

## Award-winning poet Matthew Walsh begins Hybla Residency



**By Nate Smelle**

Canadian poet Matthew Walsh is no stranger to the pulse of the city, but this summer, they found inspiration and solace in a different kind of rhythm—one shaped by the quiet beauty and slow pace of rural Ontario. Walsh, originally from Nova Scotia and now living in Toronto, is currently spending time at the Hybla Residency, a program that offers artists a tranquil environment to reflect, recharge, and reconnect with their work.

Walsh's debut poetry collection, *these are not the potatoes of my youth*, was published in 2019 to critical acclaim, earning shortlist nominations for both the Gerald Lampert Award and the Trillium Book Award for Poetry. Their second collection, *Terrarium*, released in 2024, continued to build their literary reputation and was recently shortlisted for the 2025 Trillium Award.

Walsh told Bancroft This Week they first heard about the Hybla Residency at the home of artists Roy Mitchell and Ken Fraser during a conversation with a mutual friend in Toronto. Attracted to the idea of escaping the city's noise and pressure, Walsh decided to spend part of their summer in Hybla.

"I haven't seen one piece of garbage, which is really cool," Walsh said. "I haven't seen any litter anywhere, which is great... And I

love how long things take. In the city, everything is so immediate, but here you kind of have to wait around for things, and it's kind of nice. That's how things should be. Things shouldn't be that immediate all the time. You need things to move forward to.

Currently staying in a trailer on the property, Walsh describes the experience as both creatively inspiring and personally grounding. At night, they have been enjoying the unique audio landscape of North Hastings listening to the sound of moths and other insects tapping gently against the glass as they fall asleep. Walsh compared this music to the distant roar of a race car, noting that it was a pleasant change to the scream of sirens and traffic echoing through downtown Toronto.

It's so beautiful, said Walsh. I'm staying in the trailer on the property, and at night all of these moths and stuff come up to the trailer and it sounds like you can hear the highway. But it's just all of these bugs tapping the glass. It's like really insane. It sounds like a race car, but in the distance.

The Hybla Residency encourages artists to engage with the local environment, and for Walsh, that connection is deeply felt. Upon exploring the community during their first week in Hybla, Walsh said they have already recognized how different people's perspectives towards nature are compared to people in the city.

In the city people think that animals are invading our space, but up here, the people realize that we're invading their space, Walsh said. So, it's a different way of speaking about nature. Say a deer walks up onto the property; it's not that they're invading our space. We're invading theirs. You know, they've been here for thousands of years, but in the city, people don't see it that way. So that's interesting, that switch of language and how we regard animals is different here.

Walsh has been using the residency to focus on two new poetry collections both still in development but already taking shape. They said the first book explores themes of work, capitalism, and the physical and mental toll of part-time labour.

The first one, I started back in April and I already have 16 poems for it, explained Walsh. It's about working part time jobs and capitalism; because they're like during the winter I was working so much to save money to so I wouldn't have to work so much in the summer. I was thinking about [my] body and all of the physical stuff you have to do, the part-time jobs and all the jobs you do to make ends meet. I'm also trying to make art on top of that.

According to Walsh, the second project is more personal, dealing with their father's recent medical issues. While Walsh doesn't impose deadlines on themselves, the pace of Hybla has offered the breathing room necessary to allow ideas to develop naturally.

I don't like to make plans, because that sets up an expectation, said Walsh. I don't want to stress myself out, so I'm just taking it day-by-day. I always have my notebook with me, so I'll write down details about all the little towns and stuff... I have been making notes, doing lots of reading and hanging out and talking mostly just taking it easy. But at night, usually I try to write a poem or finish like a chapter of a book. I'm just refilling my artistic well.

For Walsh, inspiration comes from small, often overlooked moments: snippets of overheard conversation, city walks, flashes of news headlines on subway screens. Their first book these are not the potatoes of my youth drew heavily from memories of adolescence and the independence of early adulthood. The second Terrarium was marked by the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

That kind of awareness the blending of personal experience with social critique is part of what makes Walsh's voice so resonant in Canadian poetry. And in Hybla, surrounded by trees, lakes, stars, and wildlife, they're finding the space to let that voice grow.

You actually stars up here, said Walsh. The moon has been gigantic! When I got here it was a full moon. And all of the clouds, all the shapes are crazy. You don't even really see clouds in the city anymore. It's really nice to actually see the sky ... and see what the sky is doing.

For Walsh, inspiration comes from experiencing the world they are a part of. Noting that their work deals with queer themes, Walsh

explained that they have crafted a lot of the poems for their new book from things they observed around them. ?I use those every day little details to create and build off of that... I am getting a lot of reading and writing done in Hybla which has been great. Roy and Ken are amazing hosts. Having the chance to disconnect and have time to work on my writing is crucial and an amazing opportunity.?

Walsh remains in Hybla until July 20, after which they'll head to Peterborough before returning to Toronto. But the time spent in this rural corner of Ontario has already left a lasting mark.