

**DOUSING THE FLAME:
AN ECOCRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ENGLISH-CANADIAN
LOVE STORIES**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is written in three segments: a novel excerpt, an introduction to the genre of English-Canadian love stories; and a critical reflection on the creative process. The introduction to the genre is written in the style of a book introduction and is intended for a general audience. My ecocritical examination of love stories in English-Canadian fiction concludes that these stories tend to be banal subplots that are nonetheless deeply engaged with nature. In this thesis, “love” always refers to the intimate love shared between two lovers or would-be lovers, be they married or unmarried, gay or straight, very young or elderly. Western culture often posits marriage as the pinnacle of accomplished intimate love, though the books researched for this project profoundly object to this viewpoint. Furthermore, the tendency toward scant, emotionally-impotent, and distinctly un-sexy depictions of love doesn’t register indifference; it registers disillusionment. I assert that a meaningful, distinct, and supportive correlation exists between love stories and nature-human stories in these texts. Where more nature is present, more love is present and vice versa. Where nature is less visible, love is less visible and vice versa. I use the term “ecology of love” to address these intrinsic links—the *in between*—between humans and nature. The first section of the thesis explores this phenomenon through the story and characters of an original novel excerpt. The second section discusses the reasons for banality, which involve social ennui and disillusionment, geographic obstacles, moral propriety, and the unique conditions that arise in a nation of immigrants.

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Novel Excerpt:

Circle of Sunlight

Novel Excerpt: Circle of Sunlight

I stayed curled around Kattie, my little girl, all night. That's how we kept warm. Sleeping outdoors had been an unexpected turn of events. More honestly, everything had been unexpected. I suppose if you're a cowboy and used to a bed of pine needles and roof of wind, you can get a good night's sleep. But I was cold on the forest floor with the thin blankets upon me. I had unbraided my hair and laid it like a scarf across my neck. I buried my face into Kattie's wool toque. Cold wove through the trees and around my skin, but I tried not to wake Kattie with shivering. Worst of all, cold had filled my head, tangling my thoughts until I couldn't sort out past from future, worries from hopes, night from nightmare. When I most wanted to leave my husband far behind me—and that ranch, that marriage, and all the awful events that had come to pass—it would seem that he was nearly walking up behind me, just about to reach for my arm, a barn door swinging open behind him. It would seem that I would know his every thought, like someone was reciting the words in his mind into my ear. I've wondered if this is the way it is with all wives. We know too much. More than we want. We know our husbands more than they know themselves. I could see the tightness in my husband's jaw. Some people know hatred. Darby is one of them. I could feel it coming at me like a blade in the dark. But the whole earth was motion that night. Night air rushed through the evergreens, streamed over grass, stone and blanket. Stars slid up and over the dark dome of the sky. Leaves and twigs rustled under the paws of animals or the paws of wind. Darby's thoughts and anger came at me and washed over, while I held onto the small rise and fall breath of my daughter and tried not to tremble.

I was waiting for a cowboy. In the morning he would come, a man I hardly knew, whose name I couldn't even remember. He would return and lead us into an unknown future. I hoped it would be a future with comfort and company, with safety for my daughter and me. He had not wanted to leave us here alone. I knew that. But we didn't have enough supplies for all of us to

sleep out. If we'd gone with him, word would have gotten back to Darby. The cowboy had left the rifle with me, I suppose in case of animals or else other dangers. I could feel its weight pressing the blanket against my back. It was early April. The first bears would be just leaving their dens. The mothers with their new cubs were the most dangerous. Any provocation, or perceived provocation, could set them off. I struggled to remember: did they only come out in the day? Or could they pass us in the deep dark too?

The night breezed and whistled around me hour after hour. I held onto my girl. Finally, the war of dark, wind, and worry ended in truce. Night drained from the sky. The trees stopped creaking, and the forest birds awoke to whistle in the light of day. If I were still at the ranch, I'd be sifting through the stove ashes right now, looking for that one last red ember to start the day's fire. Instead, I peered over the chestnut curls of Kattie's hair at the graying around me and began once more to think of Harvey. The future must also bring love, I told myself. I wished for it. I started my own fire around that ember. Then warm at last, I fell into sleep.

The night didn't last forever. Nothing does. Perhaps in some places there is a thing called forever. Perhaps in England. The kind of forever of the great estates and timeless marriages, legacies of names, that sort of thing. But in the Cariboo forever is brittle as April ice. A paper of resolve. A marriage paper left out in the rain. My mind wanders easily. I have not begun where this story started. I'm going to tell you how I came to leave my husband and escape the ranch, but that's not the beginning either.

Before that cold night of sleeping in the forest, long before, a seed was planted. I believe in the miracle of biology. There's religion in a garden. Toss a few miniscule flecks into the ground, add water and light and there will rise the tomato plants, toppling over with sweet, red globes. How plants translate the language of light into the language of leaves, roots and fruit, I don't

know. But I do know that everything in our lives grows this way. We toss seeds in the mind and into the heart without knowing it. And if there is light, if there is water, something begins to grow. What grew for me began on an October afternoon.

It was a rather typical day at the ranch, except that a beef drive was on. Everyone was taking their cattle down to the city for slaughter, which meant more men would stay over, and I'd have to run about the kitchen to make sure I could pack enough food in them all—a much harder job than you might imagine. So I was hurrying in my work, tripping over Kattie and Chester, our hound, with baskets of laundry, buckets of potatoes, and pails of water. We had a stopping house, so I was used to being dropped in on by cowboys. I hardly looked up when three more men rode into the yard that afternoon. I only saw their number—and the calculation. Three more men plus Darby, Wesley, and Peter and the five cowboys already staying over, meant six more potatoes, double the batch of biscuits and no left-over roast for tomorrow. Perhaps I'd open a jar of pickles to add to the dinner. I heard Darby greet them as I lugged the potato bucket toward that lean-to shack known as the kitchen. I recognized the voices of two. They'd stayed over before. They were born-cowboys. Their fathers were cowboys, they were raised cowboys. They knew nothing else except the weight of hay and sound of padding hooves, the white smoke of breath at dawn. I didn't have much interest in conversation with born-cowboys, not after learning that many of them had never seen a newspaper and still believed the earth was flat.

“Any Goddamn fool knows the earth is flat. Can see it with yer own damn eyes. Don't need no book to know that.” That was what Teddy told me when I first arrived out to the Cariboo. He was illiterate. I'd laughed when he said it, and then quickly blushed when I realized he was earnest. You'd imagine it was the 1530s, not the 1930s. Vancouver was a long, long ways off. It's a strange country we live in. So big and wide that time drifts faster into some valleys and plains, and leaves others humbly untouched by change. Back in the city, I knew of people who had fancy radios in living rooms with great chandeliers, people who had traveled to many far

away countries and spoke several languages. But up in the Cariboo, cowboys collected around the dining table under a single twenty watt bulb and talked about whether it was possible that Indians spoke a real language.

“I swear sometimes those Indians is saying real things.”

“Course they’s saying real things. But only they knows what they’s saying. It’s not like real talk. It’s just grunts and hiccups that they can understand.”

Darby added, “No, that’s real talk there. That’s their own language. You just don’t have an ear for it.”

“Darby’s pretending he knows something!”

Darby looked over at Wesley, our farm hand, for confirmation, and so did everyone else. But Wesley put a big forkful of mashed potatoes in his mouth and kept busy cutting his roast beef. He didn’t like to talk about the Indian ways. Sometimes I think he wished he could scrub that red right off his skin.

Anyway, I was telling you about born cowboys and not born cowboys. Not born cowboys were the ones who simply came upon the cowboy life. They might have come from other countries—like Darby, from Ireland. They might have arrived penniless with nothing else to do. For many, the work was temporary until they found better employment. With hard times hitting everyone those days, I’m sure they were happy they had work at all, no matter how lean it left them. I lugged the potatoes into the kitchen, only registering the number of men that had arrived. I set the potatoes down and lifted the heavy washing tin off the stove. I carried it out the door and set it down on the grass. It was one of those early October days when the brilliant blue Cariboo sky pressed down onto a small yellowed earth, filling the spaces between chewing cattle, the fence posts and the dull grey sides of my washtub. I spilled the soap flakes into the water like a murky snow, an omen of winter to come. Beside me was a basket of Darby’s work clothes, the bed sheets from the cowboys who had left that morning, Kattie’s little dresses, and a few soiled

dishtowels. I never liked dunking my hands in that water. It was hard with minerals, and the soap was so coarse on my skin that afterward they'd be reddened for the rest of the day. I dunked in the first few clothes, pushed the billows of trapped air into the water.

That got me thinking about whales. My hands went about scrubbing those clothes, but my mind was deep underwater, following the powerful movements of whales as they made their soft, slow gallop through the ocean. So much happens beneath the rippling silver surface of the ocean. I twisted Darby's pants until the rain drained from the coils. I pushed in the bed sheets. What would it be like to touch a whale? Most people think animals are dumb, but I have always wondered if they might not know more than us. I pictured myself swimming along beside a great grey one. That's how I did everything in those days. In daydream. I'm sure I looked like I was doing a lot of things back then that I was only half doing—ironing sheets, putting a pot roast on the stove, calling Kattie inside. But underneath, I was somewhere else. I liked it that way. Hands can scrub clothes by themselves; you don't need to watch over them. My voice knew how to call the men in for dinner. My mouth remembered to eat. Of course, Kattie could call me out of my reverie with her questions or crying or kisses. But at that particular moment, she was feeding twigs to Chester who provided her with great entertainment by chewing them then wriggling his large tongue to spit them out. Of the four years I'd spent up in the Cariboo so far, I'd only been there for a portion of it. I'm very lucky in that way. When the wood floors are splintered and dusty beneath my worn feet, I simply go away in my mind to another place.

So I was sitting on the wash rock touching whales and up to the armpits in laundry water when the sound of walking nearby turned my head. I'd never seen him before. His shirt was steel blue. I didn't know his name. The sun was brilliant behind him, so he was nearly silhouetted.

"Excuse me, M'am. Could I bother you for a glass of drinking water?"

I blinked at the light. "By all means." I wiped my hands on my apron and walked absently over to open the rickety kitchen door. I filled a glass and carried it back out to him. The sun was

on his face now, glinting into the deep grey-blue of his eyes, so perhaps I looked at him a moment too long because I was thinking of the color of whales. The water passed between our hands. A circle of sunlight glinted off the surface. He lifted it. I looked away. A cool breeze passed over my arms. I smoothed my skirt. I'd forgotten why I was standing there and was about to walk away when he returned the glass to me.

"Thank you, M'am," he said, and he looked rather long at my own eyes which are dark brown and about as uninteresting as dirt. I nodded and carried the empty glass off to the kitchen with a smile still on my face.

That was the seed. I know it now, but I didn't know it then. I suppose it occurred to me right away that I wished he'd ask for another glass. But I was also relieved when he walked away. I could hear the blood thumping through my body.

Later, however, I was in the kitchen stirring milk into the potato mash and had Kattie on my hip (I still succumbed to holding her occasionally though she was three and plenty big enough to stand) when he came in by himself. Too shy for male company, Kattie squirmed in my arms, so I put her down to hide in my skirt. I turned to him to see what he wanted. He looked at his shoe and put his hands in his pockets. He looked at me with those whale eyes.

"I was wondering if you might spare another glass of water, M'am."

I nodded, and the three of us watched as the water sloshed down from the pitcher and whirled into a glass. Time slowed itself right down. We passed the glass between us, and I stole a peek at the whale backs again. He drank. The glass passed between us again. I tried not to touch his hand as I took it. They were small ordinary actions. But they were more. They were like a ceremony whose meaning we were still waiting to know.

"Harvey," he said. "Harvey Walcott."

“Annabelle,” I half whispered, with all the shyness as if I were passing him my nightgown. I have heard that there are stars in the sky that are so old, they explode. No one can hear it. No one at all. But it makes you wonder, what if you did?

Kattie tugged at my skirt for attention. I turned away from him quickly before he could see the blush rising in my cheeks.

I hope you will not think I’m a terrible woman for looking at a man while I was married to Darby. But if you do, there is little I can say in my defense. I combed the farthest recesses of my soul in those days and found no impulse or ability to stop. Besides, it was all perfectly harmless to me just then. It was just water. I had no plan to alter the course of my life. The reality of those hard economic times had led me into a hard work marriage. I didn’t yet imagine that any of that could change, though of course I wished it would.

Harvey left the kitchen and I pressed and pounded clouds of potatoes. Kattie was lying on her back, a clean dress on the floor, asking over and over when it would be dinner. That night there was a problem with the cattle, so Darby and the cowboys supped late. I had to leave the pot roast in the oven and potatoes in the pot and put Kattie off to bed. She was fretful about sleeping on account of all her nightmares, so I curled up beside her in her bed until her breathing became calm and regular. All the while, my heart beat hard inside me because I could hear the men come into the dining hall. The shuffle of work boots. Muffled men voices. I caught none of the words, but the tone imparted neither disaster nor relief. Chair legs slid over the hard floor. I heard Darby’s tense rumbling voice and the oven door open. Which voice was Harvey’s? I strained to listen. *That* one might be his. Softer, slower than the rest. With more in it. I stared up at the slanted ceiling over Kattie’s bed. So close I could touch it. I listened for his voice. On the other side of this roof, I thought, there are stars. Searing white pearls millions of miles away. I lay there thinking about all the things we don’t understand. Like the great distances between stars. And how another can inhabit us through a glance.

When I woke the next morning at dawn and looked outside, I saw only Darby and our farmhands, Wesley and Peter, in the blue yard. Sometimes cowboys leave at first light. Not always, but when it counts, they do.

“How many are breakfasting, Darby?” I yelled.

The barn door was open, and I could see him carrying the saddle blanket over to his horse. “Just us three,” he called back.

I creaked the door closed. They must have all left at once. Normally the news would have brought relief. Fewer mouths to feed. Fewer interruptions to my daydreaming. I might have time to sit for a moment and catch up on a bit of sewing. This time the news sat me down onto the bench. I stood in the middle of the kitchen with my arms folded, looking around at my disappointment for some long minutes. I would not be sad. There was no point. By the time the tea kettle was wobbling and whistling on the stove, I’d quite recovered myself. He must come back. He would come back. Sadness is best avoided. From here to Vancouver was about a two week journey with cattle, since the men had to walk the cattle slow so as not to burn all the fat off them. But the return—with the cattle gone—would only be five days. Of course, there were other stopping houses along the way. There was no proof that he would return here to our ranch. Indeed, in four years of living at the ranch, I’d never seen him, though I could tell by his manner that he’d been cowboying a while. But he must return. He must.

When the stove was lit and breakfast ready, I set the porridge bowl on the table and called the men. They came in with a rustle of boots and jackets and all the usual rubbing and blowing on fingers. Even in early October the dawn chill sank deep to the bones. I ladled the porridge into their bowls and poured the tea. I snapped more kindling into the stove, set the big pot on it, and poured the last water from the pail into it to warm for dishwashing. I bit down on my tongue. I’d forgotten to save a bit of water for the rest of the porridge, the bit I’d saved for Kattie and me which was getting rather stiff and thick on the backburner. The men were going on about ranches

and land prices. I carried the empty water pail and set it down a little loudly by the door while I fished through their jackets for my own.

“You need water, Annabelle?” Wesley asked, rising from his chair.

“Oh,” I feigned the usual surprise at his offer. “That’d be lovely. Thank you, Wesley.” He smiled widely.

Darby and Peter kept on talking. Of course, I do sometimes fetch my own water, if I run out before dinner when the men are all out in the field. But I prefer not to. The slope down to the well is so slippery in rain and a near suicide in winter ice. Luckily there is almost always some kind farm hand or cowboy to offer to do it for me. Wesley’s very good to fetch it for me so often. Darby does not offer. I do not resent him for it. Like all aspects of our marriage, he simply kept to what was most essential. We move around each other, quite aware that we were brought together more by mutual needs than by the soft suspicions that we might one day love each other.

Wesley returned with the water and another smile. I carried the heavy bucket across the splintering boards toward the stove and set it down with a slosh. I ladled a few teaspoons of water into the pot and began to stir up a daydream of seeing Harvey in the city. We were on a crowded bus, and I was holding the leather strap above me for balance. A voice from behind me called my name and I knew before looking that it was him. Sunlight gleamed off the shiny black of his jacket. And as I looked up again into his eyes—a cry startled me. I turned around quickly and there was Kattie, sleepy-eyed, in her worn pink night dress, with loops of tawny hair ribboning her head.

“Mommy,” She whined, raising her arms out toward me and I left the stirring spoon in the pot with my reveries and lifted her out of her lonely fatigue. She was warm and smelled of sweet sleep and fresh sheets. I stepped onto the staircase intending to dress her upstairs before the two of us ate, but Darby called to me.

“Annabelle.” Sometimes Darby had a way of cracking my name out like the whip snapping over a horse’s head. “I’m culling the big pig today. Maybe you want to make soup from the bones.” He said this to his plate while wiping his mouth with the blue napkins my mother sewed for us. It was an annoyance for him to tell me these things. He wished I would just know. I wished that too.

“Alright,” I confirmed “Soup it is.” I rocked Kattie up the stairs, already feeling rather sorry for the doomed pig. I was *not* very fond of culling days. Even with the kitchen door closed I could always hear the pig screaming as the men dragged it into the slaughter room. I don’t suppose Darby, Wesley or Peter were terribly fond of the killings either. But that is life on a ranch. When I was little I imagined I might be a school teacher and marry a wealthy sea merchant. But when I was twenty-one work was scarce, and I was lucky to find any job at all, even if it was only teaching for pennies way up in the Cariboo. Perhaps I should have hesitated when Darby asked me to marry him a year later. But unlike the other two men who’d proposed that year, he owned a ranch. I knew little about him. But Mrs. Adam, who I boarded with, said he was fine and respectable. In those days we learned to ask for little. Darby was enough. Culling pigs could be tolerated when we knew many were feeding their children nothing but bread and raccoon.

Days and then weeks began to pass. The thought arrived slowly that Harvey was not going to return. He had either stayed in the city or, more likely, taken a different stopping house route back. I realized that meeting him was going to be one of the short-lived pleasures in my life. Like the time I was seven and my father came home to England during the war. I had not seen him in a year, and he delighted me by saying that when the war was over we would move out to the country and he would buy me a pony. But six months later his ship was sunk. A year after that

mother moved us out to Vancouver instead. No pony. But a bit of beach by the ocean where I could sit and throw stones and think about what it would have been like to ride a pony with father walking beside and holding the reins. Perhaps I would see Harvey again. But it was dangerous to wish luxury in times of scarcity.

It seemed that nothing in the world would ever change. I paced the circles of wifehood. Stove to wash bin, wash bin to clothes line, clothes line to garden, garden to stove. Kattie made her own usual tracks. She played with Chester. She helped look for chicken eggs. She fed her doll imaginary food by the little bench I set up for her in one corner of the kitchen. One afternoon, she became quiet—completely silent—while playing under the kitchen table. When I peered underneath, I saw that she'd fallen asleep. I scooped her carefully into my arms. She smelt of warm petals and sweet wood. Times like that, I didn't know if she broke me of my daydreaming or just let me pull her into it. I laid her like a small angel upon my bed, pulled the comforter over her, and stepped softly back down the stairs. A small ray of sunlight broke through the clouds and landed on the dusty stairs. I walked through it, thinking of nothing.

Back in the kitchen, I glanced at the creaking door and saw Darby crossing the threshold in his usual tight, darting movements. The man had a way of reminding me of coiled springs about to snap. "More men came," He announced, glancing at my apron under his lock of hair. "You've enough for two more?"

"Well, I'll take out the cold roast and we can have it on bread before the meal," I answered. The door creaked again. Darby went out. It was late November and the main beef drive was over now. But I had learned from habit to always have extra on hand no matter what time of year it was. Cowboys are always hungry, and it was impossible to over-feed them. They could devour pot roast like croutons. I used to like having more men around. The conversation became more interesting. They would often speak of news from Vancouver, or strange stories they had heard

about locals. But I quickly realized more men just meant more work for me. Now it was only moments until dinner, and suddenly I had two more guests.

I rushed the leftover roast to a plate and cut five thin, inviting slices. The men could slice the rest. I set the plate on the table with the butter dish. Suddenly I wished Kattie were awake so she could help me put out the silverware. I grabbed the remainder of the water pail and set it up on the stove with a clunk. The men like to have the chill out of their water when they washed up for dinner. With the might of a boxer I pummeled the masher into a massive pot of potatoes. Then I took two ham hocks out of the oven and poured a few tablespoons of melted butter onto them. I set the glasses, silverware and our chipped white plates out on the table cloth. The men began to come in. Kattie cried from upstairs. Children have strange clocks. I nodded to a familiar fellow behind Darby who greeted me as I wiped my hands on my apron and dashed upstairs. Down the stairs I flew with Kattie on my hip. Luckily, Darby had already placed the heavy pot of mashed potatoes on the table. One at a time, I grabbed the ham hocks and set them down on the serving plate. Then I realized I'd forgotten the napkins, so I quickly circled the table, setting one down to the left of each man. I was aware that Kattie was scowling sleepily at the strangers. I tried to compensate by forcing a smile and a nod at the first stranger, and then the second—but the second was him! Harvey. He was watching me steadily with a delighted smile—a look like he knew something secret that would please me. I looked away and my feet continued to move around the table.

I returned to the cooking corner of the kitchen to clean and organize while the men ate behind me. I rarely ate at the same time as them. There was simply not time. I set Kattie on her bench with a bowl of food. He had looked at me the same way he did in my daydreams of him. But I thought I had only made them up. I pulled baked apples from the oven and drizzled melted butter over them. He is watching me, I said to myself. My back felt very warm. I sprinkled sugar over the apples. I could not hide from him. I did not want to hide from him. I lowered the tray to the

oven door and slid the apples back in. How is it possible that a person can be across a room and completely surround you at the same time?

I smoothed my blue cotton dress and turned to face the table. He was sitting at the far end of the table, exactly opposite me. We looked at each other. Perhaps I should have turned away. You will say that I should have turned. That was the proper thing to do. But there was a message in his eyes. And I was compelled to read it. That was the right thing to do. The men's conversation rode over the table like small hoof beats. I heard not a word. Those voices became a muffled quilt of sound. Through it, Harvey and I passed a searing blue silence that said everything.

Sharp wind and pine needles brushed against my face as I clutched the reins and pulled Kattie closer to me. She was asleep now, so her little body tipped to one side. My arm already began to ache from holding her up, but it would not be safe to stop until we were deep into the woods. It was so dark, I could see next to nothing. The light tan collar on the cowboy's jacket was nearly all I could make out of his shape. I was grateful my horse knew to follow his. We filled the dark space of that forest with horse clops and heartbeats, and if he knew where we'd end up, he didn't say. I don't like to be cold. I've never done well in cold. My mother says it's because I fell into an icy creek as a toddler and never shook the cold. I was too little to remember it. But I will forever remember that night running away from the ranch, from Darby and all I had known as a Cariboo wife.

A wake of scorn would follow me, a wave of rumors of infidelity, perhaps illegitimate pregnancy, and all other sorts of terrible lies. But I had to go. I once read about a man who survived a tidal wave in Japan. He said as the great wave came down, the last thing he saw was a green leaf twirling down on him. An omen. He said he took a deep breath because he knew, somehow, he would live. That was my life now. Around me the black night whorled in wind,

rushing down around me, and my head was the grey collar of the man before me. I breathed deep and held tight to the warmth created where Kattie's back pressed against my belly. I too would survive.

The next morning I awoke when Darby slid off the bed, stretched in the graying light, and got up to get dressed. This is the way our mornings were. Grey-blue light settling on a grey-blue comforter. Darby pulled his sweater over grey-blue arms. And I lay in my warmth of grey-blue dreams, my body not colored enough to rise from the bed just yet. But rise I must and face the possibility that Harvey was gone. Again.

After Darby left the room, I dressed and went downstairs. I pulled the chain on the kitchen bulb. Warm yellow light pushed the blue far under the table, into the corners of shelves, the edges of walls. Blue-grey squares of sky hung like pictures framed by windows. That was as much art as us ranchers could afford. I turned and scooped the water into the tea kettle and set it on the cold stove. I bent and watched my hands creak open the stove door and fill it up with straw and kindling. I wondered how cowboys slept out in the wild, whether they took time to gather soft leaves and moss for their bedding. How nice it must be for Harvey to be in a bed after days sleeping out on the trail. I closed the stove door and listened to the purring roar as the fire took hold inside. I imagined him in the far room down the lodgers' hall, curled up in warmth and unknown dreams. As if his dreams were my dreams. As if I could share them just by thinking of him.

"Guess that woodstove's got a song for you to listen to."

I turned abruptly. "No." I stared wide-eyed at Harvey and brushed soot from my hands. "I was just lost in thought."

"Must be a nice place to be."

I told myself not to nod. He might read my mind.

He sat down on the bench at the table. Moments wove into silence. I sliced apples onto a plate and set them before him. He was a big man, wide shouldered, with a tousle of dark hair over a tanned and freckled face. I did not like to admit to myself that I was a little frightened to be all alone with him in that kitchen. Still, I hoped no one else would come. I set a bowl on the table and poured the biscuit flour into it.

“You don’t look like you belong here,” he offered and bit into a slice of apple.

Ah! The relief of being seen—really seen! I cut the butter and mixed it into the bowl. “I don’t think any of us know where we belong until we get there.”

“Maybe that’s true,” he said, looking down at the apples.

Then because I sensed I’d saddened him and because I knew he must be leaving right after breakfast, I added more quietly, “But do come here again.”

A moment passed. The door opened and Darby walked in with a hearty good morning and a smile for his guest. Wesley and Peter trailed after, removing their hats to greet me. I poured tea. And men crowded the table. The room filled with porridge steam and the scent of rising biscuits and red delicious apples. Somehow the biscuits turned out tastier and lighter than ever. Everyone said so. I suppose it’s because for a change I was wide awake when I made them.

They say that a good housewife is industrious, resourceful, and can make a dinner with any lack of food, a quilt with any lack of cloth. I discovered my skill was with words. His words. Though they were delicate and sparse, I returned to them again and again in my mind. I wove them together to wear like a beautiful shawl. I measured them against the landscape, the distance between moon and cows, between me and him. Finally, I knotted them together like a rope ladder—a way out of endless reverie to the threshold of real life and real love. It was all

daydream, but I drank it up like medicine. And that is where I stayed poised and ready for him to return to me.

It was frightening and invigorating. In my earlier years, I'd read many novels, some with great love stories. But this story was all mine and bore no relationship to others. Love, in my story, I concluded, is like water. It enters into you, quenches you and becomes a part of your very cells. It might end you or be the thing that keeps you alive. One day scientists will discover that love is measurable, quantifiable and can be poured into the body a drop at a time over years or arrive like a great wave to knock you over and wash from you the very things that made up your life.

I suppose I ought to tell you what it was like waiting those long months for him to return. But it's hardly a compelling story. They say if you wake the sleepwalker, he might go into shock. I was becoming more painfully awake than I'd ever been in my life and at the same time had long moments of deep waking sleep. Picture a woman stopping before a window without realizing it, mindlessly wiping dry hands on a dish rag. One day I found my sewing needles in the ice box. Another time Kattie said, "Why are you brushing my hair *so* much?" Those were my sleeping moments. But, oh, the strangeness of remembering the softness of your own hair before the mirror while your husband snores away, and you wish someone else were touching it.

Despite myself, I began to dread the moments when Darby stepped into the kitchen. Had his mood changed? Become more sullen? Or had I only now begun to see how dark the cloud around him was. And was it my imagination, or did it seem to darken most when he saw me? He seemed to spend so very much time in the barn those days—I *did* notice that—so that I began to wonder if he didn't have some project he was working on, perhaps something not going so well. So I asked him one day when, for a change, we were cowboy-less and alone with Kattie at the table.

He snatched the napkin to wipe egg from his mouth. He glared at me from under his lock of hair like I'd tried to steal from him. "Mind your business," he answered and up and left the room. Darby's not much entertainment to talk to, but the one thing I always appreciated about him was that he usually left me to myself. I don't like men with loud voices and leers who poke holes in my daydreaming. Darby hardly even looked my way. If I were the kind of woman who needed a man's attention to keep happy, I might have been quite miserable. But as it was, I preferred the privacy of my own thoughts. Since he seemed always troubled, I was at least relieved he didn't burden me with his worries.

So I followed his advice and did attend to my own business. I minded the business of my heart which included Kattie and Harvey and few others. I minded the landscapes of my daydreams. I minded the swirls of seasoned oil in the soup pot and the swirls of butter melting between knife and warm bread. And I was happy enough like that. Happy in knowing that one day Harvey would return. And his next visit would be more wood for the fire burning inside me. Darby and I slept in the same bed every night and every day I knew him a little less. I tried to tell myself that it didn't matter. Perhaps then, it's my fault for not noticing the change in him. Perhaps if I'd been a better wife, more present, he wouldn't have gone the direction he did.

It was a rather innocent seeming day in late March when I finally learned of his real reasons for passing so much time in the barn. There was sunlight on the table. Kattie was chattering to herself or me and trying to stick a jar on a spider. The usual men were outside working along with Peter's shy younger brother who'd been sent to stay with us while Peter's mother was ill. I had just cleared the dishes away from lunch. When I heard a yell and a bang—like someone hitting a wall. The yell was Peter. The wall—perhaps the barn. I hurried out the kitchen door, but then stopped on the step. Men didn't like me to intervene, so I waited for a cue or signal that I was needed, but for a moment, I saw no one.

What I saw next I don't like to speak about. I will tell you this only once, and then never again.

Peter's brother was running away from the barn with only his long johns and shirt on. Peter held Darby by the shirt collar and shoved him out of the barn and down into the dirt. Darby's pants, well, they were undone.

The dangerous thing about being a daydreamer is that it appears to be so harmless a pastime. But houses may be on fire while the daydreamer thinks of rainy days in London. I'd been so lost in my thoughts, I'd not been paying attention to what was happening around me. Now a boy had been hurt. My husband had lost his dignity. I learned later from Wesley that what happened that day in the barn may have been going on ever since Peter's brother arrived, and that there were other suspicions too. The neighbor boy from down the road. Even Wesley had had an uncomfortable incident when he first arrived on the ranch.

In those days, such a thing could not be talked about. Peter and his brother left and went to work at another ranch. We never saw them again. Darby, the story went, was thrown from a horse and that's how he ended up with a broken rib. Wesley and I were bound to silence. What happened was a heavy stone we were forced to swallow. Around town, the rumor went that Darby had taken to the drink and assaulted Peter.

Though Darby and I hardly spoke—though we never touched in bed, I had always been pleased that he let me keep to myself. Now I began to fear his secrecy. I became aware that my entire life was held within the container of who he was. I was living on his ranch. His money bought the food I prepared and the dresses I owned. His cattle surrounded us. I was trapped inside a sinking box. It was only this marriage that kept me living in the Cariboo at all. One night, I lay in bed next to his snoring shadow and I knew: I did not want to live with this man

any more. Perhaps you will think I'm simple for not seeing this before. But times were different then. Wives did not think such thoughts, or if they did, they thought them in the same way that they wished it weren't raining. With futility. That is why so much grief later befell me; I had dared to decide, to imagine beyond the box of wifehood. I planted seeds of escape, and I let them grow.

I wished my mother were still in Vancouver. She had moved back to England three years ago to live with her ailing sister. If I had any money of my own, I would have tried to go see her. If I'd had money, I would have gone anywhere—Vancouver, Kamloops, London. But no one could afford to travel in those days, least of all a Cariboo ranch wife.

The days became harder. I could neither speak to Darby, nor look at him. I was a coward. It was my right to be angry, to yell, but I said nothing. Something held me back. Perhaps the infinitesimal seed of my own quietly growing guilt. I made myself busier than ever, scrubbing at the pots as he lumbered tensely through the kitchen, clothes pegs in mouth as he glared at me on his way to the field. You'd think he thought I was the cause of his mistake.

One night, I pretended to sleep while I watched him through thinly opened eyes. He entered the room and threw his vest onto the chair. Then, strangely, he stood for a moment at the end of the bed, flicking his fingers and looking at me. I hardly breathed. He undressed and crawled roughly into his side of the bed. Beds seemed so small in those days. My heart beat an unwelcome song in my ears. I dared not move. My mind raced, but didn't know what to race to. What was he doing? Did he know all my secrets? Did he think it was my fault? Without knowing I was going to do it, I slipped out of the bed and turned to face him, heart pounding. A moment of staring, then he leaped forward and grabbed me by the wrist. A small cry escaped my mouth, but I didn't want to wake Kattie. I pulled, and he held me, but my panic was stronger. I wrenched myself free, breathing hard in the silence. His moonlit face turned into a satisfied and bitter

smirk. His body, stiff with anger. The skin on my wrist was burning. I backed out of the room, feeling behind me for the door. Never again did I enter that room while he was there.

This was not new. Other women will read this and know: this was not new. All over Cariboo country—all over the *whole* country—dark fires of rage burned in bedrooms at night. Unseen. Unspoken of. Some of those fires burned bruises on wives, under their tired eyes, or like thumb prints around the arm. You will say it did not happen everywhere. You will say that other more tender fires also warmed people in the night. And that is true, as I later learned. But the rage has too often been secret. You see, there are many stories you have never heard.

I slept on the chesterfield for four nights. The marks on my wrist did not last long. Darby did not speak to me. I forced myself to turn away from the sound of my daydreams and into the sound of his silence. I kept Kattie close to me. Her nightmares worsened, so I began sharing her bed with her. Darby hired a new farmhand, a young man named John, the youngest son of a local rancher whose herd and crops had seen a few bad years. If I had to speak to John, I didn't look him in the face. My coldness might serve as a warning to him. This was not a good place for him. Then Wesley told us over dinner one night that his grandmother was getting old and he would need to go back to the reserve and care for her. Darby responded by cutting his beef with a rather rigorous sawing with the knife and sucking the meat out of his teeth.

"You'll stay till I find new help." Darby said to the table through a mouthful of meat.

Wesley nodded in agreement, but looked away from my questioning gaze. A few days later, Darby went to town and put word out that he was looking to hire another. People talked about bad luck. It was bad luck that Darby was losing two of his crew just when the spring planting was getting near. Bad luck that he'd flown from the horse and broken a rib.

This is the way I'm expected to live my life, I thought one night curled up in Kattie's child-sized bed. As a silent accomplice to a disturbed man's deeds. I realized the changes from here would be small. Wesley and Peter—too humiliated themselves by what they had seen—would

never speak of it. No one in town would find out. For a time a slow quiet would seep through the ranch. Then, it would be as if nothing ever happened. Covered over like a fresh coat of snow. And Darby ... he would be more careful next time not to get caught. I also knew this: I was incidental. Darby's initial acquisition of me came with the same sort of commitment and emotion a rancher would have about purchasing a truck or building a barn. And now, he genuinely disliked me. I suppose because I was not what he wanted.

I rolled over in Kattie's bed. And what of my daughter? If I was not safe here—if Darby's rage could sneak up on me in the night, could it do the same to her? Moonlight painted the floor in warped silver squares. I remembered waking in the early light of morning when I was a girl. My father had said goodbye to me the night before because, he said, he would be leaving for war before I awoke. But I did awake. I woke in time to hear the front door close softly behind him. My mother stood on the step waving goodbye. He sauntered down the quiet road toward the train that would take him back to his ship. I had sat there rocking myself and wishing—wishing so hard I thought my chest could break open—that I could go with him. When he rounded the corner out of sight, I closed my eyes and imagined slipping my hand into his. We walked together. He put me on his shoulders when I tired. In that way, I was not alone.

Outside Kattie's window the night was blue as sapphire. Where was Harvey? Where was anyone to come help me? Why could no one hear the calling for help in my head? It was so loud. I wished we were away from this small dark house. I wished we were far, far away. Even poverty, even homelessness would at least mean freedom. My chest ached. I lay awake all night.

By morning I'd decided to go. I would go out into the world on my own with Kattie. I would choose open sky and freedom. Judgment but hope. Hunger in the belly, instead of emptiness of the heart. Maybe—if luck or fate willed it—I would even find that man who poured sunshine on my thoughts. It was pure foolishness, I know. But when life offers little to live for, you might risk death to find something else.

The next morning, while Wesley, John, and Darby were eating, I announced to my husband that I was fresh out of laundry flakes and cooking salt.

"I will need to go to town today," I said, while I busied myself with washing potatoes. It was custom that I ask permission since, of course, it was his truck and his money I was spending.

"Then go to town," he said.

The potatoes kept my hands from shaking, but there was nothing for my heart. "I'll go after Kattie eats." Unlike most children, Kattie always slept long into the morning, rather like a cat. On this particular morning, I was relieved she was not there to witness my nervousness. Children tend to notice those things husbands do not. By the time I'd washed each potato two or three times, the men finally finished eating and went out to their chores. I poured the last of the tea for myself and bumped my tooth with the cup.

Where was I going to go? I had no money for a train or a hotel. Although I'd been in the Cariboo for four years, my busy ranch life prevented me from making more than acquaintances. Everyone knew me as the wife of Darby Sheffield. I would not be safe spending the night with anyone in town. Word would be back to him before I could touch my head to the pillow. So where would I go?

I could not answer myself. Start with one foot, my mother used to tease me when I was a girl. If I was slow to go out the door, if I didn't want to go to school, she'd say dryly, "Just start with one foot. Left or right. It simply doesn't matter which. Just put it forward, and then the next." Kattie came down the stairs wrapped in an air of warmth and sleepiness. I scooped her up and went straight back up the stairs with her.

"Today we're going to town," I mused nervously.

"Can I have a lollipop?" She asked excitedly.

I rifled through her chest of clothes for her warmest dress. “We’ll see about that.”

I untied her night dress at the neck and pulled her warm pants onto her. While she ate, I would grab some of her things and put them in a sack.

“I want a *yellow* lollipop. Yellow is lemon, right Mommy?”

The difficult part would be getting the sack of her things and mine out to the truck without anyone noticing. Where would Darby and the others be at that time?

“Mommy. I want to have a lollipop.”

I pulled the dress over Kattie’s head. Her pink arms poked out, then a worried face. What would I tell Kattie? How would I explain this? When she was grown, would she understand why I’d done such a thing? I buttoned her up. What if we ran out of food?

“I said I want a yellow lollipop!”

When she was dressed, I lifted her and stood to leave the room. Was I doing what was truly best for her? Her face sank into my shoulder great weight. On the stairs, she lifted it off.

“Mommy! You’re not listening to me!”

“I’m not?” I answered in surprise. My heart pounded. Could she read my mind? Did she want to stay here with her father? “What do you want?”

“I want a yellow lollipop!”

I sighed with relief. “Alright. You can have a yellow lollipop.” For familiarity’s sake, I added, “But do not forget your manners.”

I worked like mad to get the breakfast dishes cleaned, the men’s sandwiches made, our clothes and a few other belongings packed, and Kattie fed and occupied. Part way through, Wesley stuck his head through the door to say they’d be out in the West pen for their lunches. This meant—luckily—no one was around when I carried our sack of clothes to the car. But—unluckily—I’d have to drive right up to the men in the truck with my hidden sack stuffed behind my seat. If Darby needed to tell me anything, he would come right to the driver door and I’d risk

him noticing. I thought of this when I stuffed the old clothes sack as far as I could beneath the back of my seat. Luckily it was black and blended in with the floor of the truck. How foolish to have to leave my suitcases behind—one of the only valuable things I owned—a gift from my mother when I'd left for the Cariboo. But who knew how we'd be traveling. If for some reason we ended up on horseback, I wanted to be prepared.

Finally, it was time. Kattie and I were bumping down the dirt trail in that rickety old truck with the men's sandwiches on a plate between us and two more wrapped in a cloth and hidden under Kattie's seat. I did not look back at the ranch. I'm not nostalgic for houses. But Chester had come up to the truck with a lazy wag and a question in his eyes.

"Go shoo!" I yelled at him with instant regret.

"Bye-bye Chester." Kattie said softly to her window as the truck circled out of the dirt drive.

Without wanting to, I looked in the rear view mirror. He was sitting in the dirt and staring after us. Sometimes I let him ride in the back when I took the men their sandwiches. Not today. The truck rocked and bumped and swayed beneath us, a language spoken between road and wheels. Indecipherable. Its omens incoherent. A rapid babble beneath us. I was hurrying as if that house might pull me back into it and shut the door. Rather like being trapped in a coffin.

The truck rolled to a stop near where the men were working. Darby left his tools by a fence post he was replacing and moved toward the truck. His walk had been tilted ever since the rib broke. To assuage my guilt, I told myself: leaving him now is the most honest thing I have done since I met him. And maybe he'll even be glad that I'm gone. I knew this was a lie. There was simply too much work on a ranch without a wife, no matter how much a man hated one. He'd never survive. He'd have to hire someone. But he had no extra money. Don't think about that—I scolded myself as he glanced up at me with his usual look. I realized only now that it was defined by skepticism. Suspicion even.

“Stay in the truck,” I ordered Kattie. I didn’t want Darby to be near her just then. I pushed open the door before he reached us and carried out the sandwiches.

“Ham,” I explained when Darby lifted a corner of the cloth from the plate.

He grumbled in response.

“Well.” I watched him walk away with the plate. “I don’t know what time we’ll be back.” Wesley waved in thanks from his seat on a rock. I lifted my hand slowly, then turned to go.

My boots whispered through the grass. I lifted myself up into the truck, smiled quickly at Kattie. I heaved the door closed. The engine rumbled alive, and I pulled away, leaving a trail of dust and the chewing men, and the walls of wifhood behind me.

That was that.

A whirl of possibilities filled my head. Perhaps Harvey would be in town. Perhaps someone friendly was driving to Vancouver and would offer a ride. Perhaps Ms. Jameson would look at me suspiciously and report my moves later to the ranger. Perhaps we’d have no where to go and end up hiding out with the Indians in a reserve. Amidst all the maybes, I had only one small plan. I would go to Ed’s market and ask him to help me. True, I didn’t know if he could. But I knew he would try. And he might have more ideas than I. He liked me. I had seen his eyes lingering after me. He would not turn me back to the ranch.

Half an hour later, we arrived in Williams Lake. The familiar sites of the bank, the hotel, town hall, and the wooden sidewalk, rose up around me. I glanced at Kattie. She hadn’t said a word the whole ride. I pulled up in front of Ed’s market. The truck grumbled to a halt. I got out my door and waited for Kattie to slide across to my side. I set her on the ground. She was sullen and in her own world. What might she have sensed from me? We got out and crossed from the sunshine world of outside to the shadowy world of soft spices in Ed’s store. Ed was slouched in

his seat with his glasses perched at the end of his soft round nose and a newspaper on the countertop. He looked rather tired, like he was not particularly expecting anyone to walk in. He pulled his wiry glasses from his face.

“Mrs. Sheffield! How wonderful to see you!” He grew taller and smiled a large-lipped grin. “And hello to you Miss Sheffield.”

Kattie grumpily turned and buried her face into my leg.

Ed had had a wife once. But she died long ago in a horse accident. I wondered what she had been like. Would she have trusted him as I did? His good heart, his kindness, made him a doorway for us now.

“Good afternoon, Ed. Kattie’s sleepy today,” I explained, then felt a knock on the back of my leg where Kattie’s small fist hit me.

“How’s the ranch? I hear Darby’s got a slew of pregnant cows this year but lost some of his help.”

“It’s busy as ever. Wesley says there’ll be about a dozen new calves this spring,” I said, avoiding his other comment. “Two cans of kidney beans please.”

He lifted them off the shelf behind his counter and put them into a bag for me. “Two cans kidney beans,” he confirmed. “What else?”

“A small bag of oats, thank you.”

He found the oats. “Old Jameson’s not so lucky this year. His best cow fell in the creek and drowned. He only has five, you know. His steer is getting old.”

“Well, ranching life’s a challenge. Old Jameson’s hard as an axe. But not everyone’s cut out for ranching. A box of soda crackers, please.”

“Oh sure,” he said, his eyes caught Kattie staring at the lollipop jar. “But at least a man’s got the cows to keep him company. And the dogs. And hired hands if he needs them. Can’t blame a man for hitting the drink once in a while, though.”

I knew he was speaking about Old Jameson now. “A bit of drink is fine for a man, but altogether incorrect for a woman. She has nothing to drown her sorrows but another splash of laundry.”

He blinked and nodded, considering the matter.

I continued, “Well, it doesn’t matter. A ranch wife is just a ranch wife. Plenty more where she came from. Doesn’t take much to beat out the laundry and potatoes day in and day out. Unless of course there were other things going on at the ranch that made the job a lot harder. Those apples look lovely. You must have wintered them well. I’ll take three.”

He searched the bowl, lifting and turning a few before finding the reddest ones.

“Things go on at a ranch that a woman might not have the right to speak about. But if it’s something horrid enough—even if it’s secret—she might have to do what’s right, even if it means going off on her own for a while.” I turned away, in case he should look up to see the panic in my eyes.

Kattie pulled at my dress.

Ed was lowering the apples into the bag like they were babies and looked up at me with a puzzle of wrinkles between his eyes. I was beating around a wide bush.

“Well if that happened,” I continued more quietly, “she wouldn’t have anyone she could explain herself to. She would just have to do what’s right.”

“Sure,” Ed answered, leaping into the conversation wherever it made sense to him. “People always have to do what’s right.”

“—Even though it may not make sense to another soul. She would have to do what’s right anyway.” I glanced at him meaningfully. People have all different expressions of confusion. There was Darby’s cold and annoyed look of confusion. My mother’s blank expectancy. And Ed’s worried and bewildered confusion. Kattie was yanking on my dress. “I think Kattie would like one of your lollipops.”

“A pink one!” She declared and licked her little lips.

“Pink it is!” Ed enthused. With a familiar clink of the great glass lid, he reached in and pulled out her treat, handing it to her as if it were a delicate glass slipper. For the first time all day, Kattie smiled, so that I wondered again if she was alright.

“Kattie, go sit on the front step in the sunshine. Mommy needs to speak with Ed for a moment.” I held the door for her. Delighted with her treasure of candy, Kattie meandered out and plunked down in the sunshine.

Ed looked rather like he was holding his breath. His eyes darted about.

“Ed, you’ve always been kind to me.” I looked him in the eye. “I need to go away now, to leave the ranch and—Darby—for a while. Please—don’t ask me to explain,” I said in hushed tones. “I can’t go back there. I’m leaving the truck—I don’t want to steal it from him—it’s not that—but ... do you know someone going out of town that can take Kattie and me with them? Do you know someone I could go to stay with for a while?” It was all or nothing.

Ed swayed and looked around wide-eyed, trying to see this picture I was painting—my need to escape, taking Kattie, leaving the truck. He rubbed a hand over his forehead. “Gee, I don’t know what you’d like, Mrs. Sheffield ...”

“I need a way to leave town. I can’t go in the truck. It’s Darby’s,” I repeated. I stared at him in earnestness. “Please keep this between us. Tell no one I talked to you. This is very important. I might be in danger.” I looked away quickly. I would not add embarrassment to my burning humility by letting him see wells of tears in my eyes. I gathered myself to finish. “Do you know someone who’s going out of town? Perhaps taking a car down to Vancouver?”

“No,” Ed replied, astonished at himself, the question, and everything else. “No, M’am. I only know a few cowboys headed north today. But they’re on horseback. You couldn’t go. You’re taking Kattie you say?”

“She’ll be safer with me. You must never speak of this to anyone.” I paused to listen for a moment. Someone was walking on the wood walkway outside. I hoped they wouldn’t come in. “I’ll go by horse if it’s the only way. The cowboys, are they safe? Do you trust them?” If I could just leave the area, I was sure I could find my way back to Vancouver even if it took a few weeks.

“Well, sure,” he replied, then pulled his hand over his jaw to consider.

Outside, I heard someone say hello to Kattie. With lollipop in hand, she had become cheerful and answered back with: “Good afternoon, Mister.”

“Let me see what I can do. I can’t promise you, M’am, that this will stay between us.” He peered down at me in a fatherly manner. I hoped he wouldn’t think it his duty to scold me. I could hardly bare it. “It’s an awfully big risk you’ll take. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Suspecting where his worry came from, I answered, “I’ll be forever grateful to you, Ed. You’re the only one I could turn to.” I reminded myself not to cry. “I won’t forget about you, or your kindness.”

His shoulders softened. He spoke softly, “Okay. Okay. Wait here. I’ll see what I can do.” He took in a great breath, shuffled out from behind the counter and left rather heroically, I thought, through the back door. I knew only one thing: we *must* not return to that ranch. I leaned my back against the countertop, recovering myself. In a moment, I would face sunshine and Kattie’s innocent smile.

I listened to her voice. She was chattering away about our ranch dog. It was possible—just possible—that it was Harvey she was speaking to. Strange things happen when one’s daily life breaks open. Destiny begins to rush in. I leaned harder against the counter, light-headed with the thought. If it was him—everything would make sense—everything would work out. It would be meant. In a rush, I pushed opened the door to face that brilliant face of hope and fate.

The man staring back at me had a long unshaven jaw and old blue eyes. His light brown hair was a mess of direction on his head. It was Sandy, who owned the Moose Hoof Ranch.

“M’am,” he greeted and tipped an invisible hat.

I caught a breath and tried to speak. “Sandy—” The disappointment fell out of my mouth of its own accord. I struggled to cover it up by saying something pleasant while I glanced down the street for Ed. And therein began one of those long rambling talks about plain nothing that seem only to happen deep in the country. Sandy stared at me and chattered about, well, I hardly recall. After a few minutes, Kattie reached up one hand to hold mine. A welcome anchor. My words—whatever they were—came out like bird chatter, my thoughts drifted above in the startling April-blue sky. And Kattie kept the rest of me from following.

What seemed like an eternity later, Sandy tipped his goodbyes and sauntered off to the tackle store. I sank down onto the step with Kattie. She’d made paste out of the end of her lollipop stick by chewing it for so long. We were hungry. I hadn’t realized. There were sandwiches in the truck. But for the moment, I was too weary to fetch them. How foolish to have believed I might see Harvey. I was hungry in my soul.

The long sun was shifting in the sky. In about an hour the men would expect their tea out in the field. If I wasn’t there to bring it, Darby would assume I’d been held up in town. But a while after that, they’d return to the house for a warm dinner, and there would be none. I leapt up from the step and fetched the sandwiches from under the passenger seat in the truck. I handed one to Kattie, who was suddenly talkative, and sank my teeth slowly into the other. If the local priest wasn’t so terribly old, feeble and hard of hearing, I might have tried to go to confession before leaving town. Probably not. That was Darby’s religion anyway. And I was not worried for his hungry stomach. I was worried for his wrath. I hoped Wesley would not feel that I’d betrayed *him*. There was cold roast and cold mash in the ice box. He would worry. He would look out the window and say nothing. Darby would question him. Or worse yet, become silent. Better not to

think of such things, I told myself and stared down into my sandwich as if the shifting shape of it were a message waiting to be translated. There are messages in everything, my mother used to say before giving a tea leaf reading, except most of us don't know how to read them.

I don't believe what the scientists say about time being equal. That afternoon that we passed talking to Sandy and chewing sandwiches on the step of Ed's market, lasted days. What came next was so quick it hardly happened at all. Ed returned. He told us to take the trail behind the store to the north of town and, where it met the main road, we'd meet a cowboy with a horse for us who would take us north.

"Oh, you're going to get me in some royal trouble Mrs. Sheffield," Ed shook his head. Kattie peered up at us.

"Annabelle," I corrected.

"Okay. Annabelle." He sighed. "You better go quickly. And you be good to that little miss." We were out his back door. "And take care of yourself too—Annabelle."

I thanked him, and we set off up the trail.

"Where are we going, Mommy?"

I sighed and shifted the sack over my shoulder. "Adventuring." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small curious smile rise on her face.

Our feet walked along the path while my mind waited up ahead for us. I knew it was not possible that the cowboy waiting for us would be Harvey. That's why I kept reminding myself that it would not be. It would not be him with sunlight on his shoulders or with blue in his eye. After a while of walking the trail, it was harder and harder to remember that it would not be him. Whoever it was, he held the reins to our destiny.

We arrived at the slope in the trail where it meets the main road. A man with a large brown jacket and beige collar turned his horse to greet us. Of course, it was not Harvey, I saw with a nudge of embarrassment. Unfortunately, I was so busy unraveling my daydreams that I paid very

little attention to him. Indeed, I forgot his name the moment he told me. For the many hours that came next, I rode along beside or behind him and wondered what his face looked like straight on. Had I asked Ed if he was trustworthy? Did I ask it clearly? He rode in silence while Kattie and I went through flurries of talk and quiet. Kattie surprised me by asking very little. As the sun weighed lower against the horizon, her little body relaxed more deeply into the nest of my body. Finally, she was asleep.

I thought no more about the ranch. The wash of blue sky wiped everything from memory. As if the past and future had simply fallen off the edge of the world. I was simply a woman on a horse with a girl.

Going somewhere.

In my mind, there were horse hoofs and no daydreams. It may seem strange that I didn't ask this man immediately where we were going. Maybe it was his unbreakable silence, or maybe I felt it a bad omen to make him pronounce the name of fate. Perhaps I did not want to know. Really, it made little difference. We were headed north—not the direction I had wanted to go. My real place was in the city—except that I wanted to be there with Harvey. Any stop we made—even if it lasted a month or two—was just a stopover on my way home to Vancouver. For now, it was foolish to pretend that my knowing anything would help. I simply had to go.

As sapphire night bore down on the land, Kattie awoke, grumpy and hungry. We stopped the horses by a creek and shared a cold can of meat and some bread. My legs were unaccustomed to riding so much, and my first step off the horse was rather wobbly. The cowboy ate quickly and leaned back on his elbow. With a gesture, he offered us some smoked salmon. Kattie and I reached for it eagerly.

“You have sleeping gear?” The sudden sound of his voice was startling. I finished chewing.

“I'm afraid we haven't anything.”

The cowboy looked away down the creek.

“You have a canvas?”

I shook my head, not knowing what he meant.

He ripped off a piece of smoked salmon and chewed for a long while.

“How much food you have?”

I opened the sack beside me. He leaned over to examine the darkened contents. He leaned back and looked off again in the direction of the creek. We were silent again. Kattie put her head on me and began squirming in my lap, trying to make herself comfortable. The cowboy seemed to be working something out in his mind. I was quite sure I had not answered his questions the way he’d hoped. In the awkward silence I felt we were all part of some perplexing puzzle that he’d become responsible for piecing together. Feeling that perhaps there was a way I could assist in the sorting, I asked, “Where are we going to tonight?”

He looked at the last piece of salmon jerky in his hands as if it would tell the answer. “I’m taking you two into the forest ahead. You’ll sleep with my gear.” He ripped off another piece and folded it into his mouth, chewing slowly. “I’ll leave you there. Can’t all sleep in the same bag.”

I blushed.

He looked off at the creek and motioned north. “I’ll go up to Patterson’s. ‘Bout twenty miles from here. See if he can loan more stuff.”

“Oh,” I said. Then because that sounded impolite, I added, “I see.” I smoothed the hair on Kattie’s head.

“Mommy, I want my bed,” Kattie whined.

“You’ll have a bed. With me. A forest bed.” I added with a smile, and she sank back down into my lap. I had pictured that I might be in someone’s ranch, or sneakily sleeping in their barn. I’d thought I could be asleep in the back of a car with Kattie in my arms winding slowly down toward Vancouver. I’d imagined many things, but not sleeping alone in the forest. I sighed. The world had opened up, and I was walking through it.

When he left us a couple hours later, he double-checked his knots on the canvas roof he'd tied to the trees to keep the dew off us. I was fully clothed and curled up to Kattie in his sleeping sack where the scent of him on the sheet filled my nose with spice and wool.

"Be back before morning." He stopped and looked at us. He went to his horse and unfastened the rifle from the saddle back. My heart froze for one frightening moment, but he only brought it over and set it on the ground next to me.

"In case of trouble."

Then, he lingered strangely, squatted next to me, so that I worried suddenly he might lean over to kiss me goodnight. But a second later, he rose and sauntered over to his horse. He left without another word. As the sound of horse footfalls grew slowly more and more faint, the small chorus of night sounds became grew. I was not frightened. This is what I told myself at first. But I lay awake for long hours listening to the creaking of trees, the soft pressing of leaves under small imagined paws. Despite the half moon, we were nearly in darkness, so thick were the trees, so heavy the canvas. I shivered and put my face in Kattie's warm hair. There was so much to consider. A life fallen away. A future yet to come. It occurred to me for the first time that the cowboy might not come back. Perhaps we'd been a burden to him. Perhaps Ed had paid him money to take us to safety, but with money in his pocket, he now had no motivation to continue. At the very least he wouldn't leave his sleeping bag and canvas, I assured myself. And no proper man would leave a woman and child alone out here for good. I was grateful for Kattie. Her small warm body seemed to hold my whole heart. Without her . . . I couldn't think of my life without her. With my ears filled with forest, and Kattie in my arms, I passed the night fretfully.

I awoke with Kattie squirming, my nose buried in a steamy matt of her hair, and cold smarting my ears and head. Kattie quickly began to cry.

"There, there," I soothed with the intention to douse that sound before it split my ears. "It's alright." I lifted my head to peer overtop of her. The horse I'd ridden was still tethered alone. I

sat up and looked around. Suddenly even the canvas roof was too much confinement for me. I pushed it with my hand, held crying Kattie on my lap, put Kattie down again. I stood up, crouched under the canvas. Why was he not back? The rifle was still beside the bed. Our sack of food, where he left it tied up in a tree. Small rays of sunlight came horizontally through the trees, highlighting the generous layer of dew the cold night had left us. I sat back down again. I wrapped Kattie and myself in the bedding.

"It's alright, Kattie," I said again. I worried that it altogether wasn't. She sniffled and rubbed her nose with a round hand.

"I want biscuits!"

"I know." I kissed her forehead. "I know you do." I left her to cry on her own for a moment while I pulled at the knotted rope on a low branch and let it slip over the crook of high branch, sinking the food sack to the ground. I found the cloth that wrapped the biscuits and set it on the bedding before us. She chewed in silence, looking out at the trees, her hair a tangle of curls. Crumbs gathered in patterns down her dress and onto the blanket. If I could read the pattern, I thought, I might know what future was awaiting her. I leaned over and kissed her warm forehead, then followed her eyes out to the whale blue sky. Waiting.

We had washed down the biscuits with water when I heard horse hoofs. A few minutes later they produced a worn and wearied looking cowboy and a slanty-eared, panting horse. He got down from the horse and stood for a moment as if unsure he could explain. I waited.

Then he said, "Mind if I catch some shut eye." He motioned to the bedding we were sitting on.

"Course not." I rose and eyed Kattie to do the same. "Generous of you to share it. I hope you haven't worn yourself out too much on our account. It was fine of you to let us use your bedding."

He made a slight noise, waited till we were clear out of the way of the bed, then flopped himself belly-down on top of it.

What in heaven's name am I doing, I thought. I don't want to live like a cowboy. If I don't start laying the cobble of my own road, I'll end up down some dead end, tumble weed trail with no where to go. I had closed the door on Darby. That part of my life was over. If only I had money of my own. I could simply take a train to the city, find a job and a place for Kattie and me to live, and make a new life. What's more, I had friends there. True enough, I hadn't seen them for years, but we still wrote at Christmas time. They would help me. But on the other hand, I thought dangerously, I could try to find Harvey. What would that life be like? Kattie chewed on her cold biscuit and watched a shiny black beetle wander over the ground. I folded my arms and looked up into the lace of blue sky between trees. What was there to guide me?

**Dousing the Flame:
An Exploration of Nature and Intimate Love
in English-Canadian Fiction**

Introduction to English-Canadian Love Stories

Nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from. -**Margaret Atwood**

Where there is love, there is life. -**Mahatma Gandhi**

To love another person is to see the face of God. -***Les Miserables***

The minute I heard my first love story I started looking for you, not knowing how blind that was.
Lovers don't finally meet somewhere. They're in each other all along. -**Rumi**

Soon ... I will say those three words that will save us all. -**Lhasa del Selva, Canadian band**
(from the song "The Living Road")

Sample Chapters

Marriage: I do and I don't

Hungry Lovers: Eating Eroticism

Transforming Love: Christianity to Postmodernism and Beyond

Love or Shelter: Two Survivals

Conceiving Nature

Suburban Tales of Banality

Canadian Novels and the Overseas Love Affair

The Flames of Eroticism: A Book Burning

**Dousing the Flame:
An Exploration of Nature and Intimate Love
in English-Canadian Fiction¹**

Introduction

Few would argue with philosopher Robert Wagoner when he writes in *The Meanings of Love*, “Love is everywhere celebrated as the most important experience in human life” (1). Although concepts of love are culturally constructed, love holds a position of central importance to most cultures. The ancient Greeks identified three distinct types of love: *Eros* (passionate love), *Philia* (friendship love), and *Agape* (divine humanitarian love). Each of these three categories has been broken into smaller sub-categories and others still have been added to the list. But of all the varieties of love humans experience—platonic love, community love, altruistic love, maternal love, love of God, love of nature, etc.—that potent form of ardor found in the intimate love between lovers and would-be lovers, *Eros*, has garnered the most attention in the arts. Passionate love resonates through the songs, plays, artwork, and literature of various cultures through the ages. Most readers can easily call to mind the emotionally lush lovescapes of numerous famous novels. The characters of the British novel *Of Human Bondage*, the American-French novel *The Girl at Lion D’Or*, and the Russian *Anna Karenina*, writhe in the agony of passionate love. Similar love-drenched plots exist in the novels of South and Central America, Asia, and Africa. Lovers and would-be lovers are exalted, up-lifted, awoken, tormented, obsessed, and transformed by love in these novels. Literary professor Catherine Belsey articulates, “Love and gambling are compulsive, unpredictable, thrilling, dangerous” (688). No wonder then that novels so frequently revel in this consuming occupation.

But what of Canadian novels? Despite love’s centrality and importance to people across the globe, passionate love in English-Canadian literature has been largely overlooked in academic

¹ This paper includes abridged and revised material from other essays by this author. See bibliography for titles.

study. Extensive bodies of theory explore the love-rich fiction of French, English, Chinese, American, and even Quebecois literature, but the Eros of English-Canadian fiction is subject to about as much literary investigation as Sasquatch, and perhaps for the same reason. Love in Canadian literature is elusive at best and hardly taken seriously even by the authors. Rather remarkably, virtually no scholars have examined this startling reality. The social cynicism surrounding love in North America today (or is it the world?) deems love studies trite and inconsequential. But some, including psychologist Harry Harlow, have asked the question: why is the study of colonial oppression, racial tension, gender inequity, violence, fascism and misogyny acceptable, even commendable, but the study of love is not? Surely, blind dismissal of the subject makes investigation all the more provocative and necessary. The examination of social blind spots offers great promise for furthering our awareness of ourselves and each other, and thus enables us to create our collective future with consciousness.

This book makes a fledgling attempt to answer many puzzling questions about the quantity and quality of love in our national literature. Though the definitions, types, and aspects of love are insurmountably vast, study must begin. In the words of poet Emily Dickinson, “That Love is all there is, / Is all we know of Love” (714). Perhaps this limited understanding is not enough. American sociologist and concentration camp survivor Pitirim Sorokin wrote in 1954: “At the present juncture of human history an increase in our knowledge of the grace of love has become the paramount need of humanity, and an intensive research in this field should take precedence over almost all other studies and research” (xxii). The fact that this research has *not* taken precedence in the last five decades increases the urgency and relevance of Sorokin’s comment for the world today. In this book, I work to identify some of the peculiar similarities of Canadian love stories, the banality, tension, existential marital angst, and flaccid courtship. Dr. Stephen

Post, founder of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love², recognizes that all forms of love involve the giving of one's self. He aptly notes, "In the giving of self lies the unsought discovery of self" (5). How can we know ourselves if we don't know ourselves in love?

My research focuses on intimate love relationships (defined in the next paragraph) in Canadian fiction for two reasons: 1) intimate love holds a prominent place in human experience and psyche, and 2) intimate love stories, paradoxically, are the most startlingly absent form of love throughout English-Canadian fiction. I've also chosen to narrow the field of research by examining only those works of fiction written by Canadians that are set in Canada. Curiously, a number of prominent Canadian authors have written well-developed, emotional love stories that are set outside of Canada (see Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, for example). Also avoided here are Harlequin-style romances, a genre which Janice Radway and others have given thoughtful attention to but whose narrative tendencies differ fundamentally from those in this research project. Wherever possible, I reference Canadian theorists on the topic of love because their insight into Canadian culture and nature proves particularly relevant. However, scant commentaries from Canadian scholars exist on the subject. Instead, I turn to the provocative insights and analysis from researchers Catherine Belsey and French theorist Paul Gifford, and include observations from sociologists, psychologists, medics, ecocritics and naturalists.

The results of my findings lead to three primary conclusions: 1) intimate love stories in English-Canadian fiction, as a whole, are poignantly lacking in depth, intensity, and quantity, 2) the reasons for this lack involve social ennui and disillusionment, geographic obstacles, moral propriety, and the unique conditions that arise in a nation of immigrants, and 3) a meaningful and distinct correlation exists between love stories and nature-human stories in these texts. Each culture has its own set of unique conditions which shape the mindset, experience and,

² Est. in Cleveland 2001

accordingly, the literature of a nation. Like all narratives, love stories flow like rivers through particular social, economic, and environmental landscapes. Canada is unusual in its cultural diversity, economic wealth and vast surrounding wilderness, and these factors have profoundly shaped Canadian love stories.

Love

The subject of love offers literary analysts a morass of contexts, definitions, and lengthy cultural considerations. Love is at once universal and intensely personal. As such, it resists definition. However, in this book, “love” always refers to the intimate love shared between two lovers or would-be lovers, be they married or unmarried, gay or straight, very young or elderly. Western culture often posits marriage as the pinnacle of accomplished intimate love, though the books researched for this project profoundly object to this viewpoint. Intimate love is often synonymous with Eros but is not limited to sexual desire alone. Sorokin writes that the action of Eros, though egocentric in nature, is “a form of self-assertion of the highest, noblest, and sublimest kind” (4). The layered meanings of love often include romance, emotional and physical intimacy, courtship, sexual desire, attachment, commitment, longing, temptation, and affection and the shadowy overlap of these and other elements. Social theorist Roland Barthes’ has written a comprehensive reference book on love words, *A Lover’s Discourse*, which adds dozens more terms to the list of possible love components, including: affirmation, fulfillment, understanding, dedication, union, truth, ravishment, waking, absence, jealousy, regret, waiting, tenderness, and magic. Any or all these components may be mixed into the love story, or it may contain its own yet unnamed elements. In *Love’s Philosophy*, Richard White notes, “It is sometimes said that love is an emotion that involves the cherishing and profound attachment to another person” (4). He adds, “... our love is sustained by wonder, and it is a sense of wonder concerning the beloved that first pulls us out of ourselves and puts us in touch with something

that goes beyond all our ordinary projects and concerns—Plato will call it ‘eternal’ and ‘divine’” (4-5). It is precisely this quality of the eternal and divine that is largely absent from Canadian fiction.

For example, in the romantic love story of Timothy Taylor’s *Stanley Park*, boy meets girl, boy and girl fall into a calm sort of love and then ... nothing happens. Perhaps they drift apart or were disappointed in one another, but no personal reflection or emotional process sheds light on the relationship’s conclusion. Neither grief nor guilt. Not longing or even relief. Their attraction, sexual encounters, and the hope they had begun to invest in one another simply dissolve. This emotional impotence exists in the intimate relationships of numerous Canadian novels including David Adams Richards’ *Nights Below Station Street*, Elizabeth Hay’s *Student of Weather*, Ethel Wilson’s *Swamp Angel*, Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill*, Matt Cohen’s *Elizabeth and After*, Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*, and Miriam Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness*, to name a few. Unlike family love, patriotic love, and humanitarian love, for example, the wondrous and divine quality of intimate relationships in Canadian love stories seem blatantly, even *deliberately*, lacking. The love stories examined here are almost always relegated to subplots, sidelined in favor of stories of multiculturalism, family, community, economic achievement, immigration, and other issues. In some instances, such as in *Diamond Grill*, *A Complicated Kindness*, and *What We All Long For*, love stories comprise no more than a few scattered lines embedded in hundreds of pages of novel. Of course not all stories have to be love stories, yet these novels were included in this research because they contain far *more* love than most English-Canadian novels.

Even where the primary focus of a book is on relationships, such as in *Nights Below Station Street*, *Sounding the Blood*, or *Student of Weather*, intimate love is most often depicted in dreary, flat, angst-ridden, or unfulfilling ways. Love stories examined in this book include multiple examples of married couples who resent each other, physical attraction that results in nothing,

and love scenes described with about as much elaboration and romance as a dental report.

Barthes explains, “Every amorous episode can be, of course, endowed with a meaning: it is generated, develops, and dies; it follows a path which is always possible to interpret according to a causality or finality ... this is the *love story*” (7). A love story, no matter how minute within the pages and pages of a bigger story, whispers its own messages to those who will listen. The purpose of this book is to listen to the meaning within these stories.

Nature

Other issues sometimes shape the Canadian love story and thus warrant attention: multiculturalism, immigration, community relationships, family life, to name a few recurring topics. Yet it would be foolhardy to overlook the *context* for all these stories: the vast and diverse natural environment of this enormous country. Unlike the stories of extensively populated nations, Canadian stories are far more likely to be intertwined with stories about nature. Not the cityscape, but the snow covered tundra, the dusty prairie, or valley between mountains provide the setting for the majority of Canadian stories. Even where novels center in cities or in suburbs, the broader context of surrounding wilderness exists in the psyche of characters and readers. Ecocritic Joseph Meeker notes, “Major literary works also resemble ecosystems in that they present a large and complex panorama of experience in which the relationships of humans to one another are frequently represented in the context of human relationships to nature and its intricate parts” (7). I examine love in Canadian stories—not as an isolated experience of human phenomenon—but as existing in an ecosystem whereby they may be supported, infused, and altered by the surrounding natural environment. Indeed the evidence from Canadian texts suggests that a significant correlation between nature (natural environment) and love exists. The link proves so pronounced it may well be a distinct feature of the Canadian love story.

Like love, the concept of “nature” proves difficult, even divisive, to define. Social theorist Raymond Williams argues, “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language” (184). Most simply, “nature” in this book refers to beings and elements that are not human or human made. Williams reiterates this point when he notes, “[N]ature is what man has not made” (188). Some prominent theorists, such as Timothy Morton, have recently argued for the inclusion of cityscapes, automobiles, and other man-made phenomenon within the definition of nature. My own approach to defining nature differs. The city-as-nature theory ignores the wise and age-old, cultural habit of learning from nature. The First-Nations, Native Americans, Ancient Chinese, and pagan cultures of Europe all believe(d) that if humans align(ed) themselves with the ways of nature (wind, water, plants, animals) we could learn valuable lessons about how to be better humans (see Allan, Sams, Tang). No culture yet has argued that humans can derive the same philosophic and/or spiritual benefit from aligning with the ways of skyscrapers, pulp factories, or highways—*because they are dead*. Indeed, if we imagine that the deadening influence of human-made things does rub off on us, we may be able to explain why city/suburb-filled Canadian novels incessantly follow a pattern of deadened, limp love stories. While “nature” in this book does not mean a goddess-like personification of the earth (“Nature”), I do want to assert that we stand to learn something from the non-human world and that the novels themselves assert this belief.

I choose to use the word “nature” here instead of “environment” because the latter suggests a context—vistas, scenery, background—that might include cityscapes and other human-made surroundings, while the former includes a surrounding natural context as well as a single snowflake or food items such as peaches and squash blossoms. Humans, of course, hang in the balance between nature and the human-made world. In instances where nature is sparse or non-existent in a text, humans form part of a non-nature, urban context. In other instances, particularly where nature plays an active role in the love story, such as in Amanda Hale’s

Sounding the Blood, the human births, deaths, lives, and love come and go with the regularity of passing seasons and thus posit humans within a realm of the natural.

Novels

By and large Canadian novels reveal subdued love stories that wander along the course of ultimately unfulfilling subplots³. From attraction to courtship to partnership to separation, English-Canadian love stories reveal a deeply unsatisfactory union between people. The tendency toward scant, banal, and distinctly un-sexy depictions of love doesn't register indifference; it registers disillusionment. When Benny and Jeremy in *Stanley Park* finally consummate their desire for one another with sex, the scene is mechanical and crass. At the end of *Nights Below Station Street*, Adele is pregnant and about to give birth, even though the reader has not glimpsed a fragment of affection between her and Ralphie. *Swamp Angel*, *Nights Below Station Street*, *Elizabeth and After*, *Sounding the Blood*, Carol Shields' *Stone Diaries*, and Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* all offer distinctly dismal views on marriage. Husband and wife are more likely to loathe each other than to love. In English-Canadian stories, sex is most often a category distinct from love; love is distinct from marriage, and courtship is very nearly nonexistent.

No simple explanation can clarify why Canadian love stories have evolved this way. Moreover, the timeline of Canadian novels does not suggest a change in attitudes toward love, nor can a meaningful distinction be made along gender lines of the authors. Indeed, the shifting of love attitudes in Canada seems to occur over the course of centuries rather than decades or single generations. For this reason, novels written decades apart can be paired together to illustrate a single point. For these reasons, I approach the causes of love-disillusionment with

³ Elizabeth Smart's novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* is a striking and singular anomaly and will be discussed later in this introduction.

caution. Several factors appear to be at play. A number of theorists (Jeremy Iggers, Belsey, Allen Stein, and Bert Bender) have noted the effect of science and statistics on contemporary concepts of love. Highly publicized rates of divorce, infidelity, date rape, and spousal abuse may well have shifted social appetite away from love and even courtship. Adding to this loss of appetite are the exhaustively detailed findings modern science has made about pheromones, orgasm, attachment hormones, testosterone, waist size, face shape and a plethora of other details associated with attraction and sexual fulfillment. These are not the details Sorokin had in mind when he urged scholars to research “the grace of love.”

Belsey, Wagoner, and Iggers delve deeper into the social weariness about love and uncover a more poignant concern. Despite all the charts and graphs, explorations, exposures and liberations around love, *it still fails us*. Iggers proposes that modern two-person intimacy is fraught with disappointment and bitterness. He articulates: “Sex has lost its promise. In the fifties and sixties, sex was still connected to romance, understood as a merging of two souls into a sort of mystical union. But starting in the late sixties, both theory and practice turned against that ideal” (111). Wagoner writes that in our times, romantic love “is more likely to entail profound suffering than happiness” (140). Perhaps it always did, but now we have statistics to prove it. Belsey adds:

... the postmodern condition brings with it an incredulity toward love. Where, we might ask, in the light of our experience, the statistics, our philosophy, or any documentary evidence outside popular romance, are its guarantees, its continuities, proof of its ability to fulfill its undertakings? (683)

While science and statistics may have wiped out much of the magic associated with love, other factors also negatively influence modern love’s viability.

Anthropologist Felice Wyndham provocatively suggests that Canada’s low love meter may be related to the fact that we are largely a nation of immigrants. She notes that people learn about attachment and love from being surrounded by a community of relationships—friends, family, and networks of relatives. But in communities where the great majority of inhabitants are

immigrants or descendents of recent immigrants, most relationship ties have been severed. While new relationships and communities are born and can thrive from their rich diversity, the process can take years or even generations to evolve to the level of intimacy of those left behind. In the meantime, individuals coexist in communities of strangers, particularly in cities. Characters from *The Law of Dreams*, *Diamond Grill*, *Disappearing Moon Café*, and *Sounding the Blood* express painful grief and loneliness over this loss, while many other narratives experience this social strangeness in more subtle ways. For example, only a thin sense of community exists in *Swamp Angel* in the town where Maggie is married to Mr. Vardoe and in Norma Joyce's prairie town in *Student of Weather*. While this fact liberates Maggie and Norma Joyce to act with courageous independence, an element of loneliness undermines their journeys. In the struggle to adjust to a new culture, language, and climate while making critical steps forward economically, new immigrants may poignantly miss the network of relationships left behind. The protagonist in *The Law of Dreams* sums up this line of thought when he laments that in Canada "Everything is strangers" (390).

The sheer geography of Canada creates another obstacle to love. Robert Kroetsch posed the question: "How do you make love in a new country? . . . How do you establish any sort of close relationship in a landscape—in a physical situation—whose primary characteristic is distance?" (73). Although Kroetsch was referring specifically to prairie literature, his question addresses a vital link between love and geography that resonates across the country. Geographic separation (along with political and economic factors) thwarts love possibilities for many characters in *Diamond Grill*, causes agonizing heartbreak for a Chinese worker in *Sounding the Blood*, and results in the tragic loss of love for the protagonist in Peter Behren's recent novel *The Law of Dreams*. The issue of isolation, remote living, also affects the availability and thus, compatibility, of partners. In *Swamp Angel*, Maggie rushes into a disastrous marriage with Mr. Vardoe because there's little way for her to survive on her own. In *Student of Weather*, the young

Norma Joyce falls into an un-passionate but steady love for Maurice because, well, who else is there to fall in love with? Not surprisingly, these relationships begin and end in disappointment.

Canada's geography impedes love's success, but the link between nature and love is curiously paradoxical. Over and over in Canadian love stories a supportive correlation exists between the two. To be precise, where more nature is present, more love is present and vice versa. Where nature is less visible, love is less visible and vice versa. This peculiar occurrence is evidenced with remarkable regularity.⁴ On the most love-rich, nature-filled side of the spectrum lie *Sounding the Blood*, *Student of Weather*, and *Disappearing Moon Café*. On the love-lean, nature-less side lie *What We All Long For*, *Elizabeth and After*, and *Nights Below Station Street*. Other novels, such as *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, *Student of Weather* and *Disappearing Moon Café*, slide up and down the spectrum at various points within the text; deeper into nature (tundra, prairie, wilderness) characters experience more love, but in the cities, love is replaced by mere sex or absence.

In some instances, this correlation is purely practical. If society forbids a love affair, nature provides a private and neutral retreat from a hostile human environment. Such is the case when the protagonist of Daphne Marlatt's 1997 novel, *Ana Historic*, comes across two women in a steamed up car nestled in the woods. The women are obviously engaged in heated physical passion, when her friend announces exactly the criticism that the women have sought to avoid; she calls them "perverts" (106). In *Gentle Sinners*, the situation is yet more dangerous. Deeply drawn to the fair-haired Melissa, Eric risks death if he is caught on her property and jeopardizes Melissa's safety if his psychotic and sexually frustrated tag-a-long locates them anywhere else. A dug-out cave on the river bank serves as a sanctuary for these tormented youth to express their most personal troubles, kiss, and lie next to each other in close, quiet, emotional intimacy.

⁴ Alice Munro's short story "A Bear Came Over the Mountain" is an exception; love, though lukewarm, is an enduring theme in the story, despite scant evidence of nature.

Similarly, illicit love-making occurs between mixed-race teenagers in forests and caves in *Sounding the Blood*. In this way, the omnipresence and cultural neutrality of nature inadvertently fosters love relationships, though those affairs still may not succeed in the end. These stories are far less likely to take place in China, Britain, Egypt or most other countries because there quite simply isn't enough private, semi-hospitable nature to host them.

However, the concept of nature as a mere container—a moral limbo-land—for forbidden love is too limiting in the case of several other novels. In *Disappearing Moon Café*, subtle threads of spirituality, traditional health philosophies, and nature-human similarities are woven into complex tapestries of story. In this novel, the farther away individuals move—physically—from materialism and the dense site of cultural rules embodied by Chinatown, the more likely they are to experience love and even conception. Examples in this novel and others (see *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, *Sounding the Blood*, and *Student of Weather*) reveal that nature can play a more active role in love stories by providing an emotional wholesomeness that is absent elsewhere, perhaps even a trace of magic that heals the bodies and hearts of humans so that they *can* love.

In other instances, nature itself is more beautiful, erotic, and engaging than a human to human relationship. Love stories occur between humans and forests/meadows/oceans and frequently between humans and food—the physical consumption of nature. In *Stanley Park*, *Diamond Grill*, and David McFadden's "Hiroko Writes a Story," eroticism, sensuality, devotion, and desire revolve around the dinner plate, not the bed. Love stories in these texts provide a thin backdrop to the robust excitement of the culinary. For example, the narrator of *Diamond Grill*, describes the "singular and memorable," "sweet musky taste" of gold, "elongated lily buds," a description which is notably erotic and tempting (129). Later, he shares his feelings about tofu: "My attraction to this food is more than belief; it's a deep need, obsessive" (151). In stark contrast, a few lines summarize the entirety of courtship, human to human love, and marriage in the book. The eroticization of food and downplaying of love is a constant pattern in *Stanley Park* and

“Hiroko Writes a Story.” In his book *The Garden of Eating*, Jeremy Iggers writes, “In a culture in which consuming rather than connecting is the central motivating force, it is only natural that eating has more erotic potential than sex” (109). Though the eroticized food in these narratives may have been collected and processed by human means and therefore exists further along a gradient of “nature,” I’ve taken liberty to include it here as nature⁵. Moreover, the characters themselves, particularly in *Stanley Park* and “Hiroko Writes a Story,” often see food as nature. In a country of plenty, food may ultimately prove more reliable and fulfilling than love.

Even beyond food, nature becomes a surprisingly powerful substitute for human to human love in several texts. In *Swamp Angel*, both Maggie and Haldar find peace, profound joy, comfort, and love in their relationship to the location Three Loon Lake. In contrast, their relationships to their respective spouses are described with words like “torment,” “humiliation,” “grudging,” and “hate” (101, 73, 160). Maggie has left her intolerable husband and Haldar has emotionally abandoned his wife. Both have replaced their spouses with nature. The novel reveals how complete this replacement is: “By the time that two months had gone past, Maggie’s union with Three Loon Lake was like a happy marriage (were we married last week, or have we always lived together as one?)” (86). In fact, written in this light, Maggie’s “marriage” to the lake constitutes the happiest, most promising relationship in the book. The lake even heals Maggie of her horrific memories of her husband: her “tormented nights of humiliations between four small walls were ... washed away by this air, this freedom, this joy” of the lake and surrounding wilderness (101). In both Haldar and the protagonist’s cases, the lake washes away concern and evokes a profound joy and devotion which is not even glimpsed in their relationships to their spouses. In this sense, nature shifts from being a context to an active entity capable of engaging

⁵ Indeed, individual foods could be located along the gradient nature to human-made scale, with artificial junk foods at the human end and a still thrashing salmon at the other.

in a real relationship with people, one of healing, transformation, comfort, and recognition—all the qualities people most hope to find in a love relationship.

Even when partners have not been abandoned, the boundaries between a human love story and a nature-human relationship in Canadian novels and short stories often become so blurred, it would be impossible to define them independently. Where this boundary blurring occurs, nature participates in the physical and spiritual dimensions of love as an active, even persuasive, agent. Such is the case in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, *Sounding the Blood*, “Hiroko Writes a Story,” and more subtly in various other stories where love cannot be comprehended except within the wider network of nature-human relationships. That is to say, human to human love must be seen through the lens of an *ecology* of love; it can no more be explained as a solitary element than rain can be explained as a phenomenon independent of clouds and oceans. The study of ecology demands that researchers shift attention away from things/beings and onto the connections between things/beings. The ecology of love may include the influence or presence of weather, plants, rocks, and animals, and, in the human realm, spiritual/religious belief systems, physical affection, and gender relations, and elements which exist in the overlap of human/nature worlds such as nature spirits, ancestry, spiritual and physical conception, and fate.

For example, in *Sounding the Blood* a storm (weather/fate) capsizes Kenji and Bella’s feeble boat; the young lovers must spend the night together on the tiny island called Dreamer’s Rock (nature/human spirits), known as the place where the spirits of deceased Haida wait to fill people’s dreams. However, in Bella’s case, they fill her dreams with whales and her belly with a baby. In this story, the conception of a human child is at the centre of a complex network which extends roots to Kenji and Bella’s emotional love for each other, the spirits of Dreamer’s Rock, Bella’s dream, the physical action of love-making, and the weather/fate which forced them onto the island. By the end of the novel, Bella appears to attribute more credit for her pregnancy to the

rocks, her dream of whales, and the Haida spirits than to Kenji. A beautiful love-making scene between a Cree husband and wife in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* exemplifies the same degree of complexity in nature/human/love stories.

These examples highlight the necessity of studying Canadian love stories through different lenses—different approaches to theory and analysis—than those called for in the literature of other nations. In fact, perhaps the best way to understand Canadian love stories is to study nature's systems—that is, through the lens of ecology. In this sense, nature lives inside the story and outside, in the mind of the reader. Inhabitants of this country may speak different languages, have different religions, beliefs, and understandings about the world and about love, but we are all truly surrounded by nature—thus our understanding of nature becomes an important way we can understand ourselves. Canadian literature suggests that nature has the power to bring people together even while keeping them apart. The great expanse of prairies, tundra, or mountains may separate, but for those not too weary, a single snowflake⁶ may reunite.

As this research has shown, love maintains only a sidelined role in almost all Canadian fiction. However, a singular anomaly exists. In this one instance love unequivocally owns the novel's spotlight. Canadian author Elizabeth Smart's novel, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, is a fierce, searing love story. In fact, not even *Of Human Bondage*, *Anna Karenina*, or *The Arabian Nights* can match it in intensity, insight, and devotion to love. Like so many other Canadian novels, nature supports and guides true love, and where nature is absent, love too is in danger. So—there is a real Canadian love story after all, right? As the title suggests, much of the book is set in the United States. Of additional concern for this research is the fact that Smart spent the majority of her adult life living and writing in England. But here's the real glitch: the novel was banned from publication in Canada for decades. The author's

⁶ The snowflake on page 28 of *Nights Below Station Street*, which prompts the first moment of meaningful attraction in the book. In this case, it has the power to tempt, though not unite.

mother knew that the book was based on Smart's real life experiences with a married man. (Indeed, most literature derives, at least in some small way, from authors' own experiences of life.) Thus, she used her political influence to bar the book from publication. Of the two hundred copies carried into Canada, she bought and burned nearly every one. Even after the book finally did come to publication in Canada, it earned remarkably little appreciation. Few novels sing with the honesty, poetic brilliance, and ardour of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, but a great many that don't make regular circuits through reading groups, bookstores, and classrooms, while this one sits quite undisturbed at the dusty end of the shelf in only the largest libraries. Apparently, Smart's book threatened to reflect human experience in a distinctly discomfiting manner for her mother and others committed to upholding Canadian social norms—norms which newcomers frequently referred to as “cold.”

One of the motives of *Dousing the Flame* is to open new doors in the realm of fiction and love research. Where the two are preemptively curbed, we limit our understanding of ourselves and our potential for connection with each other. The mother in Smart's novel professes, “Love? Stuff and nonsense! ... It's loyalty and decency and common standards of behavior that count” (67). Those things do count. But so does courage, sensuality, transformation, and the divine taste of true love. The protagonist (Smart) and her lover in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* are so intensely alert and in tune with love, sensuality, and devotion that everyone else in the novel seems asleep by comparison. It is my intention in writing this book to wake us up. Vladimir Solovyov writes, “Love is important not as one of our feelings, but as the transfer of all our interest in life from ourselves to another, as the shifting of the very center of our personal lives” (qtd in Sorokin xvii). Love is what connects us to each other, to nature and to ourselves. Recognized or not, it is an invisible and essential bond between us all.

Balancing Acts:

A Critical Reflection on the Creative Process

Balancing Acts: A Critical Reflection on the Creative Process

I begin this reflection by explaining something of my process of transmuting analytical observations into creative expression. For me, this experience involves a complex agreement between the analytical mind and the creative self—parts which overlap, but operate from different sides of the brain. I approached the thesis first as a literary analyst. Through this critical, probing, sorting, and organizing mind, I chose the novels, stories, and theory for analysis. I defined a logical order for exploring these materials and a framework for developing my own theories. I also used the analytical self to define the basic parameters of my creative project: the approximate page length, the general plot style (i.e. single protagonist, roughly linear timeline), and the fact that the novel excerpt would be—above all—a love story. If I had pursued a purely analytical thesis, this would have been the end of the story. The remarkable thing about a dual creative/critical project is that an otherwise neglected part of the brain (and psyche) also engages with the project, resulting in ultimately richer observations, understanding, and writing. While my analytical mind (left brain) analyzed novels and explored theory, my creative self (right brain) observed, absorbed, and prepared.

My critical self, like people's, is hardy, persistent, and does not require coaxing to engage in any variety of projects. My creative self, however, needs uninhibited freedom; even the tap-tap on the shoulder of analytical suggestions is unproductive and distracting. This dynamic between my two sides of self necessitated an agreement with myself that my creative side could observe my analytical processes, but the reverse would not be the case. The analytical self must never turn to analyze the creative self. Because of this delicacy, I began writing the novel excerpt nearly simultaneously to beginning the research. The theory behind this was that 1) I would have a better chance of creating a truly unique Canadian love story if I was not completely drenched in the plots and characters of other Canadian love stories already, 2) the creative self needs to

have as much weight and voice in the beginning stages of this project or else risk being crowded out by the analytical voice later on, and 3) since the creative self is writing essentially in response to literature and theory, better to respond daily to a trickle of information than await a deluge.

The real excitement came when unexpected surprises to my carefully laid plans occurred. I set out to create a novel that would both align with other of Canadian love stories and diverge into new territory. I knew that the latter task posed the greatest challenge because to be new always requires more effort than to be common. A novel must find its own balance between the imagined and the real. To my own surprise, weighing in the real conditions of a woman's life in the Cariboo in the 1930s tipped my story over and over again into the familiar terrain of a classic Canadian love story. For example, the primary way I intended my story to differ from the established genre was that it would *be* a love story—a heated, devoted, searing love story. While I believe I've achieved some promising ground work in this direction, the road has included many more obstacles than anticipated. Specifically, Annabelle reunion with Harvey's is taking a long time to come around. This fact largely results from the issue of geographic separation, though social and financial constraints around Annabelle are also a factor. If Cariboo ranches and towns were not so spread out, Harvey could stop by more easily. The two could bump into each other in town. They might have friends in common and meet up through a social event—a wedding, funeral, public dance, etc. But Harvey lives far, far to the north, and his occupation demands a somewhat nomadic lifestyle. At the close of my novel excerpt, the two are still a long, long ways off from being reunited. Like the physical geography of many of the novels I read, Cariboo terrain stretches would-be lovers a great distance from one another. However, I can't help but wonder if I haven't inadvertently created a metaphor—a puzzle—for my own solving; the distance between the two characters may represent my own struggle to piece together and make sense of fragmented love stories I've researched. I suppose that in the same way I have not

quite managed to bring Annabelle and Harvey back together, I have not quite managed to pull together the slim pieces of researched love stories into a wholly satisfactory picture. But they're on the way.

Annabelle's situation also threatens to align with the lack-luster quality of English-Canadian love stories when she considers simply finding a way to get to Vancouver—without considering what this would do to her chances of ever seeing Harvey again. My intention when I began writing was utterly different. I wanted Annabelle to stop at nothing to be reunited with him. However, her circumstances are such that making her do that would define her as a dangerously oblivious character and thus contemptible as a mother. As daydreamy as she is, even *she* knows that physical survival—feeding her child and herself, having a hope of a livable future—are more important than chasing the scent of love, no matter how potent, promising, or intoxicating. Annabelle, though born Canadian, is similar to characters from other novels who have little community to fall back on and must put the struggle to survive above all other troubles.

In this way, I found myself unintentionally tangled in the issue that quite a number of novels struggle with: love and survival are at odds; following one may be at the expense of the other. Some of the Chinese workers of Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* and Amanda Hale's *Sounding the Blood* experienced this dilemma when they leave wives behind in China in order to ensure the family's economic survival. Eric, in W.D. Valgardson's *Gentle Sinners*, chooses the suffocation of food, shelter and no love at his parents house over being an impoverished, homeless fugitive who may once in a while risk visits to his beloved Melissa. Illicit lovers Fong Mei and Ting An from Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* face a similar reality; if they attempted to express their love (or perhaps in Fong Mei's case, desire) for one another with more than scant frequency, they would likely face expulsion from the community, and then where would they live? How would they survive? This survival or love paradigm does not, as Margaret Atwood long ago suggested in *Survival*, result from the "collective victim" state of Canadian characters, but the

exquisite and challenging realities of life and land in this country (36). Perhaps then what makes Annabelle different from other characters is that she carries the flame of love with her along her road to survival—that she even *considers* meeting up with Harvey as a valid and possible outcome to her own struggles. Her dreaminess and alertness define her as unusual within her community and to some extent within the wider nation of characters studied for this research.

Another poignant similarity between my story and many of those researched exists in the penchant for defining marriage as regrettable reality of life—something between an unenthusiastic domestic arrangement and a chronic personal threat. When I began writing my novel, I had not yet realized the strength of this trend. Maggie’s story of marriage in Ethel Wilson’s *Swamp Angel* is so similar to “Circle of Sunlight” in this and other regards that one might imagine the latter was deeply inspired by it. In fact, *Swamp Angel* was one of the very last novels I read; the foundations of my own novel were too set in stone to alter even for the sake of defining more of a difference between them. Both Maggie and Annabelle marry out of survival, and geographic isolation limits their choice of partners. These protagonists differ from the norm because they deceptively abandon their husbands in order to ensure their emotional survival. Furthermore, both travel a great distance in search of an uncertain love. However, in Annabelle’s case, love is a person, while in Maggie’s it is a place. In this way, both characters fit the mold of classic Canadian literary trends, but also catapult beyond them into an important new literary-scape where emotional survival supersedes economic security.

My co-processes of creative and analytical discovery were especially fruitful in working with the intrinsic involvement of nature in Canadian love stories. I call this the love triad: two people plus nature equals love. By the time I realized the persistence with which nature infuses Canadian love stories, I saw that I was already expressing this phenomenon in my story. My creative mind had apparently identified, absorbed, and expressed the love triad before my analytical self caught up and found a way to articulate it. Drinking water, a glint of sunlight, and

a daydream of whales are the essential ingredients that facilitate love at first sight for Annabelle and Harvey. In the opening scene of the novel, the memory and hope of love warms Annabelle like an ember. Later, she begins to understand more about her feelings for Harvey by thinking about the brightness and distance of stars. Perhaps this concept of the ecology of love was ingrained in me prior to beginning this research. Could it be that after spending a lifetime in nature, I don't know how to extract the human story from the nature story? (My first experience of Jane Austen was deeply troubling; a young man and woman went for a walk in the park that lasted for many pages, but—where was the park? Not a trace of tree, bird or flower appeared—the result of which left me feeling that I was spinning in outer space.)

The thorough intermeshing of love and nature in “Circle of Sunlight” scenes creates a challenging knot to untangle with analysis. All of the following analytical approaches pose equally viable possibilities: 1) Drinking water works as a lubricant for Harvey and Annabelle by facilitating the feeling of love between them. 2) Water is necessary in the germination and growing of seeds—and in this case, the seed of love. 3) Water is the habitat of whales. Annabelle has recognized something in Harvey that is whale-like. Giving him water is a way to support that part of him which is powerful and mysterious like the whales of her daydreams. 4) The spirit of whales came into Annabelle's daydreams just prior to her meeting Harvey in order to spark her curiosity in and inner recognition of Harvey. 5) When Harvey accepts the well water from Annabelle, he is accepting her and the land she lives on and thus partaking in a circular engagement with all parts of her. 6) Her eyes are “like dirt,” or like the soil needed for him/them to plant his/their seed of love. 7) Because even the wind is blowing, all four elements are auspiciously present in this near-ceremonious meeting: fire (sun), wind, water, and air. While this list could continue indefinitely, the point is that writing the ecology of love puts focus on the connections between beings and things rather than *on* beings and things, resulting in a more dynamic and meaningful narrative.

Another truth became clear to me through the creative writing process. I am much more comfortable and can engage much more meaningfully with ideas through my creative self. Analytically, I hammer out theory like railroad ties through slow, laborious effort. But when I sit down to write on my novel, I catch hold of a train that is already moving of its own volition. This is not to say that I put less effort into the creative writing, but that the climb to the upstairs mind—the highest level of thinking—happens more easily. I feel compelled to continue the Cariboo novel. I am writing it as if in a fog; I can only see a small ways up the road at a time. Annabelle is my light, and I am learning from her ways of being. Kattie too. Hopefully, one day this completed novel will add depth and scope to the body of Canadian love stories. But as Elizabeth Smart's neglected book *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* reminds, if a novel does not reflect accepted experience, it will not be received. Undoubtedly, Smart would have written her book even if she had known that hundreds of copies would be sent up in flames under her mother's match. I feel a similar determination. (Happily, my own mother is not much for book burning.) This, in the end, is the real gift of the thesis project: discovering that I have started something I must continue.

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