Collage

PAINTINGS COVER EVERY WALL OF BETH'S HOUSE, EYE LEVEL to ceiling. A huge wave rising. Boulders on a shore with clouds like drifts of stone above them. Small gilt-framed villages. A large abstract that could be an oriental robe: rectangles of grey and black and an impossible cerulean relieved by slashes of stark white. Not a still life among them.

I've been in Beth's house before, but the Covid gap makes the place seem new, even though nothing has changed except the dining room table, which is awash in objects.

"Awash" gives the wrong impression. In the centre is a heap of stocking-like shapes with cords dangling from the tops, the thready undoings of some former mobile. Small white stones take up a vaguely rectangular space. On one side, shells that range in size from tiny scallops and periwinkles to the spiralling former homes of hermit crabs and whelks; on the other side, black stones that look like puddles of polished marble. A handful of twigs. A neat stack of Japanese papers in intricate patterns. A few skeins of bright embroidery thread. Thin blocks of wood—some the size of a matchbox, others as big as a deck of playing cards—are stacked, roughly cut from what looks like unfinished shiplap siding. A scattering of pressed dull-red maple leaves. The materials aren't rare or expensive, just bits and bobs she's been

gathering on her walks for years and the gleanings that friends have brought her.

"I like how they feel," she says, her finger caressing a length of chartreuse thread.

Centred in front of her chair is a finished "painting" of torn rice paper in soft blues, searching reds.

"The art comes from here," she says, punching herself lightly in the chest. "I don't think or plan, I just move bits of thread and paper and stones around until it feels right."

Beth leads me into the living room and sits in her wooden armchair. Beside her on a small table, dark twigs are silhouetted on a rectangle of bright white paper, a forest in moonlit snow. Nothing is glued in place. The pieces aren't mean to be permanent.

I think of the *alfombras de aserrín*, the sawdust "rugs" that Mexican families press over the cobblestones, working through the night before Christ arrives for Easter, creating brilliant images of the Holy Family, flowers, and crucifixes, all of it obliterated within hours by the feet of singing pilgrims moving down the street behind life-sized wooden statues of Jesus, Mary, and Saint John the Apostle.

When a piece is pleasing, Beth moves the construction—she calls them her collages—from the dining room to this little table by her armchair, where it stays until a new idea, another urge, moves her. Then she sets the collage on the floor, photographs it, and dismantles it, returning the materials to her dining table to become something new.

"It is important that the materials are there on the table, where I can pass and pause and create spontaneously," she says, waving an arm over the sticks and stones and scraps of paper and thread. "I just go to the table and—*whoosh!*—I'm off on a journey."

"Out of yourself? Or deeper in?"

"Oh, deeper. Deeper. I go there and the world moves away."

"I'm not a scavenger by nature," Beth says. "It is a miracle that I came to this thing that is so right for me."

On the day that Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, her friends from the Toronto Dance Theatre, David and his partner, Michael, were visiting. David is twenty years younger than Beth, still teaching dance at eighty-one. After Covid hit, he began choreographing dances in which each dancer recorded themselves individually, remarkable dances of isolation and hope. Every month, David sends out a "Postcard," an email collage of paintings, photographs, poems, song lyrics, musings on a single theme—the Blue Moon of August, Seasons of Change, Love—some of which have been collected as *A Handbook for Ecstatic Survival*. Beth calls these two creative men her pals, a round, loving word that she holds even closer than "friend."

"David has been keeping journals for as long as I've known him. They are a record of his travels, the beginning of every choreography. When he was visiting at that momentous time, he used my printer to print some photographs. He was trimming them for his journal and was about to throw away the thin white trimmings when I said, 'Wait! I can use those!' I took them to the dining room table, and that was the beginning of what is saving me now."

She takes out her iPhone and shows me photograph after photograph of white rectangles on black paper, ascending like crazy staircases, overlapping into the distance like doorways or a jumble of mismatched windows. She has images of more than eighty collages in her phone. My mind searches for meaning, but Beth isn't trying

to mirror the world so much as catch its spirit in some new arrangement of the basic elements of shape, colour, texture.

When Monet painted water lilies in his seventies, the blurred brush strokes were dismissed by critics as a symptom of cataracts. He was painting what he saw, they said. Now we understand that he was painting not what he saw, but what he felt. His creative powers weren't diminished with age; his focus had changed.

Beth doesn't cast about for theories as to why she does what she does at her dining room table.

"Beauty sustains me," she says.