THE LINE

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We grew up in the suburbs, Scarborough and Mississauga, on streets with names like Ponytrail and Pharmacy. But like so many of the names we give to places they are just reminders of what used to be there.

Trails might be a good place to start thinking about the history of lines and the landscape. They started out as tracings of shorelines or well-trodden paths marking the best routes from one place to another. Eventually, things got a bit more complicated and we added a whole set of lines, like rows and concessions, to mark out these things called property. And then pavement, pipes, wires, and on and on. And then one day you show up in this world, surrounded by a whole set of lines you didn’t draw and learn pretty quickly what you can and can’t do amongst them.

We hated the lines that we found around us. They hemmed us in, kept us inside, in shopping malls, in backyards, on our front driveways, and in between all of these, mostly the insides of cars. Power-lines and asphalt kept things moving but kept us apart. The dream of all of these lines, fences, pipelines, roads, and sidewalks was to have the best of city and country in one place. In the end, it just felt like a constant reminder of how little there was of both.

After spending time in Markham, it became pretty clear to us that we were looking at a Mississauga or Scarborough in training—an exurb quickly transforming into a suburb. The Greater Toronto Area looks like a spill of development emanating from the CN Tower. Driving up to Markham you can see the edges of settlement pushing further out. Along 16th, there is a cheap pressure-treated fence on one side and cornfields on the other—dotted with signs advertising NEW! developments. That’s exactly how people described Mississauga 30 years ago.

The Line tries to represent this condition and sounds a warning or, at the very least, a quiet lament. The Line is a 60-foot-long snow fence we built in the middle of an empty field. Snow fences are supposed to shape the way drifting particles settle, usually to make things safer for cars moving really fast in a straight line. The Line is also a 15-minute video we projected on a 100-year-old barn, displaced from its original home a few kilometres away.

The video tells the story of that snow fence travelling around Markham, stopping at strip malls, parking lots, housing developments, farms, hydro fields, and so on, tracing the lines of signatures forged over time that write us as we write them.