concert ticket by how many minimum-wage hours I'd have to slave away, holding blizzards upside-down and whatnot, to afford to go. But this? What do I measure this with? My yearly salary? Our savings?

ONE

I guess just millions.

TWO

Hm.

ONE

What're you thinking?

TWO

Huh, I guess it doesn't hurt to look... I mean, where are you thinking?

ONE

Ever been to Newmarket?

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 7

(At an agricultural convention. THREE stands by a booth. FOUR approaches.)

FOUR

Hey there!

THREE

Hello, hi.

FOUR

Are you a farmer?

(THREE looks at the sign for their booth, reading "FARMERS COOPERATIVE")

THREE

I am. Lucky guess!

FOUR

Ah, right. Sorry, um -

THREE

Are you a farmer?

FOUR

No. Well, yes - or I used to be. My father had a farm and, you know, I grew up with him and helped on the farm and things. But then he sold it a decade back and our family's been out of the farming game since.

THREE

And you still attend these? Dedicated.

FOUR

Well, I know these sorts of conventions aren't for everyone but I figured I'd come by and see what was happening - get a lay of the land, as they say - before really committing to what feels like a wild idea...

(FOUR pauses long enough.)

THREE

Do you want me to guess?

FOUR

Oh um, only if you want to - I was just thinking.

THREE

You want to get back into farming.

FOUR

Yeah! Exactly. I'm just feeling like I'm in my mid-30s now and there was always something I felt calling to me back when we lived on our farm.

THREE

That's a bit of a classic story around here.

FOUR

Is it?

THREE

(nodding)

That, and also the story of the suburbanite or city-dweller who starts off with a little vegetable garden and realizes "Woah, I wanna do this!" and so they come here to scope things out - "lay of the land" style. But...

FOUR

But what?

THREE

It's tough. I assume you've done some research? Unless you have intergenerational farmland, which sounds like you did until your family sold it off, or intergenerational wealth that can pull the miraculous feat of outbidding a land speculator that's trying to grab as much land as they can, well -

FOUR

What are the land speculators grabbing up land for?

THREE

Some of them are for investment portfolios. Lots of investors buying farmland right now... which, can you blame them? They see the value of farmland skyrocketing and they're saying, "That's a great investment. We might as well throw our money in behind that."

Others, well others are buying it up in hopes they'll get to develop the land or sell it to a developer. Some even buy Greenbelt lands for the hypothetical future that their lands are removed from the Greenbelt or protections are loosened.

FOUR

So what's that all mean?

THREE

Well it means that right now it's hard for new farmers like yourself to jump into it and start up your farm. Land speculators aren't within our control; the government would have to regulate that. But, if your heart's set on farming, some of us are getting a little ingenious about protecting our lands and working together. Farmland trusts and cooperatives - here, take a brochure.

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 8

(In a library. ONE is on the phone. TWO reads a book.)

ONE

(on the phone)

Okay yeah, I'll take the train in tonight. Pick me up at West Harbour? I'll send you a text when I get on.

(ONE listens to the other side of the call. TWO flips the page.)

ONE (Continued)

Okay, talk later. Okay, bye.

TWO

(still reading)

West Harbour? Going to Hamilton?

ONE

By necessity. I'm going home - to my family's home - in Ancaster.

(TWO closes the book.)

TWO

Ancaster. I think I went there for a wedding once a few years back.

ONE

Sounds about right. There's nothing else to do in Ancaster.

TWO

Isn't there some quaint little street or something? Reminded me of Main Street Unionville. Limestone buildings, pretty colonial churches, overpriced fashion boutiques.

ONE

That street runs for two or three blocks and then - whoosh - a sweep of suburbia all around.

TWO

The suburbs aren't all bad. You forget I'm from the suburbs too.

ONE

Scarborough is not the suburbs.

TWO

It is too.

ONE

That's the inner suburbs - it's different.

TWO

Okay, explain.

ONE

My suburbia is street on street on drive on cul-de-sac of single-family houses and nothing else. But you've got these towering buildings every now and again. It's a mix of 'forms' or whatever over there in Scarbz.

TWO

True, but it's still the suburbs, in relation to downtown. Or maybe we put it all on a spectrum.

(TWO illustrates this with their hands)

Skyscraper cities here, rural nothingness there, and our respective suburbs somewhere in between.

ONE

But also it's not just about what the housing looks like. At least Scarborough has good food and all those strip malls and plazas with interesting mom-and-pop shops and local businesses.

TWO

And what's over there in the suburbia of Ancaster?

ONE

The chains. The ensnaring chains of all the classic fast food spots and big box stores. I mean, there's only one small business - one pho place. One!

TWO

And that's what you base your definition of suburbia on? The lack of small business and unavailability of cultural foods?

ONE

Culture's definitely a part of the equation. Let's not pretend like the suburbs don't have their quirks - the glorification of the front lawn, the unnecessary yet commonplace tank-like pickup trucks, a third thing that I can't think of - Oh, I don't know, Costco memberships or something.

(An unseen voice, stage left, shushes them.)

TWO

(hushed, to voice)

Sorry.

(back to ONE)

I don't know if that counts as culture. All the culture's downtown. I'm sure even Hamilton has cultural things downtown - art galleries and indie theatres and food festivals. And maybe that sort of divide between no culture and culture is fine. Everyone in the suburbs has cars, or worst case scenario is able to hop on that one bus that comes by every 20 or 30 minutes, and can get to where the culture's at. Besides, isn't that a choice - a lifestyle choice. Not every part of the city should have all the same type of things. If we had high-rises and bike lanes and pho places in every neighbourhood, then where do the people who want to live in a spacious single-family home with there 2 cars and 1.5 kids go?

ONE

I'm not saying we should ban the suburbs or anything. I'm young. Maybe this is my young brain being all about the rush of the city with a dozen cuisines on a block and whatnot, but growing up in the suburbs was so disconnecting.

TWO

Disconnecting?

ONE

Yeah. A young queer teen like me trying to find my people. I just know getting more of the world earlier on when I was in high school would've been life-changing. But I felt trapped.

TWO

So how would you change the suburbs?

ONE

I don't know - I'd make it less conforming, more interesting. I'd have little stores with queer book clubs or movie nights. I'd have good shawarma and momos and bibimbap. I'd have public parks with plenty of benches and tables and fire pits and spots for families to gather and barbecue. I'd have townhouses and quadplexes and little laneway homes. And good transit.

TWO

At what point do you change the suburbs so much that they're no longer the suburbs?

(The unseen voice shushes them again.)

END OF SCENE.

ACT I

SCENE 9

(Darkness. And then, a golden light from above - God-like or maybe sun-like. No, some sort of game show host?)

THE VOICE

Welcome to a Campfire Conversation, brought to you by... Metamucil and Petro Canada.

(Lights up. A forest clearing again. This time there's a campfire in the middle, alight. ALTO, VAL, PIERRE, and MARIAM are sat on logs around the fire, facing the audience.)

VAL

Petro Canada?

(Every time the voice speaks, the golden light beams down on them.)

THE VOICE

Cooorrect! Now, let's introduce our four campfire conversationalists. First up, Mariam!

(A spotlight on MARIAM.)

THE VOICE (Continued)

Hailing from Brampton, Mariam is a high school physics teacher and moved here from the United Kingdom seven years ago. Mariam turns 42 next month, making her a Taurus¹.

THE VOICE

Next, here's ALTO!

(A spotlight on ALTO.)

PIERRE

Like the instrument?

¹ this should be the zodiac sign of the following month from the performance

THE VOICE

I'm sure Alto's never heard that one before. Alto comes to us from Niagara Falls and works on - you'll never guess - a winery. Say hi, Alto.

ALTO

Hi Alto!

THE VOICE

Hm, he thinks he's funny. That's cute. Moving onto our third campfire conversationalist: Pierre.

ALTO

Like Trudeau?

THE VOICE

Do you hear that, Alto? Crickets. And I'm not talking the lovely forest ambiance. Back to Pierre. Pierre lives in sunny Guelph and recently attended his daughter's convocation from her MBA program - business runs in the family, eh Pierre? And last but certainly not least, Val!

VAL

(looking up)

Can I?

THE VOICE

Can you what?

VAL

Can I introduce myself? I feel like some of these have been questionable. No offence.

THE VOICE

Questionable?

VAL

Yeah, like we're not even getting all the same info for each conversationalist. Mariam's the only one who gets her age announced, which is questionable. And what does Pierre do for work? Business? That's vague.

THE VOICE

Fine. Pierre's 65 and Alto's 29.

ALTO

I turn 30 in two months.

THE VOICE

Chip on your shoulder, Alto?

PIERRE

(to VAL)

I didn't ask the voice to conceal my occupation. I work in adhesives.

VAL

Adhesives?

PIERRE

Stickers, labels, tapes. If it sticks, we sells it.

MARIAM

Is that really your motto?

THE VOICE

Let's get this back on track, folks. Val, go ahead. But we don't have all day for intros so keep it snappy please. We've got a campfire conversation to get to after all.

VAL

Hey everyone, I'm Val. 33. My pronouns are she/her and I'm a visual artist - paintings mostly. I live in Riverdale, moved there in my twenties, and I love it.

PIERRE

Where's Riverdale?

VAL

Toronto.

PIERRE

That's very Toronto to presume we should know that. Where'd you grow up?

VAL

Oshawa.

ALTO

Our condolences.

THE VOICE

All done, Val?

VAL

Sure.

THE VOICE

Great, let's get the convo going. Here's a prompt. What are your favourite things about this province of ours?

ALTO

Ontario?

THE VOICE

Yuh-huh.

MARIAM

Well, definitely not the politics.

VAL

Or the arts funding.

ALTO

Or the transit.

PIERRE

The voice asked for good things. Let's maybe try to at least start off positive.

ALTO

That's no fun.

VAL

I'm sure we'll get to complain to our hearts' content later, if the voice permits.

(All four of them look up. All quiet.
There's no light and no voice.)

MARIAM

Is he gone?

ALTO

I think so?

(Another beat, eerie, and then...)

THE VOICE

Sorry folks, I was muted. You know how that is, scrambling for the button to - anyway, back to your favourite things. Don't make me call on you one-by-one.

PIERRE

I'll go. It's cliché, but for me it's family. I've got family all over the province and visiting them has me and mine dotting around. Who knows if we'll spend Christmas in Oakville with the in-laws or head to Collingwood for my brother's cottage. So that's what this province means to me. I look at a map and see my family.

(he looks around at the others, a bit vulnerable)

Who's next? Mariam?

MARIAM

Sure. For me, I'd say art and culture. Maybe it's this Old World versus New World mentality coming originally from Pakistan but more recently from the UK and thinking that Canada is like this super sterile country with no real culture to speak of but there's plenty of it. Even and especially where I live in Brampton.

VAL

I mean that's also a total erasure of Indigenous arts and cultures.

MARIAM

You're right. I had no idea about any of that and I still don't think I see it out in the world as much as I should.

VAL

So you thought there was no art or culture here... but now?

MARIAM

Culture is everywhere - maybe food is the easiest way to really see it around us, in our communities. The food in Brampton is to die for, same with North York, or Scarborough, or Downtown Toronto. It's the diversity. Cultures side by side but also in fusion. And then art, well, as an artist you'd know, there's so much of it! You can go with some of the classics like the Group of Seven - these gorgeous paintings of nature and landscapes - or the contemporary stuff that newer and emerging artists are creating and putting in local galleries - it's wonderful.

ALTO

See, that's my favourite thing about Ontario - the nature. Niagara's got so much beauty and wilderness to explore. There's more to see there than the Falls. Niagara Glen. Trails. Short Hills Provincial Park.

PIERRE

There's also plenty of golf links and clubs out your way.

VAL

And wineries.

ALTO

Ah yes, golf. The biggest waste of space, money, and natural resources.

PIERRE

You've seen a map of this country, yeah? We're not exactly hurting for space.

ALTO

But imagine if they were all public parks or restored back to wilderness with the occasional trail running through them. Golf is so... sanitized and privileged.

PIERRE

As opposed to the working class culture of your winery?

ALTO

I work there. I don't own it. And yeah, wine is for the people. Everyone loves wine.

MARIAM

Well I don't. I don't drink wine.

ALTO

Fair.

THE VOICE

Speaking of wineries: did you know that much of the wineries in Niagara Region are part of the Niagara Tender Fruit and Grape Area within the Greenbelt?

MARIAM

That's a fun fact.

VAL

Why again are Metamucil and Petro Canada sponsoring what appears to be a blatant ad for the Greenbelt?

THE VOICE

This isn't an ad for the Greenbelt. It's a campfire conversation - a forum for discussion. Has everyone here heard of the Greenbelt?

(They all nod.)

THE VOICE (Continued)

Good. Now discuss.

MARIAM

(to the others)

I don't think he's very good at his job. Imagine I did that in my classroom. Has everyone heard of quantum mechanics? Good. Now discuss.

ALTO

Mariam, coming out swinging!

PIERRE

Topic's the Greenbelt.

ALTO

What're your thoughts then, Pierre? Greenbelt - yay or nay?

PIERRE

It's more complicated than that.

VAL

Break it down for us.

PIERRE

Okay, so what are the objectives of the Greenbelt? What did it actually set out to do?

VAL

Protect wilderness and farmland - environment and agriculture.

ALTO

And recreation, supporting small towns and businesses, like the aforementioned winery I work at.

MARIAM

But also sprawl, no? We're not meant to be building subdivisions on wild land or Greenbelt land.

VAL

Is that part of it?

PIERRE

It is.

VAL

Not doing the greatest job then, is it? Isn't there sprawl everywhere?

ALTO

I don't know about 'everywhere'. I imagine the Greenbelt like a little lasso or, I guess, a belt around the GTHA, holding our cities in toward the lake, keeping us in check

MARIAM

Right, like in Brampton, we've got the Greenbelt to our west, which means we can only grow so much.

VAL

No wonder we've got a housing crisis.

PIERRE

There is still plenty of land on your side of the Greenbelt to build. Georgetown is right up against the Greenbelt, sure, but there is lots of land to last us at least another decade in Halton and Peel.

ALTO

Do we want another decade or two of this though? Growing out.

VAL

(to PIERRE)

What do you mean our side of the Greenbelt?

PIERRE

I'm in Guelph. There isn't a lasso for us. There's no Greenbelt to our west - just lots of land with farms and little hamlet communities.

ALTO

No, but seriously, this growing out thing. Like Val, you're in Riverdale. There's a subway line. There are streetcars. Isn't it like some of the most valuable land in the whole province? Prime stuff. Then why's it mostly these single family homes? Why're we looking to create new suburbs called Meadowvale and Havencreek in the middle of nowhere when we can build up?

VAL

I feel like the reason Riverdale's nice is because of the way it looks. Imagine condos and skyscrapers on both sides of the Don. That's horrendous.

MARIAM

We could just have better transit. People can live further from downtown and commute in, for work, for friends, shows, and culture. It seems the solution isn't about building in these quieter neighbourhoods - ripping them up for concrete, metal, and glass - but having properly good transit. In the UK, complaining about the trains is a national pastime. They think departures every half hour from sleepy seaside towns of 10,000 is poor. Meanwhile, we've got hourly trains

from Toronto to cities of half a million. They don't know how good they've got it.

VAL

Well, we know how bad we've got it.

ALTO

Do we? I don't think we do or else we'd be dreaming bigger. We don't know how good things could be. And I think we should question seeing everything as getting in and out of Toronto. Try getting from Niagara to Waterloo - a two hour drive becomes a four and a half hour transit with two transfers in Burlington or a five hour transit with a transfer in Toronto. Toronto!

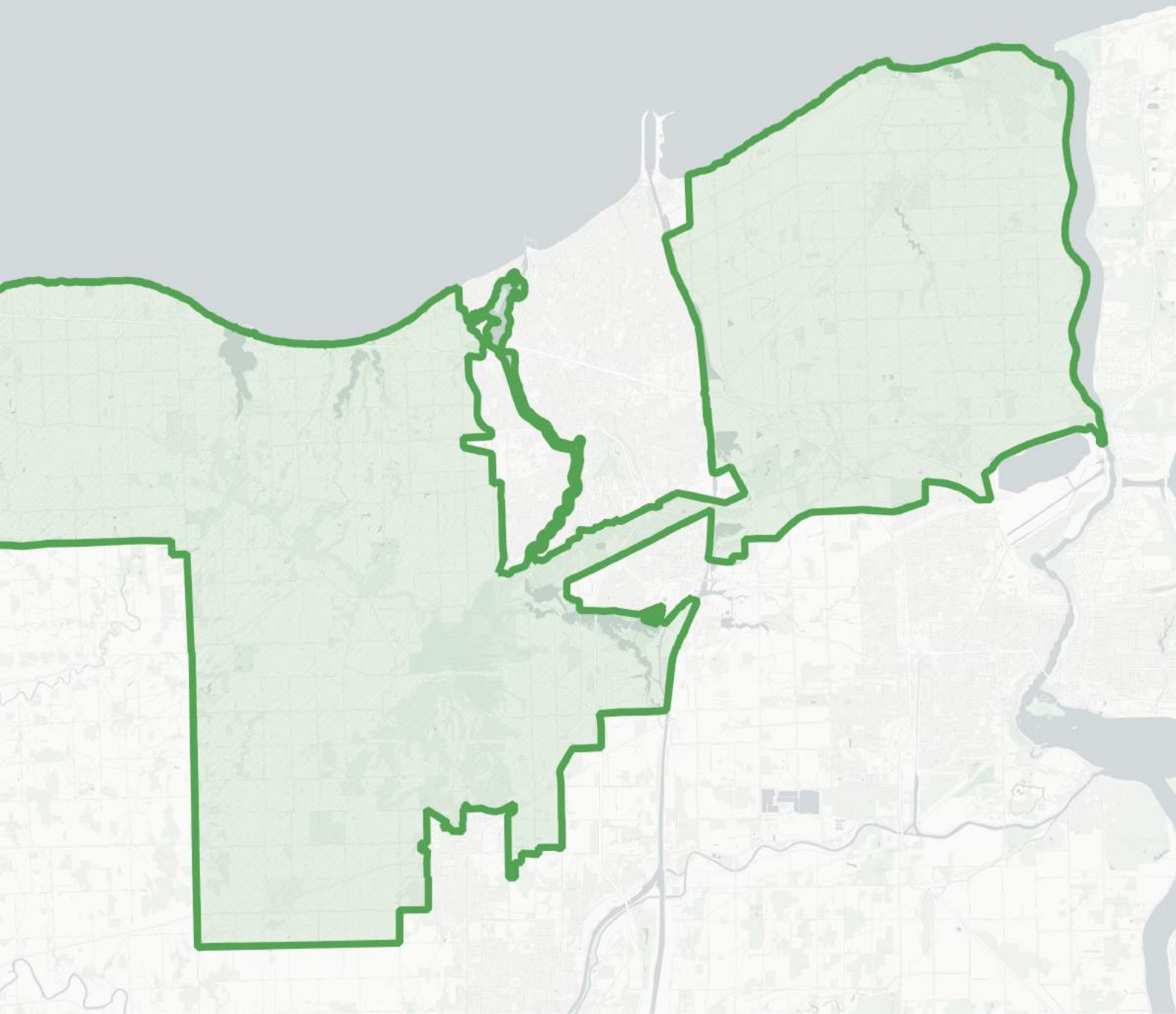
THE VOICE

Hey my little campfire conversationalists, I'm just gonna slip away now, but looks like you've got a good convo going so don't mind me. Discuss away!

(ALTO, VAL, PIERRE, and MARIAM don't notice THE VOICE, engrossed in the conversation. They keep chatting, as the lights fade.)

END OF ACT.

Act II



ACT II

SCENE 1

(ONE and TWO stand on a dark stage. It seems perhaps they are nowhere, standing, maybe floating, in nothing... existing before the Earth and before the Universe. THREE acts as a narrator. We've been here before.)

THREE

In the beginning, there was...

ONE

God.

THREE

In the beginning, there was...

TWO

Everything...

(looking to THREE)

Wait, haven't we done this bit?

THREE

(unfazed)

In the beginning, there was...

(FOUR enters. ONE and TWO make space, shifting.)

ONE

Who's - Is this the part where I talk about what God did? Because I thought we went over this.

THREE

(ignoring ONE and TWO)

In the beginning, there was...

FOUR

The Sky World.

(beat)

And in that World was a woman - Sky Woman. One day, Sky Woman fell through a hole in the dirt of that World. As she fell she grasped at the earth, but her grip did not save her from the fall. Rather she had clutched in her hand some of the plants and seeds of that World.

Below the Sky World was our world - an endless water, only inhabited by water animals. A flock of water birds noticed the Woman and flew to soften her fall, bringing her down to rest on Turtle's back.

Thanking the animals for their help, she asked if she could have some land on Turtle's back so she could grow plants, medicine, and food for nourishment. One by one, the water animals tried to bring back dirt from the bottom of the water - first loon, then beaver, and all the rest until, at last, it was muskrat's turn, returning with a clump of dirt in his paw.

Sky Woman spread the dirt on Turtle's back - shell growing and dirt multiplying as she danced. Planting the seeds of the Sky World, the dirt on Turtle's back came to life with plants and trees for as far as she could see.

THREE

The lands we are on today...

FOUR

Are those lands - the lands from the dirt at the bottom of the water, from the dirt the animals together tried to collect, the lands on the Turtle's back.

THREE

The lands we are on today...

FOUR

Are shaped by four rivers - the Credit, the Humber, the Don, and the Rouge. Touch the waters of Lake Ontario. Are plentiful with medicine and food and animals and fish. Have forests, meadows, rivers, hills, and shores.

THREE

The lands we are on today...

FOUR

Are covered by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum - a peace agreement between the Anishinaabeg and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, signifying the land as the dish to be shared by all who live on it, responsibly and in cooperation. Are to be protected, with consideration for how our actions and inactions affect

all - humans, trees, animals, water, and land. Is understood as something not to be owned but to be shared with all beings.

Stewardship. ONE

Protection. TWO

Until... THREE

Empire. ONE

Empire. TWO

END OF SCENE.

ACT II

SCENE 2

(A forest trail. In this scene, the stage is divided into three areas - the front of the stage, the back left, and the back right. Front centerstage is a signpost with two unlabelled arrows, pointing to the two dark sections at the back of the stage. Behind the signpost (back centerstage) is a projection screen, currently unseen.)

(ONE and TWO enter from the left, walking along the illuminated front of the stage, continuing their hike along the Escarpment.)

ONE

We're getting to the falls soon, yeah?

TWO

Which falls?

ONE

Niagara. Niagara Falls.

TWO

Niagara - what? We're still in Hamilton.

ONE

We've been walking forever.

TWO

You agreed to do a couple more kilometres. It's only been like 30 minutes.

ONE

I'm tired.

TWO

Okay, fine. We'll take the next offramp trail.

(ONE notices the signpost.)

ONE

Oh great! Here we are.

(to TWO)

We have ice cream at home, yeah? I wanna put my feet up, have ice cream, and watch the most mind-numbing reality tv... as a treat.

TWO

You know we only did six kilometres today, right?

(beat)

But yes we have ice cream.

ONE

Yes! Great, home time.

TWO

Hm, the markers are gone.

ONE

What?

TWO

The markers - the Bruce Trail markers.

(ONE looks around.)

ONE

Okay weird, but that's not a problem. We've got our phones for a reason.

(reaching for their phone)

Let's see which one gets us out.

TWO

No, let's - let's do this old school. No tech.

ONE

(amused)

No one's watching. We're not winning any prizes for deciding to swear off our phones, go back in time, and try figure out where to go by licking a finger and sticking it the air to see which way the wind's blowing.

TWO

It ruins the fun.

ONE

You know what ruins the fun? Getting lost. Here, I'll check.

(ONE pulls out their phone, tapping and squinting. Something's not right. ONE's confused.)

Well, this isn't on the map.

TWO

(scoffs)

What do you mean?

ONE

Like see this trail we're on? It's not on the map.

TWO

Let me see.

(TWO looks over ONE's shoulder.)

Oh. It's not on the map.

ONE

Ooh aah, we're in uncharted territory.

TWO

I mean, there's clearly a path and a sign. People *have* been here.

ONE

Right, but it's not on the map - *la carte, ce n'est pas sur la carte* - uncharted.

TWO

Okay, French Dora the Explorer.

ONE

Are you talking to yourself?

TWO

Funny. Anyway, it should be the path on the right. That way's south. It'll get us to a road.

ONE

See, I'm feeling left.

TWO

What?

ONE

My gut's saying left.

TWO

(holding back)

O-Okay, well - here's what we'll do. Let's follow your lead and if after a minute or two, it doesn't look like we're getting to a park or a road or -

ONE

(interrupting)

Civilization.

TWO

Then we come back and go my way.

ONE

Sure, as long as we get home.

(ONE and TWO walk to the left of the signpost, entering the unlit back left. Lights on the back right, as lights dim on the front of stage. On the right, a podium is now visible. The projection screen turns on. The PREMIER enters.)

(PROJECTION: The title "Weekly Briefing & Announcements" and subtitle "May 9th, 2045" in a serif font. In the corner, a familiar but updated Trillium logo, from the future.)

PREMIER

(nonchalant, this announcement like all the others)

Thank you everyone for joining us. A few important announcements today.

(PROJECTION: A stock photo of a family wearing Respro Fire Brigade masks.)

PREMIER (Continued)

First, a reminder about the 'Masks for All' program my government updated two years ago and that, thanks to our partnership with Shoppers Drug Mart, is rolling out today. That's 50 million masks distributed this week - two for every Ontarian - with another 50 million on the way for next week. My government is also in talks with protective eyewear suppliers for what we expect to be a sizeable delivery of glasses for those particularly susceptible to particulate matter.

Thank you to Minister Williams and her staff in the Ministry of Natural Disaster & Environmental Response for quick action to meet this year's earlier smoke season.

(PROJECTION: A two-week forecast, showing multiple days with 'remain indoors' warnings.)

PREMIER (Continued)

As announced last Friday by our Air Monitoring & Forecasts Initiative, we can expect an air quality health index of above 10 from the BC wildfires next week, with the following week prolonging an AQHI of over 10 due to the anticipated Northern Ontario fires. Northern municipalities, districts, and counties have all been asked to coordinate their local response units and prepare evacuation plans based on these forecasts.

(PROJECTION: Back to the title slide.)

PREMIER (Continued)

In the last election, my government ran on a three-pronged platform of environmental resiliency, meeting our housing needs, and investing in critical infrastructure that keeps us moving and growing. A significant part of this commitment is looking at our cities and communities. Today's announcement delivers on these priorities.

(PROJECTION: 2005 Map of the Greater Golden Horseshoe, showing urban development at the time and the then-newly introduced Greenbelt.)

PREMIER (Continued)

Forty years ago, when I was growing up, Southern Ontario looked like this. There was plenty of land for housing and a need to protect the environment. The Province pursued the Greenbelt to shape how the region would develop.

(PROJECTION: 2024/Current Map of the Greater Golden Horseshoe)

PREMIER (Continued)

Twenty years ago, our cities had grown and the housing crisis reached a peak for its time. With significant immigration targets and homes not being built fast enough, the government considered whether to adapt the Greenbelt to meet these challenges. In fact, it all caused some political contention back in that day.

(PROJECTION: Aerial image of a suburban subdivision.)

PREMIER (Continued)

However, there remained enough non-Greenbelt land to continue the growth of our cities and communities and

to build the types of homes that Ontarians want to live in.

(PROJECTION: 2045 Map of the Greater Golden Horseshoe, with visible suburban expansion reaching the boundaries of the Greenbelt. The region is grey with development, save for the Greenbelt, which runs through the sprawling region.)

PREMIER (Continued)

As government was in 2024, we're now at another impasse. Every Ontarian deserves the opportunity to own a house. Yet we do not currently have land available to build outward and to create the comfortable and enjoyable communities we all aspire to. That is why, in honour of the fortieth anniversary of the Greenbelt, I'm proud to announce that my government is introducing a new plan that will ensure we continue the spirit of the Greenbelt into the second half of the century.

(PROJECTION: A title slide reading "The Ontario Greengate".)

PREMIER (Continued)

The Ontario Greengate will open the door to more homes in key communities which have been held back in recent years - closed in by the previous Greenbelt. Hamilton will see 9000 acres open to the development of new homes, 10,000 in Markham, and 20,000 acres in Bowmanville, to name a few. These communities and others like them will expand, making use of the ample land in our Province.

(PROJECTION: 2045 Map of the Greater Golden Horseshoe with the 'Greengate'. This is the current Greenbelt but whittled away along the inner ring (Hamilton, Brampton, Markham, Oshawa) and with missing sections, which are labelled 'Corridors'. These now non-protected lands connect St. Catharines to Niagara Falls, Hamilton to Brantford, Burlington to Cambridge, Milton to Guelph, and Richmond Hill to Newmarket.)

PREMIER (Continued)

The Greengate also opens up development along five corridors connecting St. Catharines to Niagara Falls, Hamilton to Brantford, Burlington to Cambridge (and the Greater Waterloo region), Milton to Guelph, and Richmond Hill to Newmarket along Yonge Street.

(PROJECTION: Left image: Bulldozer digging into the land. Right image: Pouring asphalt, constructing highways.)

PREMIER (Continued)

These gates through the old Greenbelt will mean building out single-family homes and communities, as well as the infrastructure, like utilities and new highways, needed to support these suburbs.

Ontarians know that we need housing. The past twenty and forty years have been a time of unprecedented lateral growth, particularly in Southern Ontario, and removing significant corridors from the Greenbelt will allow for another few decades of this type of growth.

I'll now be taking questions.

(The projection screen turns off. Lights off on the back right, PREMIER gone. The front is lit instead. ONE and TWO return to the trail.)

TWO

Ah-ha! See.

ONE

You don't have to be a sore winner.

TWO

I mean, that option didn't look so promising to me, even from here.

ONE

Yeah, fair point. I don't know where that trail leads but it seemed a little grim? Whatever, let's just get home.

(ONE and TWO choose the other trail, walking into the now-empty darkness of the back right. Lights dim on the front and come up on the back left. On the left, the TEACHER enters.)

TEACHER

Alright, class. It's ten past the hour, meaning our lesson's begun and I expect iRings off fingers and PearPhones out of sight.

(pointing at an audience member)

Andrea, stop whispering into your iRing. Between this and the perpetual lateness - always blaming construction on Eglinton like that's not a tale as old as time and something you should just factor in by now - let's talk after class.

(TEACHER snaps fingers and the projection screen turns on.)

(PROJECTION: Slide with title: "Unit: Our Province", subtitle: "Lesson: The Greenbelt & Ongoing Reforms")

TEACHER (Continued)

Our lesson today is on the Ontario Greenbelt. And, by way of recapping what we looked at last week, let's begin with a map of the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

(PROJECTION: A map of the GGH of 2045 with urbanized areas mostly as they are today. Depending on how the map is designed, some differences to be played with can include (not actual predictions): Peel Region has been dissolved, Milton is now a city, etc. Importantly, this map shows the Greenbelt. This Greenbelt of the future is the same as today's but with additional extensions in a different shade of green, including a new ring that surrounds Guelph, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Cambridge, and another around Brantford. There are also independent Greenbelt additions around the cities of Barrie and Peterborough.)

TEACHER (Continued)

So, a little ancient history for you! Back in the 80s, the Algonquins of Ontario submitted a land claim, seeing as the Crown never entered into an agreement with them. In the 90s, they enter into negotiations that continued into the 20s, when finally after all those decades, Ontario's first modern constitutionally protected treaty is established in 2027. Here's a map!

(PROJECTION: The actual map from the currently ongoing real-life land claim showing the Algonquins of Ontario Settlement Area Boundary - an area in Eastern Ontario that includes Algonquin Provincial Park and Ottawa.)

TEACHER (Continued)

This successful land claim and new treaty got us collectively thinking differently about the Province. About the way the Province, and the country as a whole, interacts with Indigenous nations, peoples, and communities. What's the nature of that relationship? How is land tied into that? How are conflicting laws considered? We can think back to our lesson on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. Can anyone think of how those might apply? Anyone?

(beat, no one answers)

See, the TRC called on all levels of government to reconcile Indigenous and Crown constitutional legal orders -

(reading from their notes, from the TRC's 2015 report)

"including the recognition and integration of Indigenous laws and legal traditions in negotiation and implementation processes involving Treaties, land claims, and other constructive agreements" and to reaffirm the nation-to-nation relationship. So, how does this all tie into the Greenbelt?

The second half of the 20s saw a significant push across communities and sectors around housing, the environment, and social wellbeing. Non-profits, NGOs, mutual aid societies, and community land trusts were all engaging in grassroots programming, crafting and implementing interesting new interventions, and advocating for better policy from the Province and federal government.

And in 2029, realizing that the old implementation of the Greenbelt was good but required strengthening to further protect environmentally and agriculturally sensitive lands and to better curb sprawl, the Premier announced three measures - 1) Additions to the Greenbelt to protect land around Guelph, Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge, Brantford, Barrie, and Peterborough.

(PROJECTION: The map flashes these added areas to emphasize the point.)

TEACHER (Continued)

2) New urban planning guidelines and regulations that require and incentivize municipalities to densify within existing settlement boundaries, rather than pursuing sprawl.

And 3) A series of negotiations and consultations with the Indigenous peoples and nations who have lands, treaties, and claims in the Greater Golden Horseshoe and along the Greenbelt.

As you might expect, these talks took the better part of the 30s, but they resulted in agreements, treaties, and transfers of responsibilities on a nation-to-nation basis. Indigenous laws and practices were deferred to on a number of issues, particularly on land stewardship and conservation. These agreements returned Greenbelt lands to Indigenous stewardship, including traditional land management and protection.

These talks were by no means easy and, if you follow the news, you'll see that they continue. It turns out it isn't easy trying to hash out the balance, if there is one, between Indigenous rights, stewardship, and land back and the colonial Canadian system of private property rights and Ontarian planning legislation.

(to random audience member)

In fact, Colin, your mother's working as a planning lawyer on these consultations, isn't she?

(beat)

Anyway, I've done a lot of talking, so now turning this over to you. I want everyone to use your desks to interact with the maps I've just beamed you all. Play with the timeline. See the urbanization grow from the 1940s onward and how it came to meet the Greenbelt of the early 2000s. Then, use your Gen AI toolkits to investigate what some of the alternative realities may have been if we hadn't made those choices in the 20s. Where might we be today? How do cities, suburbs, forests, meadows, farms, orchards, vineyards, and lakes interact? I want you to think about how these places affect one another and how they affect us. Housing, wildlife, recreation, climate, Indigenous rights, commute times, municipal politics, transit, highways, wellbeing. You've got infinite possibilities and, as you'll see playing with the maps and models, it's not a dichotomy. So get creative, think outside the box, and think how you want to see the region -

today, in twenty years, in a hundred years, and seven generations into the future.

(There's a little ping. The TEACHER lifts up their hand, checking their ring for a notification.)

TEACHER (Continued)

Oh, okay, there's a delivery for me at the office. Be back in a bit.

(The TEACHER exits. The projection is off. Lights down on the back. ONE and TWO return to the signpost and back to the trail.)

ONE

And ha!

TWO

How does neither one get us back home?

ONE

I have no idea - they both just seem to keep going.

TWO

At least my trail looked more promising than yours. It's pretty and lively down that way. Yours was bleak.

ONE

Your trail?

TWO

Okay, fine. We're getting caught up in it. I always said we were competitive! You never saw it.

ONE

Competitive? I was the one who - Anyway. Guess the only way back where we came from is literally to retrace our steps.

TWO

Race you there!

(TWO rushes off, exiting left.)

ONE

Oh no you don't.

(ONE follows behind.)

END OF ACT.

END OF PLAY.

