The Ecology of Identity:
Memoir and the construction of narrative

by

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Abstract

My dissertation is an inquiry into issues of life-writing, narrative, and, in particular, into the genre of memoir, and into the theory, complexities and strategies of memoir as a particular space within the larger genre of autobiographical writing. Writing a personal narrative and then examining the process of that writing raises questions and challenges about such issues as ethics, identity, experience, memory, subjectivity, storytelling, and the interpretation, meaning and place of stories within our current culture. This dissertation is a discursive, dialogic conversation between my process and my understanding as an active, practicing literary writer, and as a researcher inquiring into that process and into the knowledge and new awareness that can be generated by the process of inquiry into life writing, autobiography and memoir. It is also an autoethnographic and experiential inquiry in which I explore my own experience from the multiple positions of rural working class woman, single parent mother, political activist, writer and researcher. However, the pronoun “I” is also a position from which I can articulate some of the experiential, collaborative, and collusive positionality that has shaped my personal notion of selfhood. My research and writing is about (re)cognition, about memoir in particular, and narrative and storytelling as the construction and reconstruction of various texts and the various interpretations that can result from such an analytic and critical study of this process. Within this narrative, autobiographical and theoretical inquiry, my dissertation intends to add to new knowledge of autobiographical writing and its theoretical and ethical dimensions.
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Preface: Notes on Methodology

The methodology of this thesis is the creation of a full-length creative work, in this case, a memoir, and along with it, an exegesis that examines the theoretical and critical dimensions of this kind of writing. According to the New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors (2005) the word ‘exegesis’, means a “critical explanation or interpretation of a text.”

The exegesis is a related and complementary articulation of the writing process. It outlines why I chose the project I did, and it elaborates, clarifies and places the work into context. It offers a full explanation of the ideas informing the written artifact, as well the process of producing it. It explains why and how I proceeded with the work and what elements of thought, creativity, research, intuition, and introspection have influenced the development of the work. It also demonstrates research into both the theoretical and practical aspects of my writing and research.

The exegesis is structured along two lines of inquiry – first, to look at issues, ideas and critical theory to do with the actual creation, structure and writing strategies involved in the memoir, and second, to look at the issues and ideas that were generated within the writing. These subject areas include: examining writing as research; looking at the structure of memoir and how it differs from other autobiographical writing and why that difference is important to writers and educators; the cultural and historical context for memoir; how a sense of place and setting is important to certain aspects of memoir; the role of memory; the creation of a sense of self and identity through personal
representation in writing; and finally, the contradictory and complex ethics of autobiographical writing.

The creative work and the exegesis are meant to be complementary and mutually reinforcing parts of a single project and my goal is that the relationship between the two parts will contribute to the originality and creativity of the whole. The commentary on the memoir places that genre of writing, as part of the larger field of autobiographical writing, within an artistic, historical, intellectual and cultural context.

Although the creative thesis is most common within the disciplines of English and Creative Writing, it also has a powerful application within interdisciplinary studies and education, since it allows for the examination of overlapping and complimentary research areas. My methodological process is emergent, heuristic, hermeneutic, and based upon a process of critical reflection as I engaged with the creation of a book-length memoir and then reflected upon that engagement. Thus, the design of this dissertation has been shaped by an ongoing reflection and critical gaze, both with my own process as a writer, and through research into the broader field of autobiographical writing, through extensive background reading of memoirs and autobiographies as well research into the historical, cultural and contextual issues surrounding memoir. This interwoven inquiry has meant that the creative process and the results of this work are in a constant dialogue. In that sense, my process is then also my methodology. The theory and practice of my research are linked and mutually dependent. One of my goals is to bring the practical production, understanding and knowledge of writing into the domain of scholarship. Thus, within this work, neither the creative work, nor the research, are subordinated to each other.
The field of autobiographical inquiry is vast and complex, and I have chosen to invite those voices that have resonated with my work and that have specific relevance to it. In light of the growing interest and application of autobiographical writing, both within the academy and in popular discourse and popular culture, I believe that I have managed to highlight pertinent issues for other researchers, as well as to lay the groundwork for further research work for the future.
Acknowledgments:

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In addition, many people have been of incredible assistance in other ways, above all, my children, Avril Woodend, Dorothy Woodend, Nat Morris and Geronimo Morris; and my family, in particular my brothers, Philip Armstrong and Bill Armstrong; The Women Writing Women group provided valuable feedback and advice. Dr. Clair Woodbury and Mary Woodbury provided a writing haven along with support and advice and Evelyn and George Armstrong welcomed me to another writing haven, my ‘other home’ on Nicola Lake.

Many others, including Dr. Stephen Duguid at Simon Fraser University, along with Jane Hamilton, Jean Rystaad, Zoe Landale, and Dorothy Woodend were all both excellent readers and critics. I owe a special debt to K. Linda Kivi, for conversation about shared ideas and concerns; and of course there were many others who have helped in small but important ways.
Dedication:

This work is dedicated to two special people whose love and care has sustained my life, my dear friend, Alan James Wilson, whose life was cut short by cancer in 2002, and my mother, Dorothy Anne Klingensmith Armstrong.
It’s late afternoon when my border collie, Kin, and I set out for a walk. Beside the road, fireweed and tansy blaze chartreuse and gold in the tangled brown brush of late summer. This end of August, the farm dozes under a grey sky. We’ve had a lot of rain but now it is drying out again. Ripe peaches drag the boughs of the peach trees to the ground. The new neighbours have left for the rest of the summer so I can walk through their place again. Our beach is a lot quieter without their boat. They spent over an hour one day in their powerboat circling around just off our beach pulling their kids behind them on a tube. I know this is fun—I did try it once—but the noise was wearing and after a while I got tired of them and waved at them to indicate that they could please, please go out into the middle of the lake or perhaps to perdition, I really didn’t care.

I haven’t met them yet. There seems to be a time-honoured tradition in rural Canada that summer people and the locals don’t mix. But if I get a chance, I’d like to tell them that where they have recently plunked their cabins, their trailers, their kid’s swing set, their tubes and boats and folding plastic chairs and barbecues, the place where they have cleared and graveled roads and dug waterlines, we have always called Sawdust Bay.

Once, about sixty years ago, there was a cabin there where Mabel and Dick O’Neil and all their kids lived. Pierre Longueval, the man who first homesteaded what became our farm also lived here. The old cedar picket fence (that I see now someone has knocked down and driven over), is the remains of the original fence that Pierre built; the pile of sawdust on which they have placed a trailer is where Pete had his original gas
sawmill and which he used to cut the lumber for the eighty-year old farmhouse in which I am now living.

Or maybe – but I’m not sure how they would hear it – I could tell them about the coyote den on the hill just above their cabins. One day, just a few years ago, I was walking there with the dogs, and the coyote bitch came out of the hole she had dug under a rock. She talked to us in an odd voice, a combination of barking and yipping. I had three big male dogs with me and they put their heads down and slunk away as if they had been smacked. I knew the dogs and the coyotes knew each other. Late on winter moonlit nights, I had seen them play along the pasture edge; the coyotes would come out of the trees, the dogs would rush and chase them back, disappearing into that black edge only to come charging back out again, while the coyotes stayed within the tree line and yipped at them.

I had never seen three dogs look so abashed and I wondered what the coyote had said. All I could say was “Sorry, sorry,” back away as politely as I could, and go the long way around.

Sometimes going for a walk is a very long journey.

Leo Williams, a Ktunaxa elder that I visit once or twice a year, now into his late eighties, told me this summer that he kept dreaming about driving along Highway 3, between Creston and Cranbrook, along the route he used to travel with his parents by horse and buggy. He wanted, he said, to stop at the old campsites and think about his mother and father and the people he used to know and tell their stories.
I am dreaming a similar dream but my journey is much shorter. What I am doing today is what I have been doing most of my life, walking this land, around and around, only now I walk through fifty years of history, through stories. This land is layered with memories and changes and things that have grown or died and left their remains somewhere here. How many dogs have we buried on this land? And horses. How many generations of cows and pigs and chickens have grown and died and been eaten?

Trees have also grown and fruited and died or been cut down—roads, paths, trails have been worn into the ground or dug up. There’s an African saying about how, when an elderly person dies, a library burns. I feel a bit like a library some days, my shelves sagging with sepia manuscripts of long ago stories.

Like many families, especially rural families, mine tells stories. Our stories are bound up with four generations now lived in this place. We re-live our history in stories that we tell over and over, with variations each time. We never get tired of them. And over time, they become, if not exactly true to the facts, more true to the story. They are tuned and refined. Each time an old story is re-told, there are new variations, additions, and arguments over whose version is right. Each telling sparks the next story, until the room is a conflagration, an exploding cacophony of rising voices and laughter, which drifts and mingles like smoke and carries us out the door and back to work or chores or whatever other need is calling.

I spent last weekend at a wilderness retreat centre on Kootenay Lake, listening to people tell stories of what a sense of place means to them. The Friday evening after I climbed out of the boat and onto the stony beach, I sat on the new tipi platform on the
west side of the camp, listening to the lake going lip-lap at the sharp basalt black rocks just below. There were yellow flowers growing in the rocks; I watched an iridescent blue dragonfly struggling in a spider’s web, until, and recognizing my own interference and human sentimentality, I climbed down to free it. The web was strung across a small gully in the rocks, so thick and strong I was glad I didn’t see the spider that built it. I let the dragonfly go. It sat on a rock and cleaned the rest of the web off its belly and flew away. I climbed back up to the deck and watched the snouts of the mountains dip into the lake—sleeping dragons, my friend Susan calls them—and there they were, snoozing, their noses buried in the lake, their humped spiked backs reaching up the sky. Smoke from American farmers burning stubble on their fields crept north in a blue line along the lake, making the mountains into flat blue icons from a Chinese painting.

The next morning, about thirty people gathered to talk about how we feel about where we live. We sat on cushions or chairs inside a large canvas tent with the sides rolled up so we could see the beach and the lake. There were two people from the Ktunaxa nation, Leo Williams and a young woman with two small children. Beside them, there were neighbours from the east shore, a couple of people from Creston, some newcomers to the area and some long time residents.

As we went around the circle, talking about what living in the Kootenays means to us, people were thoughtful, strong in their sense of love and connection, but more hesitant in trying to say what that meant. Then in the afternoon, the tone shifted and we deferred to the expertise of people who have studied various aspects of the Kootenay ecology—geology, birds, and fire. Gradually, the words grew more technical and our eyes glazed. The room divided into experts and audience.
We were hungry for this information; all of us wanted to know more about this place where we live. I have lived here all my life and yet there is so much I don’t know. I need to know more about the ecology, about the interplay of plants and animals that I have watched for so long.

Marlene Machmer, a tall beautiful blond woman, told us about her amazing work, studying osprey-mating habits and nesting, about how the osprey population has miraculously rebounded. I interrupted her.

“I know this sounds anthropomorphic,” I said, “but I used to live near an osprey nest and I swear, every morning, they who would fly over my house and call me out to admire their fish.”

She didn’t answer, only shook her head slightly and went on with the facts and figures and observations she had made. After dinner, as I was leaving for my lovely solitude in the tipi, she caught up with me.

”You know, ospreys do have a display activity, in which they fly up to a mate or sometimes other ospreys or people and show off their fish,” she said. “We don’t understand it, they seem to really like people.”

We know too little about this land we all share. Many people have been studying it now, for a while, but the technicians and biologists and academics keep a lot of the information to themselves. Those of us who live here have our stories and observations—what we needed in the afternoon was some way to become more than an audience, to become co-observers, co-technicians, to mesh our stories and anecdotes and knowledge with that belonging to those which the world has labeled experts.

By the next morning at the camp, the weather had changed. Huge rollers were
smacking into the rocky beach so we sat under a tarp drinking coffee and enjoying not being able to go anywhere, at least for a while. The camp is situated on a peninsula so there is no sound or sight of other people, no background hum of electricity, cars, no phones ringing. We were all slightly disappointed when the weather cleared and it was possible to go home.

On the way home, I began thinking about a remark that Kootenay archeologist Wayne Choquette had made. “I’ve been thinking about a sense of home and place for thirty years and I’ve come to define it more by what it isn’t than what it is.”

Wayne has been studying the history, the geology and the archeology of the Kootenays for thirty years. He has a deep understanding of the interplay between these areas. He also has a close working relationship with the Ktunaxa people. But after all that time, he says, what he mostly has are a lot of questions about what a sense of place actually means.

Now, a week later, I’m still thinking about some of my own endless questions about what living here means. Walking for me is a way of thinking. Today, I am walking through layers of time. There are so many kinds of time here. There is present time, the life I live now, split between the city and here. There is a lifetime of memories of myself growing up here, then my kids growing up here, and then there is the comforting sense of eternity or near eternity, that I can step into in the mountains. One of the reasons I like mountains is they are so present, so huge, and so enduring. It’s hard to change a mountain. Hard to build on a mountain, hard work to log it, to climb it, to do much of anything to it, although now apparently in Appalachia, they have figured out to level
Mountains to get at the coal underneath them.

Mountains are full of secrets and surprises. People come to them for as many reasons as there are people; mountains make both walls and shelters—it’s very hard to live here and not feel the rest of the world receding into dim blue distance, to not be reminded that there is another sense of time besides our speedy human perspective. I love mountains because I can hide in them, because they make me feel small and unimportant, and they make the rest of the world go away.

I walk past the new neighbour’s new-lumber smelling cabins and up the hill, past the house which we still call Shelackie’s cabin. We first lived there when our parents moved to my grandfather’s farm. Then the cabin was bought by the Blackburns, then Beincourts, now it belongs to someone I don’t know. It looks almost abandoned; wild roses and buckbrush have sprung up around the front door. I pause at the old workshop, the door sags open and the interior reeks of packrat. Kin snuffles at the walls and digs half-heartedly at the piles of junk.

Then out of their yard, the back way, under the power line. Past Haley’s cabins. I like to check on Haley’s cabins now and again—no one seems to know who Haley was or why he made these four log cabins—the only story I know is that about a hundred years ago, he trailed a herd of goats over the mountains to this place—there are still remnants of rock walls and strings of rusty barbed wire. The cabins are almost invisible, crumbling back into soil under a canopy of brush and small trees. One huge Grand Fir has survived fires and clearing and goats. Perhaps it was big enough that Haley left it to grow over his cabin. The fir trees around it are scrawny and haven’t grown much over the years—what
has grown are the maples and alders, so that the cabins are almost invisible.

Below the cabins is a flattened place in the trees we always called Haley’s meadow, a place I go once a year for the sweetest of wild blackberries. The blackberry vine has been struggling along for years, almost dead but never quite, covered with grass, under the shade of the alders.

Finally, I walk home again along the highway, past the granite cliffs, the places where the highway department has blasted and blasted away at the mountainside to straighten out the curves made by the early road builders, past the corner piece of land on which someone years ago built a plastic and aluminum sided house then stuck a for sale sign on it and disappeared. No one has been here for a long time.

Dogs get old too fast; Kin is panting behind me on the way home instead of scaring me by charging across the road and up the hill and back again, dodging car loads of tourists with screeching brakes and impatient fright on their faces.

Finally we step off the highway back onto the farm, into the yard, past the house, under the Transparent apple tree. Kin lopes ahead of me to take a drink from the bucket by the back door. But I stop. I notice, as I have noticed before, the feeling of being transformed by being home, being private, being safe. A little greedy animal voice inside me goes “mine, ours” and another self that has been walking through the blue shadowed glory of eternity and mountains and outside of present time says “liar, liar” but I have no quarrel with either of them and go on my way, under the walnut tree.

My brother and father lopped the top off it a few years ago but it has now grown it back and is busy drying the grass and very slowly and steadily killing the Queen Annie cherry tree.
My life here has always strung on two parallel lines, like the wires my father strung to hold up the long lines of raspberry bushes. There is the land itself, working and living on it, and then there are stories, the many fantasylands I lived in as a child and then later books, other people’s and finally, my own.

When I was a child, this farm where we lived, and the mountains above it were full of places that were in some way magic, which isn’t a term I used for them, then. But what they were, were places that in some way lent themselves to my imagination. They were places that pulled me inside them for a while.

There was a clearing under an enormous pine tree, which was encircled by brush, so that inside the clearing and under the tree was a room, a round clear pine-needles space littered with enormous intricately jewel-like pine cones. The best part was edging up, with our toes hanging over the edge, along the narrow ledge that ran along a cliff and then parting the brush at the top of the cliff edge to get into the room.

We picked up bags of the pine cones and took them home to our mother, where they somehow lost their magic until she spray painted them with silver paint and used them for Christmas tree ornaments.

Once my younger brother and I found tiny crystals inside a quartz ledge in the rocks beside the beach. We spent days chipping the crystals out of the ledge with a hammer and chisel and crowbar, convinced we had found diamonds, until our father rudely informed us that we were wasting our time.

And above all, there was the irresistible lure of the beach; in the spring the level of water in Kootenay Lake receded and left a whole new edges to explore, but best of all,
was the mud flat at the mouth of the small creek, a place to build endlessly complex dams and roads and canals.

These places were like rooms in my mind—rooms in some enormous and mythological world that had no limits. Beside the farm was the lake, and above the farm, the blue-green Purcell Mountains, fringed with endless trees. And beyond the mountains, the endless wilderness, full of rooms and possibilities, and full of new stories.

Walking here now, I walk through time and stories. The stories dwell in me as I am made from them. The stories and I dwell within layers of time. Human beings are created by the stories they tell. As soon as we learn to speak, we start to tell stories and as soon as we start to tell stories, we dwell in the identity those stories make for us.

Stories live both outside and inside time; they live in us and in the land. They connect us together and split us apart. They tie me, body and soul, to this place.

Richard Flanagan, the Tasmanian writer, has said that the movement of writers in the last century was away from home but that the movement of writers in this century will be towards home, towards understanding the meaning of home, place. I hope he’s right.

Stories of home live both outside and inside time; they live in us and in the land. We write our stories on land—in codings of houses, roads, fences, landscaping—as much as our stories are written within our bodies and minds, they are also written within land. After fifty years of living in the same place, a place that holds my whole life the way a glass bowl holds water, each corner of the road, each tree and bush and mountaintop has
a story to tell me, a story I experienced there, that I now re/member there. And I am made by these stories, as much as these stories are mine to make, or mine to tell.

Chapter One:

The piece of land on which I grew up and have lived most of my life was once a creek delta, a cedar swamp, an almost flat place at the bottom of the Purcell Mountains, before it was cleared by Pierre Longueval, the young Frenchman who, in 1920, bought 160 acres of raw land beside Kootenay Lake and set out to create a farm. Kootenay Lake is a long, broad deep expanse of clear green-blue water, threaded between the Selkirk Mountains on the west and the Purcells on the east. Human inhabitants perch uneasily here, on bits of flat land on the toes of the mountain next to the lake. There are few beaches. The rocks are granite. The forest is dark, mixed fir, larch, pine and hemlock.

When my parents, my two brothers and baby sister arrived at the farm, it was early spring in 1955. Our parents were excited. The farm was a place of promise and hope.

I was five. We had been living in Riondel, a mining camp toward the northern end of Kootenay Lake. My parents had moved there from their other farm, five miles south of this one, in 1952. Riondel was a disheveled place mostly made up of people who had migrated to Canada after World War Two, referred to then, by everyone, simply as DP’s. Most of them didn't speak English and they lived in a haphazard collection of shacks, tents, and bunkhouses built by Consolidated Mining and Smelting, called CM&S, or more simply, the Company. Riondel was a tiny place at the end of six miles of rutted
twisty dirt road that led from the main road. Besides the houses, and tents, there was a
gaping hole in the rocks beside the lake that was simply called “the mine.” Everyday, my father disappeared into that hole and then came home again at night, dirty and tired, carrying his black lunch bucket.

Before Riondel, we had lived on another small farm called the Mannerino place, after its first owners, just above the very south end of the lake. This farm was a cleared piece of steep mountainside, beside a creek. The Wilsons, who lived a mile down the dirt road, were our nearest neighbours. I played sometimes with their son Alan, who was three months younger than me. But in Riondel, my mother promised me, there would be lots of children to play with. I was three, my older brother was six and just starting school, my younger brother was only a year old and my mother was pregnant again. The idea of other children was exciting.

When we first moved to Riondel, we lived in a company bunkhouse on the outside of town, but the next spring, we moved to the unfinished basement of the new house our father was building for us. The basement was damp, the walls and floor were concrete; the only heat was the wood cook stove. This house was right in the middle of a lot of other half-finished houses. Outside the basement door was a dirt yard, and beyond that, an expanse that my father had enclosed in a picket fence that he said would be our garden.

I stayed inside a lot, at first, underfoot and unsure of myself in such a new environment. One day my exasperated and exhausted mother said, “Go outside, there’s lots of children out there. Go make some friends.” Reluctantly, I slumped outside by myself, loitering by the back door, shuffling my feet in the muddy dirt. Finally, I saw a
boy coming down the dirt street and I went towards him. The next thing I saw was a rock spiraling towards my head. I saw it clearly but I didn’t have time to duck, in fact, I was too astonished to duck–then the rock hit me and shattered my faith in making friends and I ran wailing back into the house.

My mother found out who the boy was, and told me to stay away from him. Gradually, my older brother and I began to find out who the other kids were and to make friends. The Italian family next to us had several children, and we did play with them sometimes but more often, we threw rocks at them over the back fence. The kids in the camp formed shifting gangs that formed and dissolved, fought and played together, and I learned to wait until my brother came home from school so I had an ally and a protector.

Eventually, my mother found me another friend, a girl who lived up the hill above our house. She was the daughter of the mine supervisor but I didn’t know that– I did know I had to climb to her house through the trees and up a long flight of stairs. I was entranced both by these trees, by the grey piped stems of young alders, as well as by the long moss covered flight of stairs in front of her house. Whenever I went to her house, I would climb slowly up and down the stairs, loving the feeling it gave me with no ability to understand why. I had no words for beauty – and since I was alone there was no one to ask. But something about that place, something about the slender lines of trees next to the grey wooden stairs, the broad yellow flowers of skunk cabbage among the trees, the brilliant multi-shades of green, called me and I responded.

I also learned to fight in Riondel, a skill that stood me in good stead in later school years. One spring morning, I stood outside on the road, with my dad and a bunch
of other men – the mine was on strike and the men had nothing much to do. Junie Munro was there with her dad, Hughie, who was big and red faced and English. Soon the men egged Junie and me into fighting. Junie was older than me; I was four and she was five, little kids, – but it remains in my mind like a fight between giants. I knew that my mom and dad didn’t like Hughie, so even though Junie was older and heavier, I fought for my family and my dad. As we yelled and tore at each other and rolled around on the gravel road, I felt her give in, and I rolled over on top of her and began pounding her head into the gravel. One of the men, maybe Junie's dad, pulled me off and made us apologize to each other, but I knew my triumph. I knew from that moment on, that I could win a fight if I had to.

There were a few other bright moments; in the summer, some days my father would come home, stooped and dirty from the mine and we would take our supper to the beach north of town and play in the shallow water while the sun bent the light over the mountains on the other side of the lake.

But the winters were long and dark and damp. My mother was unhappy. She couldn’t make friends since most of the women in Riondel didn’t speak much English. She didn’t want this new baby. She had three small children and we seemed to always have colds from living in the damp basement. We sat inside and stared out the window while rain dripped off the lumber scaffolding on the makeshift roof and leaked in under the front door.

Winters in the Kootenays are always dark. The long narrow north-south valleys sock in with clouds in November, a ceiling that doesn’t lift until March and the snow that comes is usually wet slush.
But occasionally, it would snow, a deep rug of powdery snow and usually after that, the sun would come out. On one occasion, this happened on a Sunday and the whole town turned out with cardboard boxes, toboggans and sleighs. Everyone spent an afternoon sliding down one of the hilly streets. Someone made a fire and someone else donated hot chocolate.

When evening came, I didn’t want to quit. My mother grabbed my hand and towed me reluctantly home but while she was making dinner, I slipped out, took my small red sleigh and went back to the hill. In the darkness, I slid and swooped until my father came to find me.

My father occasionally used to take me with him when we went to the farm to visit his father, my grandfather and my step-grandmother. Their house was old and smelled funny. The only light in the evening came from coal-oil lamps. There was nowhere for me to sleep but curled up on an ancient couch under a blanket. I didn’t like my grandfather. He seemed very old and crabby to me. He had rough whiskers and his sweater strained to meet over his belly. When night came, I leaned against my father’s knee, missing my mother and wishing we could go home.

“Homesick, eh?” said my grandfather. “Like a baby.”

I glared at him with tears in my eyes.

“Look, she’s a crybaby.”

I looked from him to my father. Both of them were grinning. Even at four I was embarrassed. I had broken some kind of rule I didn’t understand. The tears dried into stones. I turned my head away. I decided to never cry in front of my father again.
One Sunday afternoon, the tent on the lot next door to us burned. The people got out and the neighbours came running but a canvas tent only takes a few minutes to burn. The ruins of the tent smoked for days while the camp kids, including my brother and I, raked through the warm ashes for the pennies that we heard had been in a jar in the tent. But the fire upset my mother. The family of several children had barely made it of the tent alive.

My mother began to hate Riondel. She could never get warm. She stuffed wood in the cook stove that was our only heat and shivered anyway. She was still in her early twenties and pregnant with her fourth child. When my father came home she would rage at him and he would rage back. They had moved to Riondel to try to make enough to money to build up a stake so they could go back to farming. But now they were too young and exhausted and the mine didn't pay enough to get them out of the trap of poverty and endless work into which they had fallen.

When my sister was born, the cord was twisted around her neck and she was blue from lack of oxygen. When my mother came home, my small sister cried and cried. One night my mother began crying and crying as well and couldn't stop—finally some men came and she went away with them. A few days later my grandmother, my mother’s mother, came to look after us. My grandmother and my father were never friends – I don’t think they ever even liked each other, but there were four small children to be cared for, including my baby sister, Robin who was only a few months old.

Then my father got ill as well. At that time, both of my parents chain-smoked, as did almost everyone they knew. My father had managed to get himself out of the black
depths of the mine, work which he hated and for which he was too tall, and reassigned to
loading cyanide laced mine slag on the dock; he hand-rolled his own cigarettes and
smoked a toxic combination of lead, cyanide and tobacco. My mother had come home
again, but she was still far from well. My grandfather decided to retire from farming and
move into Creston. He offered to sell the farm to my parents. They were both homesick
for farming, for land, and for distance from other people and so, finally, we left Riondel
behind. We arrived, late one night with all our stuff crammed into our green Dodge
pickup, at a cabin on the edge of the farm, that was called Shelackie’s cabin after the man
who had built it. It had been sitting empty for years. It smelled of damp plywood from the
always-leaking toilet, of creosote from the bridge timbers that Louis Shelackie had used
to build it, and pack rats.

In Riondel, I had gotten used to being on my own. I liked to wander and no one
had the time or energy to worry about it much. The farm invited wandering; I didn’t
know where anything was and now my father disappeared each day across the pasture
towards my grandfather’s house. One morning, I set out to follow him but it was hard
going, the grass was tall, there was a wide brown creek which meandered between humps
of mud, and beyond that, a jungle of thistles and ferns with thin trails winding through
into darkness. I could see my grandparent’s house, but not how to get there. I started into
the thistle jungle, where the paths were so narrow the thistles reached out to catch and
scratch my bare arms. It was dark in the thistle path and I could no longer see the house. I
heard crashing behind me; it was, Tiny the Jersey cow, who my Dad called a muley cow
because she had no horns, and the other cow, Bossy, the black and white Holstein,
following me through the thistles. I’d met them before, my father had taken us out to the
barn and squirted milk in our faces out of their glistening huge bags and thick teats, but my father was far away and the cows were close. I ran as fast as I could, twisting and turning down the many tangled aisles of this enormous jungle, until I spotted the page wire fence, sagging under its burden of brush. I made it over the fence, and into the yard. My father had seen me coming. He was standing there, laughing at someone so foolish as to be afraid of a couple of cows.

“Cows won’t hurt you,” he said, “Turn around, stand up to them. Yell at them.”

I believed whatever my father said. I stared back at the cows, triumphant now on the right side of the fence and beside my powerful father.

Since I was around, my father did what was most natural to him and found some work for me to do. He said from now on I would have to feed the chickens. If I forgot, he said, the chickens would go hungry and it would be my fault. Bantam chickens dusted themselves and scratched and squatted under every bush. He showed me where the grain was and threw some on the ground. The chickens came running.

From then on, when I went to the shed and got a bucket of grain, chickens came running from all over the yard. They crowded around me, ate what I gave them. I loved their colours, their magnificent glowing iridescent feather, their red combs, and their golden-wise eyes. But mostly I was proud of how they came running, that they followed me, and trusted me to feed them. One evening, I stood with my small tin can of wheat at the edge of the yard, staring across the pasture, where the evening sunlight was slanting over the emerald grass, and I fell into belonging. My feet sank into the grass, my head swam in the warm air while the chickens pecked and scratched at my feet. I was home now, and I knew it, knew that wherever I roamed, from now on, on this land, it would
belong to me and me to it.

My grandfather and his wife, who we called Grantie because she was the sister of our real grandmother who had died, were still living in the old green farmhouse. Every day, my mother made lunch for all of us and loaded it into my older brother’s wagon and we all trudged down the dirt road to the farmhouse, where my grandfather and his second wife were slowly packing and getting ready to move. One day my brother tried to tow the wagon with his tricycle and going down the hill, he went too fast and the pot of stew that was in the wagon turned over and spilled. My mother raged at him. It had taken her all morning to make the stew and she had no other food.

That spring, my father began plowing ground and setting out tomato seedlings, thousands of them. My baby sister was now a year old; my brother was two. When my mother wasn’t cleaning or cooking, or washing the milk things, or doing laundry with the wringer washer, she went to help. I was alone with a whole new universe to explore on my own.

In Riondel, I’d been on my own a lot as well, but there were other kids, other houses, other adults always around. In Riondel, my oldest brother and I usually played together. But at the farm, I was often alone. My older brother, Phil had to work with my dad; my younger brother Bill and my sister Robin were in the house with my mother.

I got into the habit of following my father around. The farm work fascinated me. There was a lot to learn. That first summer, I stood beside my father on top of the hay wagon as the labouring horses pulled the wagon up the hill towards the barn. He shouted and slapped the horses; even I could see it was too hard for them. They puffed blasts of
air out of their red nostrils; sweat ran in dark streams down their necks and legs. They went slow, slow, their heads down, heaving the wagon in little jerks, until it was below the square hole in the back of the top of the log barn. From there, my father had to hoist the hay up a forkful at a time and stuff it in that hole, where it piled up and up until the whole top of the barn was bulging with hay. My job was to stomp on the hay as it came up in scratchy flying forkfuls into the barn. My father stood below us, his shirt off, the long muscles in his back working and bulging as he lifted and bent again for another load.

And after the work was done, our reward was that we got to go to the beach, a golden curving crescent of sand surrounded by water worn granite on the south edge of the farm.

To get to the beach, we followed a rutted grassy road that went out of the yard, past the end of the chicken shed where a mysterious black pool of water hid in a fringe of elderberry bushes. Here the creek that trickled through the yard made a wide sandy spot in the road that we splashed through in our bare feet. Then we had to run under the dark cedar trees where clouds of mosquitoes waited to attack and down the long hill to the narrow path above the beach.

Because we had to go to the beach by ourselves, my mother wanted to make sure we knew how to swim. She didn’t have time to come with us every day although she loved the beach and tried to come when she could. At least she knew if we could swim, we wouldn’t drown. But I had a yellow inflated duck that I loved to float on, staring down at my peculiar angular feet in the green water, or drifting from place to place,
paddling my feet and pretending to be a boat.

One afternoon, when I put on my pink bathing suit, and grabbed the duck, my mother took the duck away. “You have to learn to swim,” she said.

I stared at her. I knew perfectly well I could swim. I’d already figured it out. Swimming was simple. It wasn’t something anyone had to learn; all you had to do was run into the water and kick hard. Dog paddling, we all called it. Except our small black dog Willy wouldn’t go in the water at all unless our father picked him up, carried him into the water and threw him in. Then he swam frantically for shore, his head high and his front feet splashing in his desperation.

“I can swim already,” I told her but she held my yellow duck over my head. Disgusted, I left the house, and went down the long path to the beach. No one else was there. I waded into the water, swam a few strokes and went back up to the house.

“I can so swim,” I said. Defeated, my mother handed me the yellow duck and I went back to the beach. I spent the next few weeks paddling around on the duck but my father found out and made fun of me. Toy ducks were for little kids, for babies. I knew my father must be right, and reluctantly, I left it behind on the next trip to the beach.

We had to run to the beach through the clouds of mosquitoes that hovered under the trees. We learned to whip towels around our ears and shoulders to keep them away. But there were no mosquitoes at the beach. Instead there was the hot sun smoldering onto the layered folds of granite. The same stream that ran through our yard ran here over the rocks and then gullied the sand into layers, smoothing it into long sandbars at the edge of the water. There were sun and water-worn giant tree stumps that could be turned into pirate ships, or elephants, or spaceships and piles of driftwood left from high water. We
leapt and raced on the long ropes of logs, surefooted as mountain goats.

In the forest above the beach were small surprising secret rooms, carpeted with moss, in the middle of huge leaning fir trees. One day, excited and guilty, I went into one of these rooms and took off all my clothes. I lay on the moss, looking up through the trees. Coming into such a place always made me catch my breath and hesitate; I knew it was beautiful, although I had no words for it and magical, although I had no concept of magic. I just knew that such places drew me in; when I was inside them I fell inside a kind of dream. Such places went somewhere inside me, made me wonder, made me happy. When I lay down in the middle of the moss, I found myself in the middle of a perfect room, a room of silent green happiness. It was a kind of worship, an amazement that there could be such a place and that I could be in it, rolling on the moss and prying the moss apart to watch a tiny miniature world of bugs and ants and dust.

The first summer flew by; I made friends with the cows. My father’s solution of turning around to yell at them worked. I followed them around and let them lick my hands and face with their long gooey sloppy tongues. I followed my father around as well, out to the barn to milk, into the house, stride, stride; if I tried, I could stretch out my legs to match his steps. When I marched behind him, from place to place around the farm, everything obeyed him, everything was ours, except inside the house, where my mother was always working.

Until we moved to the farm, my father had been a distant figure—someone who went to work and came home and caused trouble. On weekends, or occasionally in the summer, he had taken us to the beach or sometime we played outside beside him while he
worked in the garden he had made or on the tall picket fence he built to enclose it. But my mother was the center of the house, the center of our lives.

Now, at the farm, everything interesting, joyous, unexpected, magical or mysterious belonged to my father—the chickens, the enormous horses, the cows, the endless trees, the tall grass and thistle fields were my father’s and the rules were my father’s as well. My mother seemed as trapped as a flightless bird; her children came and went from the house but she stayed in it. I tried to bring her gifts from my new world by telling her stories, or bringing in flowers, or gifts from the gardens, or the fruit trees. But more and more I ran after my father, who didn’t care what I did as long as I didn’t get in the way. And when he was busy or gone, I ran by myself.

Initially, my mother tried to make me responsible for my small brother and sister. One day she ordered me to take my sister outside. I stood around for a bit, watching my year and a half old sister tottering around the muddy yard. I didn’t like my small sister who cried a lot and so was annoying. My father was lying on his back under a tractor, taking it apart. I thought Robin would go back inside to our mother if I ignored her, so as soon as no one was looking, I trotted off to find something more interesting to do. An hour or so later, a car stopped. A neighbour had found my sister heading down the gravel road.

I lied. “I thought Dad was watching her,” I said. My mother knew I was lying but she didn’t ask me again to look after Robin.

My brother and sister were my mother’s problem and none of mine. Mine was this new kingdom of fields and green glowing rooms under trees and golden water where
fish swam and clams full of pearls waited to be opened. Mine was the garden, the new
peas and carrots, the apple and cherry trees that could be climbed to the top. My mother
tried to catch me, comb my hair, wash my face, but more and more each morning I
escaped her, out to the barn or the garden or the beach.

For that first summer, the farm was a place of hope, sunshine, a place where my
mother sang at her endless work. That August, my father took us out to the tomato field
handed us enormous tomatoes to eat, full and dripping with juice.

And finally, late that first summer, we moved out of Shelackie’s cabin, and into
the farmhouse, Pete had been building the house when he died and my grandfather had
done little to finish it. Pete had built it one room at a time, so each of the rooms had a
door. And I, finally, for the first time, had a room of my own. Now every night, I climbed
the long stairs in the dark to my room, with its two small windows facing north, where I
could look out over the cow pasture. I had a big double bed, and a rug on the floor of my
room, a hairy rug backed with green felt, which my mother told me had once been the
hide of my grandfather’s favourite horse. I wasn’t sure how I felt having a dead horse on
my floor but I both loved and was terrified of my room. Each night I undressed in the
middle of the dead horse rug and then leapt for the bed, where I tucked in the blankets to
keep myself safe.

The house was dark and spooky. We didn’t yet have electricity so our light came
from kerosene lanterns that my father lit every evening. But I had to find my way to my
room in the dark. My mother and father both joked about Pete’s ghost and indeed doors
opened and shut at odd moments. At night, after we all went to bed, the house creaked
and snapped as it settled into itself. The tin chimney in the corner of my room that went
down to the wood cookstove whispered and rattled as it cooled, or as the wind outside hit it. I could hear my brother and sister breathing in the next room. I could hear the cows lowing in the pasture. And when the windows were open, I could hear the wind coming over the fir trees; I could hear the night birds trilling as they went after mosquitoes and the creek eternally murmuring in its muddy ditch.

But the brief space of peace and hope didn’t last. Something happened to the tomato crop that was going to make us so much money. My parents slept downstairs and at night, lying awake, that fall, I could hear them arguing, arguing, arguing, their voices rising, and falling through the floor as I lay very still the blankets tucked around my legs, in my dark cold room.

I began to dread sitting down for supper. Every evening, when we sat down to eat at a table laden with rich farm food, my parents started in at each other, their voices bitter and deadly. One night my father got so angry he stood up, grabbed the edge of the table laden with food that my mother had just set down, turned it over and stomped out into the night, slamming the door behind him. I stood horrified at the sight of our dinner spread across the floor. Finally, I began to mop with a towel at the terrible waste of a whole gallon of milk flooding across the worn linoleum but my mother, furiously weeping, yelled at me told me to leave it, go away, go upstairs and leave her alone to clean up.
Chapter Two:

Our farm is on the eastern shore of Kootenay Lake, which is part of the Kootenay-Columbia River system. The Kootenay-Columbia basin, in the southeastern corner of British Columbia is, in effect, an island, bounded and circled by rivers. The Columbia and Kootenay Rivers both flow out of adjoining valleys in the Rocky Mountains, into the Rocky Mountain Trench. They almost meet at Columbia Flats, but then the Columbia River flows north and the Kootenay River flows south, only to both circle around and meet again just north of Castlegar. It is an island that encompasses desert, tundra, alpine, boreal forest, dry pine prairie, alpine lakes and rivers, and many small and varied communities of humans spotted along the valley bottoms.

Archeologist Wayne Choquette, who had been studying the archeology and history of the Kootenay area for thirty years, says he thinks of it as a hybrid crossover area where over the millennia, geographies, people, species, ecological systems have met and crossed and crossed again. Not once, but three times, tectonic plates have collided here, overlapped, creating three different mountain ranges, the ancient Purcells, the newer Selkirks, and the still newer and still growing Rockies. One of the edges of these plates runs down the middle of Kootenay Lake, so that the Purcell Mountains on the east are a lower and softer mountain range than the more rugged Selkirks to the west.

The first people probably arrived here about 15,000 years ago, after the enormous lakes created by glaciation had a chance to recede. The area had to re-vegetate, and gradually it became a steppe-tundra of sage, grass, and scattered spruce and fir. Eventually, it became a place of ecological abundance. Salmon ran from the ocean, all
the way up the Columbia River into the lakes, and steelhead and char were abundant in the lakes as well. The people who lived there moved seasonally from valley bottoms and lakeside winter camps to summer hunting terrain in the mountains.

Archeological evidence indicates that the Ktunaxa people, the Shushwap people, and the Sinixt people all shared the resources of Kootenay Lake, but for some reason, didn’t settle there.

The Ktunaxa were the first human beings to establish a permanent settlement in the Northern Purcells and explore the rugged backcountry up the major drainages. Their first settlement was probably at the Columbia River in shallow wetlands where the Lake Windermere empties into the river, and just south of the confluence of Toby Creek and the Columbia. This site was called "Koalanuk" (The Salmon Beds) as salmon spawned in the shallow waters and the catches were plentiful.

The benchlands above the Columbia River wetlands were mostly grasslands that were home to vast herds of ungulates and bison. Pacific salmon concluded legendary spawning trips home to the headwaters of the 1,200 mile-long Columbia River and their presence meant bears, especially grizzly bears, were abundant.

The Ktunaxa people, who still live from the Flathead area in Montana to Creston to the upper Columbia Valley, believe they have always been here. Their creation myth centres in Columbia Lake. An enormous monster lived there and traveled the waterways around in a circle, which he could do then because there was no land between Kootenay River and Columbia Lake. There were three woodpecker brothers living around there at that time, and the monster ate the youngest one. Naturally enough this made them angry
and they called a council of all the animal beings, which was headed by a giant of some kind, so tall that if he stood up, his head would hit the ceiling of the sky. They decided to pursue the monster so a war party of animal beings gave chase. The monster took off north up the Columbia River, then south into what is now the US, then he escaped into the Kootenay River, into Kootenay Lake, and north again back into Columbia Lake.

Around and around they went, unable to catch the monster because they couldn’t corner him. At that time, the various areas of the Kootenays were known by the names Land of the Eagle, Land of the Woodtick, and Land of the Coyote.

A wise creature, a sort of early human, who was watching all this, said to the giant, “Use your arm to block the river.” The giant blocked the river between the Kootenay and Columbia Rivers so the monster couldn’t escape from Columbia Lake and the war party could kill it. After the woodpecker brothers killed the monster, they cut him up and passed out the meat as food for everyone. All that was left were the entrails, so they took the bladder, crumbled it up and spread it to the four corners of the world where the different races were created from different parts of the monster. The Ktunaxa people were created from the blood of the monster. Everyone rejoiced at the death of the monster but the giant was so happy, he jumped up and hit his head on the sky and was killed. When he fell over, his body formed the Rocky Mountains, his head formed the Yellowhead area and his feet formed Yellowstone.

The Ktunaxa people have been traditionally reluctant to talk to researchers, with good reason; their history of contacts with white people has been the usual litany of misunderstanding and betrayal. The first white person the Ktunaxa encountered in any major way was David Thompson, the explorer whose name is most associated with the
Kootenay Region, although other white fur traders had passed through the area.

David Thompson established a trading post on Windermere Lake in 1806, and in 1811 he was the first European to travel the full length of the Columbia River from its origin at Canal Flats to Astoria near the mouth of the Columbia River and back again.

At this time a race was on between the British and the Americans to discover the source of the mighty river that blasted into the Pacific Ocean at Astoria, Ore. As the Columbia headed north, Thompson logically assumed it was not the river in question. The more southerly Kootenay seemed a more likely candidate.

So in the following spring of 1808, David Thompson left his wife Charlotte and the children, who followed him on most of his travels at Kootenae House. His plan was to explore the Kootenay River as well as find the Flathead Indians. He followed the Kootenay River south into Montana, Idaho, and kept going when it looped north into Canada. He arrived at the south end of Kootenay Lake on May 14, 1808, and met up with a group of Kootenay Lake inhabitants, or, as he named them, Marsh or Swamp People, which was not their name for themselves. They called themselves Yaquan Nukiy, which translates as “the place where the rock is standing”.

He and his men paddled, accompanied by swarms of mosquitoes, through the reed beds and marshes at the south end of Kootenay Lake. He asked the locals what lay to the north, and instead of telling him there was a lake, they warned him of a series of waterfalls and five portages, one of them twenty miles long. It was a decisive moment and cost Thompson another two years in actually finding the route of the Columbia. His men were out of food, so, tired and discouraged, Thompson turned back.

Because all the rivers were in flood, he decided to go overland by horseback. He
hired a young Kootenay man for a guide, who stayed with them for a couple of days and then left. It’s interesting to speculate what the exact route was that he used in getting back to Tobacco Plains, but it was most probably along the Moyie River, which flows south from Moyie Lake west and south of present day Cranbrook.

At any rate, according to Thompson’s diary, they had a terrible time, crossing the flooded river in several places by making log bridges. After twelve days of living mostly on bread made from roasted moss and the occasional antelope or deer, they came out into the valley near Columbia Lake.

In May of 1812, David Thompson left the Kootenay area forever. He never did see the great blue stretch of Kootenay Lake. At that time, before the dams, the south end of the lake where he arrived would have been a length maze of bulrushes, swamps, mud and mosquitoes. Maybe that's why he turned south. Or perhaps the locals warned him off because they were afraid of what he would do to the magic – or the magic would do to them. Or maybe they were afraid he'd stick around and never leave.

Growing up, I didn’t know anything about First Nations people or First Nations history. Our mother told us various stories in which Indians figured as mysterious people who showed up occasionally. One of her stories was about a horse she and her friend Louise bought from the Indians who lived near Creston. The two girls wanted a horse more than anything; they saved the bits of money they made doing chores for their parents and bought a half-starved colt that they kept in Louise’s parent’s woodshed. The horse got into a bag of oats and almost died but they walked it around for hours until it recovered. Once the horse got some strength, it turned out to be both wild and untamable
so reluctantly, they sold it back to the Indians.

Indians ran through other tales my mother told, and sometimes when we went into town, we passed a wagon drawn by a team of horses, the adults sitting hunched on the front seat, a bundle of children in the back. I always stared – anything to do with horses caught my interest. Or I would see the teams tied up in a vacant lot on the edge of town, the same dark people standing around, sometimes with a fire going.

Indians always seemed to be far outside the rest of the world, and since I felt I lived there as well, I thought I should know more about them. But it was hard to connect the stories my mother told with the people I saw on the edge of town. I never saw them anywhere else–they weren’t in school or in the stores or even on the streets of town. They were just at the edge of things, a glimpse that caught my attention and stayed there simmering.

I knew one of our closest neighbours, Mabel O’Neil, was an Indian because my mother said she was but I also knew her as a warm comfortable presence, a purveyor of warm bread fresh out of the oven and slathered with wild strawberry jam, a woman who said little but was at the center of her family’s life.

And very occasionally, on the way with my father to buy hay or other supplies, we would pass the small cluster of houses, a white church, and a few cars a mile south of town. My father jerked his thumb towards it. “There’s The Mission,” he said. I didn’t know what that meant, but there were those people again. They seemed so distant – they seemed to have lives about which no one knew anything.

So Indians went on being a mystery and a fascination for me. Gradually, I found bits and pieces about Indians in books, but the books didn’t help much. Indians in books
lived far away, hunted buffalo, lived in tipis, not like the Indians I had seen, huddled at the edge of the white people’s new settlement. And yet Indians were clearly something like me; they lived outside, in the woods, with animals, all the things that were important to me, that bounded my new life, that gave it shape and meaning and importance.

By the 1880's, the Kootenay Lake area began to be frequented by Europeans and Americans – mostly prospectors and miners drawn by the lure of silver and gold. Eventually, enormously rich silver strikes brought waves of men seeking fortune, followed by the railways and paddle-wheel steamers.

When the mining boom died down, it was orchardists who formed the next wave of immigration. The first orchards were planted in 1890, and from 1910 to 1930 many farms took root around the shores of Kootenay Lake. The east shore was and is a particularly good growing area for cherries, peaches, pears and apples, although almost no one has an orchard these days. Markets are far away, and orchards are hard work. Lake shore is for recreation, for retirement, for scenery, not for farming.

The mining ‘camp’ of Riondel was settled because of a silver, lead, and zinc mine, that, when my dad worked there, was known as the Bluebell Mine. In 1882, an American named Robert Sproule staked four claims along the peninsula, including the Blue Bell. When he left to register his claims, an Englishman, Thomas Hammill, restaked the claims. This led to a dispute that ended with Sproule shooting Hammill dead and going to the gallows for his crime.

In 1905, The Canadian Metal Company purchased the mine, and in 1907 the
settlement was named Riondel after Count Edouard Riondel, the president of the company.

The mine closed in 1943 and the town was soon empty but in 1950, the mine re-opened, and the population soared to almost 300 within three years. My father and mother moved there in 1952, desperate for a job and money.

Pierre Longueval, the young Frenchman who took up a 160 acre land grant on the edge of this huge cold lake, showed up in 1918, young, ambitious, and energetic. I know very little of Pierre, or Pete as he ended up being called. Stories of early beginnings get lost too fast–by the time I thought of writing this book and had the skills to do it, too many of the elders in our community had already died. So the little I do know of Pierre has come down through anecdotes, bits of stories sifting down like dust over the years.

I know he came from France with a group of other settlers; he went first to Saskatchewan, then Alberta, and then somehow he came to BC, found the lake and took up 160 acres of land. He had money–he was a French remittance man – so that one of the stories with which my siblings and I grew up was that of Pete’s hidden gold.

The story in our family was that when my grandfather first came to the Kootenays, he sold Pete some hay, and Pete went outside and came back in with a jar of gold coins, and paid my grandfather in gold. After my younger brother and I heard this story, we crawled under the barn and chicken shed, we dug and explored but we never found the gold.

Pete died in Kootenay Lake, which even now has a reputation for catching people unawares. Kootenay Lake is not a friendly lake – it is deep and cold, so cold that the
bodies of drowned people are not recovered. Squalls can sweep unexpectedly down its long narrow length. And because the wind hits with particular ferocity in the middle, away from the sheltering bays, boats with naïve drivers often leave shore thinking the waves aren’t too tall, only to be swamped by the big rollers farther out being driven by the wind.

So we know he drowned but we don’t know the whole story. We do know that he was tall and good-looking, that he was well-educated, interested in socialism, and that he had a girlfriend. He also had a housekeeper, Leontyne Duperron, who had come out from the prairies to get away from the prairie winter and so most of what I know of the story comes from her daughter. I went to see Marguerite Duperron one hot summer day and she told me this story.

Marguerite was born in Unity, Saskatchewan. Pierre was a relative of her grandmother’s, who had re-married after her first husband, a man called Louis Vasseur, who had come to Canada from France with several of his brothers, died. Pierre’s parents had died when he was young and so he came to live with the Vasseurs as a young man. In 1922, Marguerite, her family and Pete all moved to the Kootenays. They spent one winter in a log cabin five miles north of the booming railway town of Sirdar. Marguerite was seven, and every morning, she and her sister got up and trudged three miles along the rutted dirt road, through knee-deep snow to go to school. They left home in the dark and arrived back again in the afternoon in the dark. But the train engineers got to know them, and the train would wait at a lonely railroad siding, called Atbara, a mile from the school, where they could climb gratefully into the warm caboose and ride the last mile.

The next year, Pete bought the property on the lake. He was both progressive and
ambitious. He left behind in the house a number of pamphlets on modern agriculture. And he must have already had the idea that someday, lakeside property might be valuable, so before he built his house, he built two cabins above the shining gold sand beach below the farm. Pete and Marguerite’s dad bought a small gasoline-driven sawmill. Together, they cut the massive cedars off what is now our pasture, and milled out wood for the cabins, the house, a barn, a woodshed, and a long elaborate chicken house.

In the seventeen years Pete lived there, from 1922 to 1937, he accomplished an astounding amount. Besides the buildings, he fenced and cross-fenced the property with split-rail fences made of cedar logs. The cedar logs are charred on the outside. My father told me once that Pete would haul the logs to the beach, pile them up, light them on fire and then throw sand on them to put the fire out, a process akin to making charcoal. The charring seems to make them impervious to rot so that some of these fences are still standing and still solid. We know he kept goats and chickens; he planted an enormous orchard of apples, pears, cherries, plums; he built his house beside the path that would become the road, out of sight of the lake, and my grandfather said that Pete was planning on opening a store when there was more population along the lake.

Pete altered the landscape in other ways; an old rockslide, still barely visible above the highway, just south of the farm, was caused by Pete diverting water from one creek into another.

There was no actual road to the farm then, just a track known as the tote road. The road went north from Creston to Kuskanook, where the sternwheelers docked, and then it was a three-mile hike or wagon-ride to the farm. Kuskanook had already boomed and died. Very briefly, Kuskanook had served as the terminus of a branch of the Bedlington
Northern Railway. There the cargo and passengers were loaded onto a sternwheeler, but after the railway was finished on the western side the lake, the railbed to Kuskanook was torn up and turned into a dirt road. But people still kept cabins in Kuskanook, at the end of the road, for fishing or boating.

One late fall, Pete had a house party. His girlfriend apparently decided she wanted to go fishing. Pete had a canoe and he and the girlfriend went down to the lake. She came back a couple of hours later with a story that the canoe had overturned, that Pete had called to her to swim for shore, he would be right behind, she was on top of the canoe and he was kicking behind but he never made it. She climbed up the steep rocks and came back through the trees.

After Pete died, things quickly disappeared from the farm. People came and claimed tools, animals, farm implements, and then eventually the farm was sold for taxes. Pete had died in 1937, and in 1938, my grandfather bought the whole 160 acres for $2525. Someone else had bid $2500.

In 1995, we tore down the chicken shed. The huge one-foot by one foot solid squared off beams under the floor had finally rotted through. We saved the wide-grain, old growth cedar lumber from the walls, and the sheet metal roofing and burned the rest.

Pete’s dreams still haunt the land; whether his ghost does or not is unknown. When I wander there now, I wonder if he would be pleased or angry at what we’ve done, – or haven’t done.

There are other farms in our family history.
When my parents were first married, as a wedding present, my grandfather bought them a farm, five miles south of his farm. It was known then, and still, in our family, as the Mannarino place.

The Mannarino place, like most farms along the lake, was a couple of cleared benches of land on the side of the mountain. The farm was located there because of a stream tumbling through it. This farm was at the south end of the lake, above a vast area of swamp, cottonwood trees and thick willow bush. From a few places on the farm, there was a view to the north of the long sweep of water continuing northward out of sight. Just below the farm, cutting through a swath of thick willow and cottonwood, a channel of the Kootenay River ran northward into the lake. A long five mile stretch of railroad track crossed the swamp at the south end of the lake and directed the railway onto the west side of the lake where it ran northwards to where the river flows again out of Kootenay Lake, south past Nelson and then into the Columbia River just north of Castlegar.

Both my parents wanted to be farmers.

My mother, Dorothy Klingensmith, and my father, Robert Armstrong, met after the war. My mother had just returned from working at the Boeing aircraft factory in Vancouver. My father hadn’t gone to war; his father wangled an exemption for him as an essential farm worker.

My mother’s grandfather was one of the first settlers into the valley. Her paternal grandfather, my great grandfather, had moved to Creston from Pennsylvania. Although his family was settled and fairly wealthy in Pennsylvania, with a feed mill and a sawmill, he began searching for oil in the early 1800’s. Eventually he wound up working for the
CPR as a sawmill superintendent; finally, he settled on 10 acres in Erickson. There he built a three-story southern-style house, with a wide verandah and shaded windows and an enormous kitchen and dining room. The verandah wrapped around three sides of the house; the huge dining room and living room were lined with books and gloomy black and white photographs of people. Upstairs there was secret room behind the walk-in closet between the master bedroom and the second bedroom.

My grandfather, Fred Klingensmith, grew up with a strict stepmother who, according to my mother, beat him with a strap. Whatever the reason, he was a man who was not much interested in family and much more interested in finding the elusive gold mine for which he searched his whole life. He met my grandmother in a mining town in northern Ontario.

My maternal grandmother, Lucy Rhinehart, had come to Canada on her own when she was eighteen. She was a woman of independent spirit who had first run away from her family in Liverpool to an aunt in Sweden when she was only twelve. In Canada, she took a job cooking in the small northern mining town of Temiskaming, where she met Fred Klingensmith, who was working in the sawmill. They moved to Port Huron where their first child, my aunt Aileen, was born, then back to Creston, where Fred’s parents were. He got a job as a filer in the local sawmill.

My grandparents had five children and my mother was the second youngest. My grandfather wasn’t much of a provider or a father. His real love was prospecting and when he wasn’t working, he was roaming the mountains looking for gold.

One story my mother often told us was about a time he took a job in Nakusp, a town at
the northern end of the Kootenays. My grandmother would take her brood of children and they would travel there on the sternwheeler, setting off from Creston, traveling the length of Kootenay Lake to Nelson, then getting on the train to Castlegar and off and onto another sternwheeler, and then travelling the Arrow Lakes to Nakusp.

Along the way, they would eat in the dining room where the tables were set with white linen and silver tableware and tall black stewards in white coats with white gloves waited on them with grave courtesy and then showed them to their cabins to sleep. But once they had been longer between visits than usual. When they arrived at Nakusp, the children ran to meet their father, who turned to the man he was walking with and asked in bewilderment, “Who are those children?”

My mother grew up in a large white house, in the middle of Creston, a half a block from Canyon Street, the main thoroughfare that runs through the centre of the town. Creston was a new town. It sits on a slope above where Kootenay Lake used to be. Creston is at the centre of a large flat and fertile area suitable for orchards, cattle, or growing hay. As soon as settlers arrived, they began changing the landscape as fast as they could, clearing land, planting orchards and strawberry fields. But what really drew their eye was the vast expanse of swamp below the town. It was gradually dyked off and turned into farmland.

Creston also acquired the nickname of Little Chicago. It was a rough brawling town, close to the US border, divided by the railway track that ran below Canyon Street. The better class of people lived up the hill, while the bars and the poor people were literally below the tracks.

Then my grandfather lost his job during the depression and my grandmother
opened a boarding house. And then my grandmother got sick. She developed bowel cancer. My mother was only twelve but she quit school to help with the cleaning and cooking. My grandmother went to Vancouver for a risky operation but survived and came home.

When the war broke out, my mother went to Vancouver and lived with her Aunt Diz. Her real name was Daisy but her family called her Dizzy. She lived up to the name. She and her husband, Murdoch McLeod, an optometrist who travelled to all the little towns in the Kootenays to fit people with glasses, had nine kids. The house was chaos most of the time because Aunt Diz really wanted to be a concert pianist and would practice the piano all night, especially, according to my mother, whenever Murdoch came home. During the war, my mother got a job at the Boeing Aircraft Factory carrying rivets around. For the first time in her life, she could indulge herself in her real passion, which was music, and she began taking singing lessons on weekends along with her brother Charlie. Her singing teacher told her she had a fantastic soprano and she could become an opera star. He asked her to move to Toronto to study at the Toronto Conservatory.

When the war ended, she desperately wanted to go on with her singing career but she had no money once her job at Boeing ended. She went home to Creston to ask her family for money and they refused her. My grandmother told her she was being foolish to even dream of such a thing.

Instead, she got a job in the Mercantile store, and met my father. By now, my father had moved to the farm on the lake. After chores were done, he began bicycling the twenty miles to town to see my mother and then back home in time to feed the pigs and milk the cows in the morning.
My paternal grandfather Armstrong was descended from the Armstrongs who had lived along the border between Scotland and England. The Armstrongs were one of the most famous of the so-called “riding” clans, the Reivers or thieves, who fought with both the English, the Scots, their neighbours, and when they ran out of people to fight with and steal from, each other. The Armstrongs were the most feared riding clan on the frontier. In 1528, they could put 3000 men into the saddle. Great importance was placed on a Reiver’s small tough black horses, chosen for agility and stamina.

Their land was hilly with wooded valleys, barren ridges, salt marshes, peat bogs, and broad rivers. The Armstrongs knew the hills and twisting passes. They knew where to hide in the wastes and where to hide their stolen cattle. Reivers were very tough and very insular. Government was far away and they resolved disputes themselves. A legend of the Borders is when the women of the household felt that supplies were running low, they would place a covered plate before the men. When the top was taken off, there would be a pair of spurs on the plate. The message, to ride or to starve.

Religion didn’t keep people from fighting. Even the priests carried weapons. Bishop Leslie, a historian, wrote in 1572 that "their [Borderers] devotion to their rosaries was never greater than before setting out on a raid, and on the Scottish Border it was the custom of christening to leave unblest the child’s master hand in order that unhallowed blows could be struck upon the enemy." When the Bishop of Liddesdale found no churches on the Borders, he demanded: "Are there no Christians here?"

"Na, we's be a' Elliots and Armstrangs,” was the answer.
Reiving tended to happen from autumn to the spring. Summers were for farming. Some of the raids would consist of a large group of men and could last for days. Smaller raids might be a quick moonlight ride, a quick plunder and disappear back to their homes. Whether the raid was a full-scale invasion for political reasons or a raid against a single farmhouse, reiving was risky. The towns were secure and well-defended, local watches were formed, and the cattle and livestock were brought in at night. Roads and passes were patrolled by troopers helped by local countrymen who knew where the bogs were. A Reiver's choice of weapons, clothing and horses allowed him to move with speed. The elements of surprise, boldness, cunning and speed, were necessary for a successful raid.

The first Armstrong of my family to come to Canada was William Armstrong. In 1817, William left his village of Hirsthead, in Cumberland, and came initially to New York with his cousin, James Elliot. In 1825, he bought 195 acres of land in Markham, Ontario. His father, Thomas, his mother Elizabeth, and six other siblings, one brother and five sisters, also came to Canada. Thomas didn’t live long but Elizabeth lived to the then astonishing age of 89. William married Esther Reesor in 1833, and they produced eight children. Their son, Robert Goodfellow Armstrong was my great-great-grandfather.

The Reesors were a clan of devout Mennonites who had come to North America in 1739, after being persecuted in Europe. Initially, they settled in Pennsylvania, but in 1786, Peter Reesor settled on six hundred acres of land in Upper Canada. In 1804, the rest of his extended family made the journey northwards in five Conestoga wagons. The six families bought land in Markham and became prosperous farmers.

My grandfather, William Armstrong married a sensitive, artistic young woman in
Markham named Winifreth Browne, whose nickname was Queenie. She agreed against all sense and counsel to go out west with him to try and make their fortune in wheat farming. She had four children in quick succession, one of whom died in infancy. She and my grandfather were relatively prosperous as farmers went, until two things happened; she got cancer and the dirty thirties hit Saskatchewan. These two blows discouraged my grandfather utterly. After Queenie died, he went east to Markham with his three bewildered bedraggled grief stricken children. My grandfather sold his land in Saskatchewan and then drove all the way back across Canada, and came to the Kootenays, came from the prairies to this place of mountains and rocks and trees. He came by accident, the way most people come to places; he knew the bank manager, who would lend him money to buy land and get started again.

My father grew up motherless. He had an older sister and a younger sister. They had a housekeeper, Helen Nelson, who my grandfather hired when Helen was only 18. She cooked and cleaned and mothered this trio of lost and bewildered children. She left to get married when my father was sixteen but kept in touch for the rest of her life.

In their wedding picture, my parents look extraordinarily young, beautiful and hopeful. My father is tall and handsome, with black hair and dark brown eyes set back under strong brows. His jaw juts out; his eyes are intense. He is a big man, six feet and four inches tall, with huge broad shoulders, and enormous spatulate hands. My mother is tiny beside him, a foot shorter, her soft brown hair curled on her shoulders, her eyes wide and serious. They married on the long weekend in May 1945, and for their honeymoon,
they went to Alberta, to a ranch then owned by my grandfather’s brother, a huge ranch in the Cypress Hills called the East and West Ranch.

My parents were both used to hard work. My mother, as a teenager, was in charge of cooking and cleaning for five or six men while her mother was ill. My father’s first paid job was at twelve, running a combine, but he had been working for his father and living more or less on his own since he was eight.

When they married, my father was 21 and my mother was 23. They were intensely in love. They had the farm, plus a team of horses and a few tools. My father wanted to be a farmer; it was what he knew and I don’t know if he ever considered any other choice. Plus he and my mother wanted to be alone; they were both shy, and not terribly social. Most of their lives they avoided society, didn’t join groups or go to church, partly because they didn’t have time and partly because they weren’t any good at it. They seemed to have no social ambitions although they got on well with all their neighbours and gave away endlessly generous and bountiful amounts of food.

At first, my father adored my mother. After a hellishly lonely life, finally, he had someone to love and someone who loved him. Sexuality was an amazing discovery for both of them; my mother told me later, when I was old enough to understand, that sex was the thing that kept them together.

Neither of my parents had ever gone out with anyone before. My father wasn’t at all interested in sharing this new love with someone else, certainly not with a baby. But of course my mother became pregnant almost immediately and she very much wanted
children.

The Mannarino place was three miles north of the small railroad town of Sirdar. It had first been cleared and settled by Jimmy and Victoria Mannarino, hence the name. Jimmy had built a white clapboard house with a broad verandah; across the yard was a corral, two log barns, and just below the house, he had planted an orchard with grape vines and prune trees. The nearest neighbours were James and Lillian Wilson to the south who lived along the old tote road that ran above the highway. James and Lillian’s son, Charles and his new wife, Muriel, lived in a cabin about half a mile away. Dorothy and Gene Haines farmed about a mile to the north along with their son, Mike, who was the same age as my dad. Muriel and Mom had children at about the same time; Charlie and Muriel’s son, Clive, was a bit older than my brother Phil; their second son, Alan, was born three months after me. One of the first pictures I have of myself is of Alan and I sitting together in a crib on the screened porch of the house on the Mannarino farm.

The Wilsons had a granite quarry. The Wilsons from Scotland had always been stonemasons and they carried on with this tradition. The Haines had come here from the Yukon and gone into fruit farming. They built a log house that still stands up on the hill but which has now been empty for years.

Three miles away, at Sirdar, there was a clan of people who had come here from the village of Petilia Policastro in Italy. These were the Pascuzzos, the Lombardos, the Cherbos and Jimmy Mannarino, who settled away from the others.

My parents had never known the Mannarinos but they had heard stories, lots of
stories. Jimmy was apparently more than a little hard to get along with. He was not very tall, only about 4ft. 10 in., but he fought with people. Jimmie had a silver mine up on the mountain above his farm; he also had a mining partner named Pedro Cherbo. Just a few years ago, Mike Haynes told me the story of Jimmie and Pedro’s gunfight. He said they got along well until Pedro got the idea that maybe the mine should be all his and he should get rid of Jimmy.

This was in the late 1920s, when the CPR was building the railway across the lake. Pedro told Jimmy he had gotten someone from the railway crew to stash a few cases of dynamite in the brush beside the tracks. As they were going down the hill single file along the path to the railway, Pedro pulled his pistol and shot Jimmy in the back. The pistol apparently had a terrific pull to the right, so Pedro missed Jimmy's heart and got him in the shoulder. Jimmy fell to the ground and Pedro tried to shoot him in the head but missed. Jimmy played dead and Pedro ran away. When he was gone, Jimmy got up and staggered off along the railway tracks to Sirdar, to get help.

Pedro holed up in the log shed up by the house and when a posse of men showed up led by Constable Bill Crawford from Creston, they proceeded to shoot it out. Pedro had his pistol and a 25-35 Winchester rifle. But eventually he ran out of ammunition and had to give up.

Jimmie died in of old age and Victoria Mannarino, who was much younger than her husband, sold the farm to my grandfather. My mother and father moved into the beautiful old house. They were determined to make a go of it as farmers. There were two enormous log barns north of the house, one of which still had the bullet holes in it. My parents planted a huge garden and began bringing back the orchard, pruning the trees,
deer fencing and cross fencing the pasture. There were a lot of varieties of what would be called heritage trees now, such as Black Republican cherries and Northwest Greening apples. There were even two mulberry trees and a huge garden, all ditch irrigated out of the stream that ran down the gully in front of the house from a big concrete tank up in the trees. This too was terraced with beautifully built rock walls.

They had a team of horses and every summer, my father cut marsh grass for hay across the river, floated it across the river on a raft, and hauled it up the long steep hill with the labouring team. The mosquitoes were hellish, but the work had to be done. The garden had to be watered, the fruit picked, wood cut for winter. My mother canned fruit and vegetables and venison to get them through the winter. But after my oldest brother was born, they realized they could no longer live on grouse and venison. They tried to make money from the orchard and the garden but it wasn’t enough. The next spring, my father got a job working on the dikes that were built on the Creston flats.

Because it was a long drive home over bad roads, my father often stayed over in Creston during the week and came home on weekends. My mother was left alone in an isolated farmhouse with a new baby. The farm was a small clearing in a vast, mostly untouched wilderness. Below the farm was hundred of acres of swamp and above the farm was mountains and forest. The bears came regularly to raid the orchard and the deer wandered through what had always been, to them, home.

One night as she went to bed by herself, something woke her in the night. She sat up and was terrified to see a white shape in the doorway of her bedroom. Fortunately, she had the baby in bed with her, but she sat up all night in terror wondering what this thing was she was seeing. The next day my father came home and she told him what had
happened. So that night when they went to bed they waited and sure enough, the same white shape, the shape of a little bent over old man with a cane, appeared. In the days before he died, Jimmy had gotten very bent by rheumatism and used to walk with the aid of two canes. Apparently, even with the canes, he used to hoof it the three miles to Kuskanook just to watch the girls go swimming.

They saw this white shape many times after that. They had no idea what, or who it was. After a while, they just called it Jimmy. At first it frightened them and they tried to find some kind of explanation for it, but as time passed and they saw it often, on both moonlit and dark nights, in various parts of the house, they got used to it. One night my father walked right through it. He says it was kind of cold and the shape wavered apart and came back together again. Nevertheless, he still maintains that he does not believe in ghosts and he has no explanation for the shape that they saw in the house.

Eventually, my parents got tired of starving on the Mannarino place and they moved away to Riondel because the mine had re-opened and my father could get work. My parents had no intention of permanently leaving this farm and my father made the long thirty-five mile drive as often as he could to look after the trees. They had to leave the horses behind as well. Before they left, he somehow got the money together to buy enough trees to plant a new orchard. Then he made a desperate final effort to fence the newly planted orchard with a fence with six strands of barbed wire to keep out the deer in the upper field above the house. But leaving a house and land alone in those days wasn’t a good idea. Tools and other things disappeared and someone left the deer fence gate open and deer destroyed the new orchard despite my father’s efforts. It was the first time
that the land broke their hearts, but it wasn’t the last.

Chapter Three:

Our land beside Kootenay Lake had a lot more going for it as a farm than the Mannarino place. It was mostly flat, at least below the highway, and the mosquitoes in the summer, though bad, weren’t as mind-numbingly terrible as they were at the Mannarino place. There was an orchard just above the lake with about thirty cherry trees, along with many apple, plum and pear trees. On the north of the house, there was a swampy pasture, a log barn and a hayshed, and on the south, the huge chicken shed and more fruit trees. My grandfather had kept pigs and soon after we moved to the farm, my father acquired two milk cows and a Farmall tractor.

After we moved into the huge dark green farmhouse, mornings at the farm were announced by the rattle of the stove lids on the wood cookstove in the kitchen downstairs, as my father rose at five to build a fire, and then go out to milk. I’d hear the rattle of the bucket as he went across the yard, then fall back to sleep. It wasn’t a reassuring sound. It meant that when he came back in, he'd pound on the stairs and if we didn't get up, he'd come up stairs, drag the covers off, and haul our lazy useless asses out of bed.

For, as we were now discovering, the name of the farm was work, and we were its servants. And whatever was to be done, we children were part of its doing. We picked fruit, gathered eggs, pitched hay, fed the chickens, carried in wood. Inside the house, our mother was washing, cooking, cleaning, canning, and sterilizing the milk coolers that sat in the fridge on the back porch. Once a week, she got out the wringer washer, filled it full
of hot water from the tap, ran load after load of clothes through the wringer into a galvanized tub, carried them outside and hung them on the clothesline then mopped the puddles that ran all over the floor. On laundry days, the windows misted over and the house smelled damp and sad and grey.

Outside our father was milking, feeding cows, pruning trees, picking fruit, cutting, turning, raking, hauling hay into the barn, hoeing the weeds out of the garden, hauling irrigation hoses from place to place, cutting wood, splitting, stacking wood. The work was seasonal but always endless. Spring was for pruning, raking, burning, plowing the fields and the garden, picking rocks out of the fields; summer was an orgy of picking, canning, freezing fruits and vegetables; fall was killing time, when the pigs, the steers, and the chickens, went into the freezer, when trees fell to the chain saw, and the dead corn stalks rattled, desolate, in the garden. Winter was a brief pause in the frenzy but the cows and chickens still had to be fed and cared for, wood carried into the house and ashes carried out, and three meals a day prepared, eaten and cleaned up after. Once when I managed to get up the nerve to ask why we all had to work so hard, my father looked at me.

“You work or you starve,” he said.

But for me the farm had two names; if one was work, then the other was freedom and I escaped from one into the other as often as I could. I was crafty at this, as all children are. For example, I loved fishing, and I soon learned that fishing looked like work but was really a matter of lying on a rock for an afternoon staring into the depths of the water, watching the golden bodies of squawfish arrow from one nook and cranny to another. Hauled into the light, they were a disappointment, grey, gasping and slimy.
Sometimes, I managed to catch a trout instead, for which I was inordinately praised by my mother, trout being a change from our diet of chicken, beef and pork. But when I came home, I snuck from the sunshine and cool mystery of the lake into a house charged with anger and despair. For there was still no money, no money, no money. I lay in bed at night in my white bedroom over the kitchen, the only kid with my own room, and listened to my parents’ voices vibrate through the floor. Sometimes I’d hear the door slam as my father stormed out of the house. So I escaped whenever I could and the place to which I escaped was the O’Neils.

It was late afternoon on a spring day just after we moved to the farm. I heard a crashing wave of noise, looked up and saw horses running through our yard. In retrospect, there were probably only four or five horses plus a couple of cows, but at the time it seemed like a whole lot more. My father was waving his arms in fury.

There were two girls with the horses. The girls were older than me. They waved back at my furious father; one of them waved at me, and then they were gone. I ran into the house to find out who they were. My mother never answered my question. Instead, she and my father launched into some tedious story about the O’Neils and all their kids and how Dick drank and beat his horses and his boys, and all those kids, and how did Mabel stand it. In a lowered voice, my father said something about Dick being a "squawman," which I didn't understand but remembered. But none of this mattered. I wanted to know about the horses.

The next day I walked barefoot over the mile of graveled road between our place and theirs. The gravel was burning hot. When I got there, the whole family was out
weeding the corn patch. They didn't seem surprised to see me.

After the corn was done, the two girls, Nora and Shirley, took me down to the barn. Even at five, I knew this was a wonderful place. They had a barrel with a saddle on it tied between two rafters. We played on that for a while but I wanted more.

We went into the pen where the horses were. There was a big white workhorse named King who stepped on my bare foot. I didn't say anything although my foot felt like it had been hammered flat. I thought if I complained or cried they might make me leave. There was a brown mare named Lady, a small black mare named Gypsy and a shaggy pony named Billy. They put me on Billy and led me around for a while then left me on my own. Billy immediately put his head down and began eating grass. Nora handed me a thick stick and said, "Here, hit him with this."

I did – which got his attention. It was my first riding lesson.

I spent the rest of that summer on horseback. I now know that no parent in his or her right mind would have let us ride those horses. They bit, kicked, bucked and ran away. But I didn't know enough to be afraid, and Nora and Shirley had learned to be tough. My parents were far too busy to notice what we were doing. My mother had my baby sister and brother and all the housework plus gardening, canning, cooking, and looking after the milk things. My father was putting up hay, picking fruit, and working at the sawmill to make money to support the farm.

Nora and Shirley were the youngest kids of the large O'Neil family. When I met them, Nora was nine and Shirley was eight. Nora was the leader; she had short curly hair, and sparkling dark eyes. My mother always said, “That girl is sly, I don’t trust her.”

So, of course, I believed everything she said. Shirley was beautiful, with long
black hair and my brother Phil developed an immediate crush on her. I never did meet them all. There were two older brothers, Art and Jack, who still lived at home and who logged the mountains with their dad. There were three older sisters who came home occasionally, and at least one brother or perhaps two who had drowned in Kootenay Lake in a canoeing accident. At the time, none of this mattered to me. What mattered were the horses, the smell of sun on shiny horsehide, the gripping on to the neck as we slid down a graveled hillside, took the horses down to the beach and made them swim, or trotted home behind the O'Neil's milk cow, which had to be rounded up every night.

I eventually found out more about the O'Neils because they remained a topic of conversation in our family for years. I found out that the old Man, Dick, was a cruel bastard, who used to beat King, the big kindly white workhorse, with a chain. I found out that Dick and the boys, Art and Jack, used to get their horses by rounding up what was left of a wild herd up north in the Columbia Valley somewhere. They'd bring them home in a truck, tie them in the corral, bring them water and feed and when they were reasonably quiet, then Jack or Art would get on, whack them with a stick until they were broke and give them to us kids to ride.

They bit and kicked sometimes, but they never bit and kicked me. After a while, I got to ride Gypsy, who was little and black, with a white blaze. She bucked everyone off except me. We had no saddles and only a collection of old and tattered bridles or sometimes ropes tied onto the side rings of a halter.

During our second year at the farm, I begged and pleaded and Dad let me keep a brown mare named Lady at our place. He complained about it but my father complained about everything.
"Horse'll starve a cow," he growled, "and a sheep will starve them both."

I had no idea what he meant. I was just deliriously happy to have a horse. Lady was hard to catch but I'd learned from the O'Neils to hide the bridle behind my back, bring some oats, get her in a corner, get a hand on her side, watch that she didn't kick, get a hand on her mane and slide a bridle rein around her neck. I'd have to find a rock to stand on so I could slip the bit into her mouth and the bridle over her ears. Then I'd have to find a bigger rock and lead her up beside it. She'd sidle away while I made a flying leap for her back. After a while, I learned to fling myself up from the ground onto her back with a kind of scissors kick, hauling desperately on her black thick mane while she ran off. Then I sat up straight, picked up the reins and away we went. Together, we went up the mountain or down to the beach or along the road or up the logging track to the O'Neils.

I spent hours with Lady tied to a tree in the yard, cleaning and brushing her. I fed her apples and oats stolen from our chickens. When she was out in the pasture, stretched out in the sun, I curled between her legs, my head on her belly.

I had the O'Neils in my life for two brief years but those years were enough to establish many of the inclinations that have stayed with me through the rest of my life. I liked being at the O'Neil’s so I spent more and more time there. I liked how they lived. No one there seemed to care what I did.

At home my mother was always busy. There were always chores to do. There were chores at the O'Neil’s too, but they didn't feel like chores. One day, while we were wandering the mountainside in search of wild strawberries, Nora suggested I move in with them. It made sense to me.
We got on the horses and rode to my parent's house. As I remember it, and as my mother retells it, my parents were in town together, a rare occurrence, and the house was empty. My brothers and sister must have gone with them.

I was only in first grade and couldn't write properly, so I printed out the letters as Nora dictated them, telling my mother I had left home.

We fled on the horses, giggling with daring, giddy with escape, high and free and full of ourselves. That night there was a party of sorts in the O'Neill's log cabin under the giant cedar trees beside the waterfall where Twin Bays Creek crashed down the mountainside, ran through the birch and poplar behind the cabin. I lay between them on the mattress in the little room off the kitchen with Nora and Shirley telling me dirty jokes that I laughed at without having a clue what they were about. God knows where everyone else slept. I had never spent much time in the house. This was the first time I'd stayed over or even had dinner there. Dinner had consisted of slices of homemade bread with wild strawberry jam.

My parents came to get me late that night. My mother was crying. I didn't really want to go home and I couldn't figure out why she was so upset.

After that, I wasn't allowed the same freedom, although I still went riding whenever I could. But I couldn't go home with Nora and Shirley when they came by with the herd of horses and cows. I had to stay in and do the dishes. I hated doing the dishes. I hated being in the house. Everything I did with the O'Neils had an air of daring and wildness, like the afternoon, Nora had beckoned to me. “Come on,” she had said impatiently. I followed her down the leafy path to the outhouse. She pulled a pack of cigarettes and some matches from her pocket. We all lit up and puffed away. It seemed a
bit silly to me but it was important to them, and we giggled hysterically at our daring.

My English grandmother – my mother's mother, often came to stay with us. I had been her favourite when I was a baby – I was named after her, Lucy Anne shortened to Luanne — but now nothing about me pleased her. I never combed or washed my hair if I could avoid it. I had no manners. I was like a "wild Indian" she said. This of course was a term that pleased me immensely, though I still wasn’t sure what Indians were. But I was convinced by now that free and wild were the best things to be.

I have few photos of myself as a child; in one, taken soon after we moved to the farm, I am standing on the front lawn under the walnut tree wearing a dress and even though the photo is black and white, whenever I look at the photo, I remember that the dress was pink and the satin ribbon tied around my waist was also pink. In the photo, I am standing self-consciously, my chin pressed down to my chest. My hair is long, blond, combed into ringlets and tied with a pink ribbon, shining in the sun. I am self-conscious, because this is my first new fancy dress. It is for my seventh birthday. My grandmother has bought it for me, for the occasion. My mother has made a big fuss over this dress, my first party dress.

I remember standing as stiffly and carefully as I could, trying to live up to that dress. It was the first time in my life I remember feeling the terrible gravity and falseness that came from wearing special clothes and being told I looked pretty; it was frightening and pleasing at the same time. I pushed my chin into my chest in an effort to do as I was told, to stand up straight and stop fidgeting, to live up to the importance of the dress. But I hated it. All I wanted to do at that moment was run away.
In all other pictures I have of myself as a child, I am in jeans, sometimes on horseback, once sitting on the ground in the orchard in spring with my arms wrapped around the neck of the O’Neil heifer, called that because we bought her as a calf from the O’Neil’s. My hair is either in braids or flying away in tangles.

When I was born, my grandmother made me her pet, to the exclusion of the other children, and she bought me special presents. She wanted me, she said, to be a lady.

But by the time I was photographed in that dress I had already had most of the experiences that would shape me, met the land, met the forest and the mountains, met the O’Neil kids and their horses. I had learned much from them, had climbed cliffs, had clung on to Nora’s waist while the horses slid down the rotten pea shaped granite gravel on the mountain north of the farm, had jumped out of the hay loft in the barn because Nora told me I could. I had gone wild and there was no saving me, though my grandmother tried.

My grandmother had been a bit of a wild girl herself. She liked to tell us how she had made it all the way to Sweden on her own when she was only sixteen, how she had come to Canada and survived by getting jobs as a cook in mining and logging camps. But as my grandmother got older, she became more proudly English. She always called England, the mother country. The longer she lived in Canada, the more genteel she became, until she had made herself over into a middle-class English gentlewoman, the same fate she had picked out for me.

My grandmother had disapproved of my mother’s marriage. She took one look at my father and his father and realized they were beneath her, they had no class, they were rough farmers and uncouth.
But she didn’t know what she was up against in the struggle to keep me like her. She knew nothing of farming or horses or half-wild half-native girls who could curse and stay out as late as they wanted – although she was a hard worker herself, she didn’t understand my father’s and his father’s ways, rough men, men who worked insanely hard, who matched their strength against the land, determined to best it, men who belched as they settled in their chairs for a nap after lunch, men who swore, men who had no time or patience for manners or prettiness.

I never understood until much later in my life why my grandmother was so angry with me, why I went from being her favourite to being someone she barely noticed and often wouldn’t even look at. I missed her and I missed being her pet. I loved my grandmother and as a child, I expected her to go on loving me, to even share in my delight at my new life and adventures. It was the first time in my life that someone openly disapproved of who I felt I had to be, that someone disparaged and made fun of what I loved with my whole being.

My grandmother lost me to a place and a way of life she considered despicable, she had lost me to Canada, to the wood, to the Kootenays, to forests and trees and bantie chickens and the rough harsh ways of my father. But it wasn’t until I became a grandmother myself that I understood the nature of her hurt– she had given me what gifts she could, the gifts she knew, that meant everything to her and I had scorned them. She had tried to tell me the wisdom she had learned in her life and it meant nothing to me. We had loved each other and never understood each other; our different histories, my new culture, her old culture, and my seduction into this new land, made us strangers.

I don’t know what happened to the dress. I never wore it again. We were so poor.
It must have gotten used again. But on the other hand, it was utterly impractical, too frilly for school, too pink and fluffy to withstand much wearing. But I think it hung in my closet for a long time, unworn, reproachful, and unloved.

My grandfather had only sold us half of the original 160 acres of the farm. The rest he kept and subdivided for summer cottages. One day when I went to one of my favourite moss rooms, it was gone. The trees were cut down and the moss had shriveled in the sun. I went away and said nothing. I knew no one would care or understand. After that, I avoided even going past the new cabin, rising from lumber and sawdust and the shrieks of saws.

People from Creston, a lawyer, a doctor, a pharmacist and other people with money, bought the lots in the subdivision next to our farm and began putting up cabins. Now we had to share the beach with their kids, the summer kids, or as we called them, the beach kids. We tried to play with them and make friends but their rules were different than ours or rather, they actually had rules and we didn’t. They weren’t allowed to swim out into the deep water or dive off the rocks or go in the water until an hour after lunch.

When we came to the beach, we would march past them into the water, swim out as far as we could go, and stay out well over our heads, lolling around and spouting like playing whales. Or we’d swim around the rocky point and hide in the rocks deliberately out of sight. Sometimes they sent someone in a boat to check up on us. Then one day a delegation of mothers came up the hill to the farmhouse to complain to my mother that we shouldn’t be allowed to come to the beach by ourselves. It was burden on them, these women said, to have to worry about us.
My mother was polite. She would speak to us, she said. But when she told us this story, we all laughed at them together, those timid town people, who were afraid for us. My mother was a wonderful mimic and she made them ridiculous, those mincing prissy women, who had the nerve to criticize her wonderful children. She was proud, she told us, of how independent we were, and we in turn were proud of our toughness, and our freedom.

The year I turned eight, the O'Neils moved away. I couldn’t believe they were going. I went up to their place after they'd left. I went through the empty barn and the line of sheds that stood between the barn and the house. I looked in the windows of the house. Then I walked the trail home through the woods where we had so often ridden, an old skid trail that went up and over the powerline and down through a secret mossy gully between two humpy rocks, through the trees, then down the hill, across the highway, through Sawdust Bay, along the lakeshore and finally home.

I begged and begged and one day my father drove me to where the O'Neils had moved and left me there for a whole weekend. But I didn't understand anything that was going on. Mabel had a new baby and was busy. Jack and Art were still living at the house but working in town. Nora and Shirley didn't want to go riding. They still had horses but they had lost interest in them. We didn't even go down to the barn, just wandered around the fields, and went down to the river, played along the logs and sandbars.

That night, as I lay next to Shirley and Nora in the loft of the log house, I could hear cars coming and going, voices downstairs, laughter, loud laughter. I heard a woman screaming.
"Shhh," Nora said. "Don't let them know you're here." I had no idea what she meant. We all lay there pretending to sleep.

The next morning, finally, we did go riding. We went down the road to some neighbours where a group of kids were practicing to ride in the local parade. Nora looked at me critically and said, "Can't you do something about your hair?" I sat miserably behind her as we trotted down the road, trying to comb my hair with my fingers.

That afternoon my father came to get me and I ran to meet him. For the last couple of hours, I had been sitting on the corral fence, sulking and kicking my feet.

I didn't see Shirley and Nora for years after that. Their betrayal hurt hugely but it didn't really matter. They had given me a greater gift. Every night I put myself to sleep dreaming of horses, wild horses. Whenever I had something difficult to do, I imagined myself on horseback. When I needed to push myself, when I needed strength, endurance, when I needed to be both strong and yet careful, I imagined myself free, powerful, in control, riding.

Chapter Four:

Fortunately, I found another place to escape to. I found books, reading and writing. After the first summer at the farm, I started school at the small one room school-house in Sirdar, seven miles south of the farm. Sirdar is one of the many small places in the Kootenays that had a few brief bright days when it looked as if it might become something, an important place, a town or even a city. Once it had several hotels and a train station, a railway turntable and a water tower. Most of those things were still there
when we were kids but deserted; the railway station, with its rows of seats, its wooden platform, its carefully lettered sign, its window for the ticket agent, was closed and locked. Even though we pressed our noses to the glass of the waiting room, we never broke in. There was something forbidding about the place.

That first school day in September, my older brother and I stood outside the gate beside the road. I wore a new dress and new white and black saddle-shoes. I had a yellow lunch bucket with a peanut butter sandwich and a thermos of milk. When the bus came, the driver opened the folding yellow door and we clomped up the steps to where the O’Neil kids were already waiting for us. The rattly yellow school bus groaned into motion. It stopped again three miles later and waited for Alan Wilson and his brother Clive to get on – Clive was always late – and five miles further on, it stopped again and we all got off at the Sirdar store. We crossed the highway, went down a narrow weedy path cut into the steep road bank, across the railway crossing between long lines of parked boxcars, past the empty station house, along the coal-dust laden road, and into the school house.

Mrs. Hare was new that year as well. She had a school with seven grades, few resources, and a motley mixture of students. In my grade one class, there were three of us, Alan, myself, and red-headed Santo Wood, whose mother was Dominic Pascuzzo’s sister but who had married out of the clan to a red-headed Irishman. We started the day by singing The Lord’s Prayer and Oh Canada. A picture of the Queen hung at the front of the classroom, over the two blackboards and a row of geraniums with bright red flowers lined the windows.
Mrs. Hare came at 9 am and left at 3 pm. She always brought her small Spaniel dog with her. He lay in a basket all day beside her desk at the front of the room until it was time to leave.

The school bus arrived at the school at 8:15am and came back from town to pick us up at 4:15 pm. We had forty-five minutes in the morning and evenings, fifteen minutes at recess and an hour at noon to do what we wanted.

Inside the classroom, Mrs. Hare kept strict discipline that she enforced with a yardstick. Outside was different; the biggest and oldest kid in Grade Seven gave the orders and decided what we would play. The rest of us followed along.

I was deeply excited by school. I organized my new pencils and my fountain pen, my bottle of ink, and my wide-lined notebooks inside my desk at the front of the first row by the windows. We got workbooks in which to trace letters and readers with absurd stories about Dick and Jane and Sally and their dog Spot. Mrs. Hare believed firmly in phonics, which meant that we could learn words on our own by sounding them out. Once I figured this out, I worked at learning words. I discovered that learning a word was like opening a box within a box, only to find they were all connected together. Eventually, I got very bored with Dick and Jane and their lives and discovered there was another shelf of books on the far wall by the Grade Sevens. I connected enough boxes to read a whole book—The Little Red Hen—that I laboriously sounded out, word by word until with delight, I realized I understood the whole thing at once. I told my mother. I read it out loud to her. I felt like an explorer at the edge of a new land. There were books and books and more books and I could read them.

I don’t remember what led me to believe from this that I could be a writer. But I
do know I decided at six to be a writer and I never went back on the idea. It was always what I was going to do. In fact, I announced it to my family one night after dinner. What I don’t understand is where the idea came from. As far as I know, no one in our family had ever met a writer or had any idea how anyone went about being such a thing. We were farmers, or at least, my father was and his father and his father before that; generation upon generation of Armstrongs who had been farmers and outlaws in Scotland and when they came to Canada, married above themselves to women of gentleness and refinement and learning and then went on being farmers.

As school wore on that year, I made other discoveries. We had a piano in the school, and every day we would gather around the piano that no one ever played and Mrs. Hare would play songs to us on her creaky violin. We learned a lot of songs and that Christmas, we had a concert. We had learned Christmas songs and the older kids had prepared a full three-act play about Robin Hood. My brother needed to be dressed in armour and my mother, in some puzzlement, wrapped tin foil around some old clothes, only to discover, to her deep and everlasting chagrin and fury, that Robin Cherbo’s mother had made him a complete set of armour out of links of silver painted cardboard.

When it was time for the Christmas concert, my parents, predictably, had a fight. Every event in our lives seemed to be occasion for a war. But finally, after everyone had a bath in the giant cast iron bathtub, we got dressed in our best clothes, got in the green Dodge pickup, and drove to the school, where the playground that no one ever drove on, was full of cars. The schoolhouse was jammed; people had driven from all over to come to our concert. Our program was an hour long, with two choirs, a play, some skits, and a
solo by Mrs. Hare on her violin. Finally Santa Claus arrived through the back door, which was never normally opened, and handed out candy canes to all of us and then there was a table laden with the assortment of cookies, cakes, candy and other food brought by the mothers. My mother always brought shortbread Christmas trees that were much sought after.

We also produced a newspaper full of stories, poems and essays that we ran off on an old Gestetner machine Mrs. Hare carted out from town. Everyone had to contribute a story or a poem. Most of the kids hated this chore but I dove into it and took the task of writing essays seriously. In Grade Four, I produced an essay on the balance of nature that was essentially a long argument with Wally Johnson, our trapper neighbour, who insisted that any animals beside birds and fish ought to be killed. My mother both liked and disliked him and from her I got the phrase, “the balance of nature.” The rest I figured out for myself. I gave a copy of it to Wally, who took it very seriously and argued with me about it after that whenever he saw me.

Mrs. Hare and my mother ran together in my head and merged into one person. I got their names mixed up and routinely called each one by the other’s name. Mrs. Hare let me stay in and read at recess and lunch hour; once she discovered my passion for books, she usually gave into my request that I be the one to go to the elementary school in Creston and pick out a new batch of library books. And when I read my way through all the readers we had, she let me sit with the older Grades and read theirs until I finished them and then she left me to read on my own. Adam Robertson, the principal from the elementary school in town, would come once or twice a year on a nominal inspection and each time, he would call me up to stand beside the desk and read to him. Then he would
go back to Creston and report back to the kids there that I was smarter than them. They hated me long before they ever met me.

Outside the long row of windows on the south side of the school was the flagpole, then a high mounded granite rock, surrounded by lilac bushes gone wild, which was variously a spaceship, a base for hide and seek, a police station or a ranch for the cowboys during cowboys and Indians.

In class, we stared longingly out the windows, waiting for our real life, the life where we could become part of those things, to resume. There were also swings and a teeter-totter but those were dull compared to the games we could imagine. We lived our real lives, the intense and endless melodramas of cops or space or cowboys in and among and on top of the rocks, in the hollows beside the two enormous pine trees on the slope south of the school above the lake or in the tangles of brush, lilac bushes and wild apple trees around the school grounds.

There were two broken down old fruit trees and a crabapple growing over the cut bank to the north of the school. We hollowed out the dirt under the crabapple and made seats and from then on, when it got hot in May or June, Mrs. Hare let us move the school out under the crabapple tree.

The one place we were never supposed to go was the lake. No one seemed to mind or care about the water tower but over and over again Mrs. Hare warned us about the lake. In the winter, gas under the ice made hidden holes through which we could all fall through and then we would disappear forever under the ice.

At home, our lake was the place where I spent all my spare time. It didn't seem
right to be going to a school on another lake and not go to it. One day I talked everyone into sneaking down through the thick willow and buckbrush, though the small meadow that marked the boundary of the allowable school territory, onto the skinny trail under the huge pines and then past the quaky aspens onto the long stretch of sand and rocks. Duck Lake was different than Kootenay Lake. It was shallow and reedy, full of insects and fish and ducks. Fascinated, I stared into the brown water in which things swam and scuttled and disappeared out of sight.

Someone told on us, and since it had been my idea, for once I got in trouble with Mrs. Hare. I was her smart girl, her star pupil and for her to be angry with me was far more devastating than for my mother to be angry. The only other time Mrs. Hare got angry at me was when I figured out that the two times table and adding the same two numbers together got the same result. I wrote it out on the blackboard to show her but she sent me outside and told me I couldn't know that yet.

Life outside the school at Sirdar school was a rigid form of anarchy. The toughest big kids gave the orders and the rest of us followed along. When we tired of Let’s Pretend, we played endless fiercely democratic games of Scrub baseball, or we played Prisoner’s Base, which involved drawing a line in the sand and daring each other to cross it. Sometimes we tied each other up and once we played a game of torture that gave me shivery weird feelings when I thought about it at night. Once I had started thinking about it, I couldn't stop and I wanted to ask my mother about it but I thought she would be angry.

The brush around the school was a thick tangle of red willow, buckbrush and syringa. Only very determined small children, crawling on their hands and knees,
molding the brush into tunnels, walls and rooms could get through it. We made rooms in
the brush and nests out of long dried grass in the rooms. We piled up ammunition made
from the tiny green crab apples and then we went to war with the apples that we whipped
at each other with the long shoots broken off the apple trees. Alliances shifted, were
made in an instant, and then broken almost as fast. Life in the school was organized and
in its own way, interesting, but life outside the school was what called us to be fierce,
dramatic, and as brave as we could be.

One noon hour, we gathered around the base of the wooden water tower. Some of
the older boys had pried the boards off the wall and made a space into which we could
crawl. Inside it was cool and damp and smelled of earth.

“Climb the ladder,” someone hissed in my ear. “Double dare you.”

I couldn’t see anything in the dark. I inched my way forward until I held the rungs
of the ladder in each hand. I began to climb, and then I stopped. I clung to the ladder with
both hands. I was afraid to move. I imagined the ladder rungs breaking underneath me,
imagined myself falling away into the darkness. But I had to move. There were voices far
below hissing at me but I had no idea what they were saying; there was light above me to
which I climbed with the abandon of desperation until I could crawl out on the small
ledge.

I could hear wings in the blackness; something brushed by my head. Swallows
and disturbed bats wheeled and circled in the small fragments of light sifting between the
broken boards on the roof. I sat there until I felt myself come back from the terrible place
fear had taken me, and then I had to slide back down the long blackness, hanging on and
feeling with my feet.

When I made it back outside into the bright prayer of the spring sun, they were all staring at me. “Don’t tell,” hissed the older kids. “Don’t tell or you’ll be in so much trouble.”

On another afternoon, we gathered around the ancient rusted railway turntable. The turntable weighed nine tons, according to my father. Someone had broken the lock off. We began to push. Someone got a pole and we levered and pushed and sweated until we actually got it moving. On other days, we got up on top of the long lines of ranked boxcars and ran along them, jumping from boxcar to boxcar.

When Mrs. Hare came outside and rang the bell, we came dutifully in the white door, past the pink tiles inside the girls washroom and the brown tiles inside the boys, hung our coats on the row of coat hangers, and sat in our assigned seats, ranked by class, one row for each class. At the front of the class were two blackboards and Mrs. Hare’s desk, under which her dog slept its days away. Alan, Santo and I started at the windows in grade one and by grade seven, we had have moved all the way over to the far wall. One class at a time, Mrs. Hare would call us to sit at the reddish-brown skinny table to do reading or arithmetic. The black upright piano stood in the corner on far wall, and past that, the sink and the hot plate.

Every day, one student was delegated to leave the school early, walk across the tracks and up the hill to Charlie Nelson’s store to get a can of soup. Charlie Nelson was an old white haired man. He always wore a worn grey sweater that bulged over his huge belly and he had a sickly wife who we never saw, who lived upstairs over the store. One day it was my turn. The store was one of my favourite places. Every day, after
school, we would play until Charlie Nelson rang the bell and then we ran back to the store because the school bus was coming. On Fridays, our mother would give each of us ten cents. For ten cents, I could buy a bag of potato chips, or chocolate bar, or an ice cream, or ten round bubblegum which we got one a time from the bubblegum machine on the counter, or a lollipop. The choice was agonizing.

At the back of the store, was a huge pile of ancient Star Weeklys, which I was determined to read my way through. There were wooden shelves piled with dusty clothes that no one ever looked at and glass cases full of ancient fishing lures.

This day, when I came in the store, I asked politely for the canned soup, handed over my twenty-five cents and turned to go. Charlie Nelson grabbed me from behind and pulled me onto his knee. “Give me a kiss,” he said. He fumbled towards me with his blubbery lips, his whiskery-white cheeks.

I pushed him away as hard as I could and ran out of the store and all the way back to the school. I didn’t say anything to anyone. I hadn’t understood what had just happened. It stayed in my head like a weird nightmare until gradually, it wore away. But after that, I was also careful to never be alone with him.

Now that I could read, I discovered books in our house, an odd and weirdly varied assortment of leftovers from previous generations which I found on rainy afternoons by scrounging through the boxes that had been left in the dusty crawl space over the stairs, There was a set of stories of Norse mythology, which I loved, and a Girl’s Own annual from England which had somehow migrated to our attic. I didn’t understand a lot of what
the girls in the story were saying or doing, but that didn’t matter. I think I was in my forties before I realized that a jumper was a sweater and not a pullover kind of dress.

My parents spent money on books, at least my mother did. My father once bought us a set of Science Made Simple books which none of us read despite his complaining. I tried but they were dull. I read my way steadily through everything else the house had to offer, through all the Reader’s Digest condensed books which my parents subscribed to, through the few books on our pathetic bookshelf at the school, through our assigned readers and then through anything else I could find that had print.

For me, books were as addicting as cocaine. I read on my bed when I was sent upstairs to clean my room. I sat on the edge of the bed and thumped my feet on the floor until my mother crept up the stairs and caught me. I read under the covers with a flashlight. I read sitting upstairs, shivering in my cold room when I was supposed to be doing homework.

I made a number of notable discoveries. My mother bought me Black Beauty for Christmas when I was seven. The book was written from the point of view of a horse, which made sense to me. After all I understood horses better than people and I’d spent more time with them. From then on, I read every horse and dog story I could find, although I was happy to read about almost any animal. I loved, for example the Rudyard Kipling story about Rikki Tikki Tavi, the mongoose who kills a cobra, and read it over and over.

I was hooked immediately – after all, I knew far more about animals than I did about people. I lived with animals more intensely; I spent more time with them. I threw myself into the challenge of reading every dog and horse story I could find; after Black
Beauty there was *Lassie Come Home*, and one of my all time favourite books, *The Yearling*, which I still read and which is still unbearably, sweetly and powerfully good.

At school, I made sure I was the one picked to go to town every few months to get books for our tiny library, and so all of us at Sirdar read our way through *Lad, A Dog*, and the rest of the collie books by Albert Payson Terhune, which we all loved, and then the endless series of *The Black Stallion* books.

In the animal stories I read, the animals were always smart, powerful and good, while human beings, most of them, were treacherous, or cruel or stupid. This only confirmed what I already understood about the adult world.

Somehow, the books I needed and wanted to read showed up, although I still can’t figure out how or from where. I suspect my mother had a hand in it without saying anything, but there were small miracles, one after another: *Robin Hood*, *Treasure Island*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Women*, *Tarzan*, *Robinson Crusoe*. *Robin Hood* in particular became an iconic book for me. Robin Hood lived in the woods, he was free of restrictions and duties; not only that but he was heroic and tough. And then I discovered another hero. Annie Oakley was the heroine of a television series at the time but we didn’t have television. Someone gave me a copy of one of the Annie Oakley series of books. Annie was also young and single and free, she had a horse and a dog and a gun, which to me, seemed to be all any girl would ever need.

My mother must have blessed the day she discovered something called the Open Shelf Library. This was a brilliant but short-lived idea where kids could order books from
the Open Shelf Library in Victoria, for free, through the Post Office. Of course, it was a
hell of a chore, first, ordering the catalogues, then mailing the lists, then finally receiving
the books and then remembering to pack them up and ship them off again. But it was all
worth it when after school, I’d go to the Post Office and there would be one of those
brown paper wrapped packages.

But it still wasn’t enough.

We had a neighbour named Mrs. Arnold. She had been the teacher at the one
room school in Sirdar. She had retired the year before I started school, so I never knew
her as a teacher, only as my mother’s friend.

My mother usually had one friend that she could talk to, but seldom more than
one, and because of the farm and the endless work, she didn’t visit anyone often. There
wasn’t an organized social life on the Eastshore, and even if there had been, my father
wouldn’t have wasted the time and gas money to go to it. So my mother made do with
visits from relatives, usually my father’s sisters who she didn’t like, or her mother, who
came once a year and fought with my father; and when we went to town we had to visit
my grandfather who lived alone in a dusty small house that stank of must and mold.

We also visited often with the Wilsons and them with us. We went to their house
for Christmas dinner and they came to our house on occasional evenings when the adults
played cards and on those evenings, no matter what the weather, the kids all played
outside, played our favourite game, hide and seek. Occasionally, we played softball and
one year we invented an odd sort of golf, played with sticks and a torn softball over the
rumpled garden and in and out of the piles of rusting machinery. And one of the greatest
attractions, for me, was Alan’s immense collection of comic books that he kept in a box
under his bed.

My mother talked to Marg Arnold about many things and she mentioned my need for books. Mrs. Arnold had belonged to the Book of the Month Club since it had started. Every month, she bought whatever book was offered and put it on her shelf. One of the walls in her small grey house by the lake was lined with books. I don’t know if she read them. Their dust covers were undisturbed and each one still had a bookmark from Book of the Month club describing the contents.

My mother suggested I go for tea on Sunday afternoon and bring back some books. One Sunday, I walked the mile of gravel highway between our houses, along the twisting S curve up toward the O’Neil’s house, past the place where Twin Bays creek muttered over its collection of sand and logs, and down Twin Bays road, over the little log bridge and up the thin lane past the blackberry bushes, to her house.

When I came, she always made tea. She had obviously baked for my coming and brought out plates of cookies which I impolitely devoured while we made polite conversation about the weather and my mother. We must have talked about other things, perhaps the neighbours, or the scenery, but she told me nothing about her life and I never asked. I waited patiently for the moment when she suggested perhaps I would like to pick out some books and then I went into the chilly dusty living room, where it was obvious no one ever went anymore, turned on the single dim light and perused the shelves with the avidity of an addict being offered more than enough of the right drug. I picked out a stack of books and she never questioned my selection or suggested any choices. Even I knew some of the books were beyond me but it didn’t matter, they were words and therefore worth something.
Once I had the books I was eager to go but she was less eager to let me. I stood in her kitchen, shifting from foot to foot, while she kept making eager desperate conversation, and I made little lunges for the door until at last I managed to say good-bye, managed to point out that it was getting dark and my mother would be worried, (what did I care if my mother worried) and then I hurried back across the bridge, up the hill, and down the highway through the close wintry dusk hugging my parcel of books to myself.

When Marg Arnold died, I was in high school. I had long since ceased my visits. Many things had changed.

Marg had begun to phone my mother; we had phones now, black boxes that hung on the wall, that had party lines with individual rings for each house, but when you answered the phone, you heard click, click, click down the line as other people picked up and listened in. That was one of the things that had changed. Marg didn’t drive much anymore and Mom and Dad had taken to buying her groceries, or taking her to town with them on town days which they didn’t like doing because she was so slow. One day she phoned to complain that someone was on her roof, trying to get in her house. My father went up but of course, there was no one there. These phone calls went on for several weeks, and finally, my father got fed up. When he went to see her, she was weak and sick and he persuaded her to go to the hospital. He and my mother had talked about it– it was obvious she couldn’t go on living by herself–she had no family.

Now for the first time, my mother told me the little of Marg’s story that she knew; she had a little girl, my mother told me, who died of pneumonia when she was four. Marg had never gotten over her child’s death, and had come here to bury her hurt and her
sorrow. She lived in our small isolated community as a housekeeper to a dreadful cranky man named Jim Purcell, and eked out a living as a schoolteacher, until she retired. Jim finally died and left her alone to live in a house that didn’t belong to her. After she died, it would go to Jim’s son in the US.

She lived for a few days in the hospital. All she wanted to do was go home again, and my father, none too gently, told her she couldn’t. But my mother told me all Marg wanted was to die and see her daughter again.

After she died, the dreadful son came from Texas, driving a new Cadillac car. He clearly was irritated and uninterested in this chore of dealing with his father’s stuff. He roared about complaining, told us Canada was full of Communists, put the place up for sale, sold everything and disappeared again. But the books came to me, and also a picture I still have, of Marg Arnold, young and beautiful and smiling, with her small daughter sitting in her lap. And every time I look at it, I feel both guilty and grateful.

Chapter Five:

As I grew older, my life began to fragment into rigid divisions: work versus freedom; loyalty to my father versus protection for my mother; my grandmother versus the O'Neils; inside and outside; books and the forest. But I also had the land telling me I belonged to this place. This sense of belonging was my key to survival but I didn't know that as a child. All I could do was follow my heart, my gut, to the places where I couldn't be hurt. I sat on the school bus in the morning, pressed my cheek against the cold glass and watched wild horses flow past through the trees.
After we moved into the old farmhouse, it reeked of smoke and dust and ghosts. My mother cleaned and painted and wallpapered but still Pete’s ghost snuck through the house at night, slamming doors or opening them again. The house was painted dark green and two Douglas Firs towered over the front of the house. When the wind blew, the trees swung and roared and I would go out into the overgrown front garden and listen. The front garden was enclosed by an unpainted picket fence. In early summer, a row of delphiniums in the deepest shade of royal blue towered over the lawn. They made a tunnel into which I could crawl, looking out through a fringe of blue upon the shadowed world.

Beyond the delphiniums to the north, through the fence, was a swampy piece of ground covered in ancient currant and gooseberry bushes, intertwined and overgrown with thistles and sweet clover. My brother Bill and I made tunnels here as well, and ponds in the stream we could enlarge and dam up so we could sail wooden boats around them.

In the front, under the walnut tree, the gate opened onto the dirt road – the first summer, my mother set out a table and a chair and my oldest brother and I sold bags of cherries to the few tourists who stopped and paid us ten cents a pound for a paper bag of cherries. My father got us out of bed at 5 am to pick cherries. He set the twelve-foot ladders under the tall branches and we scrambled up, into the centre of the trees, twenty feet high, with buckets hooked to our belts and scrambled back down with the buckets that weighed twenty pounds each when they were full of cherries. We ate cherries steadily all day and then had no appetite for dinner.
In the back yard was an old log woodshed, full of strange bits of harness and tools, and beyond that, the log barn where every afternoon, Tiny the Jersey cow stood and bellowed at her calf, locked in the barn, until my father came out to let her in for milking and to let the calf have a chance to suck.

When I went out in the late afternoon to the gate by the barn, with my tin can of wheat, chickens came running from all over the farm. We had baby chicks now and they were my care as well. It was my favourite time of the day, standing by the barn gate, staring out over fields, emerald in the evening light.

There was so much to see and explore, so many places that became whatever I wished them to be. In the pasture was a huge stone that turned into an elephant when I sat on its head. I had just read Rudyard Kipling’s stories and I desperately wanted an elephant but the stone would have to do.

Ranks of imaginary wild horses ranged the hills above me; at the beach the rocks sang to me in the exhausted afternoons after climbing down off the stinking headache making school bus, and among the rocks, golden-eyed fish that lived in their own kingdom sailed with majestic slowness through green-shadowed water.

In the summers, almost every evening I escaped to the lake. As evening fell, I would sit on the Fishing Rock, watching the sun gracefully sinking down, over the top of McGregor peak, gold light catching the forestry watchtower on its bald peak. A downdraft would start, I could hear it coming, sighing down the mountainside through the fir and pine branches.

Above me in the fields, the dark was growing and the curlews were crying and crying through the shadows.
They're gone now. They've disappeared and I don't know why. My father says the ravens drove them away. But when I was a child, lying awake on hot nights, they cried and ran over the fields and I loved their cries more than any other sound.

I stayed at the beach until there was only a lingering rim of light behind the opaque blue mountains. The fish made circles on the water; the water slurped and lipped at the sand's edge like feet splashing, like something coming out of the black depths to visit. After it got dark, the noises of the lake changed and became menacing.

There is a monster in the lake. Many people have seen it. On very hot summer evenings, our father sometimes took us out in the boat into the middle of the lake to swim. He would swim under the boat and grab our legs. He and our mother would talk about all the bodies that had been lost in the lake, the bodies that never came to the surface, the black endless depths of the lake.

But still I wouldn't want to go home. The fields were full of dark. The hay stubble would bite my bare feet. My mother might be calling. Mosquitoes began to haunt the air; light still glimmered in dim layers on the mountains. But I didn't want to go, not yet, not quite yet. The wind would come stronger now, enough to rock the trees, wake ripples on the water, which splashed with greater urgency – ghosts in the water.

The mountains were black now. Under the trees, up the path from the beach, I had to feel my way. The noise behind me from the water was menacing. I had escaped but it wanted me back. All day I had hovered by the water, staring into the green depths, looking for fish, caught in a dream of water and air, the sun tasting my skin, turning me to brown salt and leather. My skin would glow all night.

Floating back through the hay fields, half fish, half bird, blind across the bird-
crying fields, with the wind and the black sighing trees and my mother waiting, calling me, singing, to come in, come in, come back inside.

The next spring after we moved to the farm, when I was about to turn seven, I came home one day from school and the two giant fir trees lay prone across the yard, across the fence, crushing the delphiniums. Dick O’Neil was there, sawing the trees into blocks with his chainsaw. The tree stumps were three feet through. I stopped in shock as I came through the gate. Then I did something horrifying. I began to cry. Those trees had been mysterious, enormous, giant friends that guarded the house. Something about their helplessness, their giant lengths across the ground, tree limbs severed and already piled for burning so the trunks looked naked, and helpless. I flung my lunch case to the ground and ran to my mother, who would understand.

“They had to come down,” she said. “They weren’t safe.”

I flung myself out of the house, out of the back door, across the pasture, to the elephant rock where I sat with my head on my knees, staring at the mountains, until it got dark.

When I finally came in the house, dinner was almost done. The light from the kitchen shot into my sore eyes. Everyone stared at me, my two brothers and my sister, sitting at the dinner table, and my parents. I slid into my chair, and my mother dished me potatoes and fried chicken and peas. I ate my food without raising my eyes.

“Don’t know what the hell you’re so upset about,” my father said. “Just a couple of trees.”

“They had to go,” my mother said, more gently.
Words slogged in hopeless circles in my head. They were beautiful. I liked them. Nothing made sense. I knew for the first time that my father and mother were both wrong. I did the only thing I could. I finished my supper in silence and went up to my room.

One afternoon, after lunch, before I could escape, my mother said, “Come and help me.”

My parents had been arguing all though lunch. My mother wanted to order new linoleum from the Sears catalogue, and father said no, it was a waste of money. After lunch, she left the dishes sitting and went into the living room. Then she went downstairs to the basement and then came back up with a claw hammer. She shoved the old worn couch away from the wall and attacked the linoleum with the claw hammer, pulling it up in chunks and fragments.

“Come and help me,” she screamed. Her voice went up and up like a machine revving up. Her hair was hanging in her eyes and her and face was red. I stood in the doorway.

“Hurry up,” she said. “You have to help.”

This was not my mother, this harsh screaming stranger. Who was it that had let the dishes stand and was now screaming and pounding at the linoleum? I rather liked the blue linoleum. It had a border of flowers around the edge but now it was coming up in long ragged strips.

I grabbed hold of a strip and pulled. It came away with a satisfying tear, leaving patches of glue and grey underlay on the floor. There were rough boards under the
linoleum. I knelt beside my mother and pried at the edges of the linoleum with my
fingernails. My mother leaned back on her heels, and wiped her hair out of her eyes.

“Should I leave your father?” she said.

I stared at her.

“Where could we go?” she said. “I used to be a hairdresser. I could do that again.
Or I could work in a store.”

I thought hard and fast. I knew my mother was always unhappy but the thought of
her actually leaving was inconceivable. I thought about the farm, my parent’s fighting,
and the endless angry voices at night until I fell asleep. I thought about being away from
my father. I thought about leaving the farm and going away into a world I knew nothing
about.

“No,” I said finally. “I don’t think you should go.”

“I could manage,” she said. “I used to work in a store. Or I could get a job as a
hairdresser.” She was crying now. “We never have any money. I haven’t bought any new
clothes since we got married.”

“But we have the farm. And the animals. And our house.”

What would happen to the chickens, I thought, without me to feed them?

“It will get better,” I said earnestly. “I’ll help you.”

We went back to tearing up the linoleum and carrying it out onto the front lawn.
When my father came in at four for tea, the linoleum was gone, lying in a pile of strips
outside on the lawn, and the dishes were done. For once my father was speechless.
I never heard anything more about the linoleum. A few weeks later I came home from
school and my father was running a rented sander up the down the rough boards in the
living room. He painted them with varnish after they were sanded.

My mother ordered a rug from Sears catalogue and every few weeks, she would roll up the rug, coat the boards with hard wax, put the opera, *Aida*, on the stereo, and give us pairs of our father’s work socks to pull on over our shoes. Then we would slide up and down the wax until it was smoothed and buffed and shiny and slick as ice.

For a few brief years during the war, my mother had her own job and her own money. She worked at the Boeing Aircraft Factory and she spent her money on singing lessons. Now, somehow, she kept music in her life. She saved small bits of money and subscribed to the Metropolitan Opera Record Club; whenever she could afford it, she bought a new opera. The first few records she ordered were simple operas that we could all listen to and understand. I sat with the lyrics to *The Tales of Hoffman* on my lap and learned the melody and the lyrics. After my mother played an opera, she and I would both sing it together. When Mrs. Hare asked us to memorize a song and sing it at school, I sang an aria from *Tales of Hoffman*. Mrs. Hare was astonished enough to phone my mother.

On rainy afternoons, she would put on *Aida* or *Carmen* so we could all march around the living room and play at bullfights, and then she got *La Bohéme* and soon after, *Madame Butterfly*. I couldn’t understand the words but my mother told me the story and the music itself was so desperately beautiful it was right at the farthest edge of unbearable. But still, it was irresistibly, endlessly singable. Whenever she played music, my mother would tell stories to go with it, about her days in Vancouver taking singing lessons, about her handsome singing teacher who had wanted to take her to Toronto,
about how she had quit singing to marry our father, about how different her life could have been.

She sang at her work, sang to call us inside, pure operatic soprano notes floating over the orchard and down the hill to the water, where we were hiding, escaping the endless work. My mother sang in her toil, from morning to night, the endless effort of running a farm and feeding everyone on it and producing everything from scratch—everything we ate came from the farm—meat, fruit, vegetables, milk and butter. Every fall, 300 jars of fruit and vegetables lined the shelves in the cellar.

My mother had small hands. There were always sores breaking open on her hands; burns from the oven or cuts from a knife. Her hands were always so busy; even in those rare moments when she sat down, she was knitting something, usually a sweater for one of us. The skin on the back of her hands was thin and delicate and the blue veins showed through. She kept her nails carefully filed but she seldom used nail polish.

“You stay in and help with supper,” my mother said one afternoon. I barely glanced at her. I was watching out the window. Nora and Shirley would be by soon. Every afternoon they went to fetch their cows and horses home from the pasture south of our house. I went with them, either riding double bareback, if they were riding, or skipping beside them if they were on foot.

“You stay here,” my mother said. “You’re always running off with those girls. Stay home and help your own family.”

“But I have to go,” I said. “They’re expecting me.” I stared at her. I couldn’t figure out why she was being so horrible. Stay in and cook? Instead of running through the woods, rounding up the cows, and loping the mile or so behind them back to the log
corral at the O'Neil’s, along stick in my hand? It was no contest.

“You stay inside,” my mother said. “It’s time you learned something about cooking. It’s time you started to help out around here.” Her voice rose and her face twisted. She grabbed a stick of kindling from the box beside the stove and smacked me with it. It stung but what stung even more was my mother’s betrayal. She had been proud of my independence, my freedom.

Besides, she was being unfair and we both knew it. I worked hard; it was just that whatever I did was outside with my father. I loved farm work. I hated housework.

“I’m going with the O’Neil’s,” I said. “I hate this house. I hate being inside.”

We faced each other. “Do what you’re told,” she said. She was yelling now, screeching, about the work and how tired she was. My mother was almost always warm and kind and understanding. She was the person I came to for defense against my father; she always understood and backed me up.

Snuffling and furious, not from the beating, but from her inexplicable betrayal, I helped set the table and mash the potatoes, turned everything into bowls and called my father for dinner from the basement where he usually had several things that needed some kind of fixing.

I sat through dinner with my head down. I ate my food because if I hadn’t my father would have made me sit there all evening until it was gone, then excused myself and slid out the back door, through the pasture gate and into the field to one of my favourite hiding places, the hollow behind the juniper trees next to the orchard fence. I sat there through the gathering dark, planning how to run away and determined to stay out all night. But when the dark was fully descended, thoughts of bears and cougars intruded and
I snuck back to the house, in through the back door and up to my room.

My mother was never really strong or really well. She was made for an easier life—and yet she had four children and a farm. My father was impatient with illness or weakness, and in fact, simply got frantic whenever my mother, or any of us, got sick. A sick cow he could shoot, a broken tractor he could fix, but a sick person had to be goaded and ranted at so we would get back to work.

“Work it off,” he would bellow at his sick children. “Get outside and work up a sweat. That’ll cure you.”

When my oldest brother developed hayfever and came in from the barn coughing and wheezing, our father told us all how he had been allergic to pollen and dust but had cured himself by working on a haying crew where most of the hay consisted of ragweed. A day spent coughing and sneezing in a haze of yellow ragweed pollen had cured him. The same treatment never worked for my brother but my father never excused him from haying work.

I came home once from rounding up cows on horseback with the O’Neil kids with my scalp torn open from a low-hanging branch. My mother demanded we drive the twenty miles to the hospital. My father was furious at the idea of wasting gas and time over something so trivial. But my mother won, for once, and a doctor used nine stitches to close the cut.

But my mother couldn’t always work it off. She developed rheumatic fever soon after we moved to the farm but went on working, against the advice of her doctor, dragging herself through the days. It affected her heart and she took medication for it the
rest of her life. But I didn’t know this. I didn’t know about her weakness, her exhaustion, or her swollen and painful hands. I only wanted to be outside, in the blue twilight, running alongside the O’Neil’s.

After the O’Neil’s left, the woods were lonely. I trudged up the trails on foot where we had ridden together. I dreamed about riding, I woke in the morning, frustrated, from dreams of riding horses, so vivid I couldn’t believe they hadn’t been, in some way, real. So I began dreaming awake. I rode imaginary horses over the pasture and through the orchard to the beach, talking out loud to them. In old machine shop at the back of our house, I lined up a series of sticks with twine tied around them. I printed out their names, the most beautiful names I could think of, and stuck them on the wall with tacks: Princess Beauty, Steeldust, Coaly-black. I had a horse of every colour. In a schoolbook, I made up elaborate family connections for them. By this time I was reading every horse book I could get my hands on, so I had some idea how horses were named, that they had mothers and fathers and histories. I lay awake, dreaming of their names and their colours. They were so real to me that sometimes, when I ran to the machine shop in the morning, I stopped, surprised by the row of sticks tied to the wall by bits of twine. It required a trick of the imagination to get myself back into the world where these sticks were transformed back into proud horses, and myself into the princess/warrior riding them into various vague battles.

My parents didn’t have the time or money to pay a lot of attention to their children’s obsessions. But I was so obsessed by the idea of getting my own horse, they actually got worried. My father complained that horses were useless and ate too much. I
didn’t listen. I didn’t care what he said. I ate and slept and dreamed horses and over and over again, I begged for a horse of my own.

So, they bought me a horse for my ninth birthday. My father took me to see her before he bought her. He asked me what I thought. I had no idea what I thought. I only knew she was a horse, a brown horse, a horse that if I said yes, would be my horse. So I said yes.

What he bought, for the enormous sum of $150, was a barely broken untrained, muddy-brown three-year old mare. When my father hauled her home in the back of the Dodge pickup, and turned her loose in the pasture, she headed for the farthest corner and refused to have anything to do with any of us.

What we didn’t know, and found out much later, is that she had been “broken” as the term went, when someone had stuck a halter on her head, beaten her half senseless, stuck a bridle and bit on her, ridden her around a bit, and pronounced her ready to sell.

I followed her around for weeks, with bits of apple and oats pilfered from the cows and chickens. I asked my father for advice and he grunted that she was my horse and if I didn’t want her, she could go back where she came from. After a while, she let me scratch her neck and shoulders and one day when she was lying in the sun, I lay down with my head on her round warm belly and we dozed together.

Even horses get lonely. One day, Lady (which was the name she had come with) came to me when I crossed the pasture. She put her head in my arms and sighed the deep sigh horses make when they relax.

I went back to the barn and lifted the heavy old leather halter off the nail in the corner above the manger. I went back out. Lady was still standing where I had left her. I
lifted the halter up and she stuck her nose in it. I did up the heavy metal buckle. Then I tied a rope to the ring at the bottom and led her through the gate. I tied her to a tree and went and got a brush. I spent much of the rest of the afternoon brushing her and feeding her apples while she stood with her head down, half asleep. Finally I got the ancient bridle that had come with her and stuck the cold bit in her mouth and wrestled the earpiece over her ears. Then I slid on her back and rode around the house, down the lane, through the orchard, and back up to the house. Before I turned her loose, I rubbed my hair all over her hair so I could sleep all night smelling that wonderful salty sweaty horse smell.

That night at dinner, I announced that I had taken Lady for a ride. No one seemed to think this was remarkable. What to me had been a miracle was passed over between the potatoes and the creamed corn. That night I took my horse-stinky hair to bed and lay all night in a stupour of happiness, dreaming of the places that Lady and I would go. And we did go, up and down the mountain, over the trails that the O’Neil girls had shown me. My father had given me a twenty-two rifle. He handed it to me one day, showed me how to load it, showed me where the shells were kept, and said, “Learn to shoot it.”

I had an Annie Oakley cowboy hat and a red vest. In the summer, I galloped through the cluster of cabins full of gaping town kids. I rode up and down the highway, proud and tall, on my horse. I had a horse and a gun, just like Annie.

But Lady soon showed a genius for getting herself, and me, into trouble. She began to figure out how to untie gates ropes, latches, and barn doors. She got into the feed bin and ate herself sick; she tore down a whole line full of white sheets that my
mother had hung on the line and trampled them into the mud.

When I woke in the morning, Lady would be tied to a tree in the yard. So I knew she had done something. It was always bad. It always cost something. One night she ruined a whole wagon-load of apples by leisurely chewing small bites of out of a few apples in each box. One night, the Greyhound bus driver knocked on our door. At the last moment, he had seen a black shadow on the road and screeched to a halt. Lady was stretched out on the warm pavement, sound asleep.

I began to tie her in the barn with the door closed. To get out, she had to untie a rope that I had knotted and double knotted, undo the latch on the barn door and then undo the gate. Somehow she managed it. Finally, my father looped a heavy chain over the barnyard gate and wired it shut. This seemed to work.

My father thought that everything on the farm should have a job, should be put to work. Lady had no job, no use that he could see, except to starve the cows by eating all their grass; finally he hit on the idea that we might be useful driving the cows on their annual spring trip across the river, where they were left for the summer to graze. We brought them back again every year just before Christmas.

To get the cows to the river, we drove them five miles south along the highway to the railway bridge. My father went ahead in the truck and my brothers and I ran behind. The cows hated this trip and broke away at every opportunity, into the neighbour’s yards, up old logging roads onto the mountains. They stopped traffic and stood stupidly in the middle of the road staring at the cars, while equally stupid furious drivers honked and waved their arms.

We ran and ran, while our father banged on the door of the truck and yelled
instructions. Occasionally, when there was nowhere for the cows to go, we caught a brief breath on the running boards of the truck. When we got to the river, we banged on the rumps of the cows with sticks and rocks until reluctantly, they crawled into the river and swam across. Then we could pile in the warm cab of the truck and go home.

Every year, we brought them back again just before Christmas. But first we had to find them. They were scattered through the brush and marsh and willow thickets at the south end of the lake.

We walked across the railway trestle, stepping over the black, creosoted ties, looking down at the black-green water below. The wind always blew through the trestle girders, viciously trying to snatch us off and throw us into the water. Then it was a three-mile march out to the other end of the dike, to Kootenay Landing, where once sternwheeler boats had tied up and received passengers before the railway track was built.

The cows were always hiding somewhere, reluctant to get moving, wary of people after seven or eight months on their own. We had to run through the swamp, through murky black water and mud, leaping from clump to clump of tall peppermint-smelling swamp grass, while the cows sloshed ahead of us.

After we got them across the river again, we ran behind them, all the way home. I once figured out that we had run, almost with pausing, for over eight miles.

My father thought Lady should be able to help with this, but Lady had figured out pretty quickly that she didn’t have to do much of anything she didn’t want to do. One thing she didn’t want to do was be ordered around by me. Slopping around the farm was one thing. That was okay. She let me ride her; she stumbled and dragged her feet and slouched along and stopped whenever she saw something that might be good to eat. I
tried riding her with a stick, the way the O’Neil’s had taught me, but that made her shake and sweat and shy at everything so I fell off as much as I rode her. But running along the highway after a bunch of cows wasn’t her idea of fun. She shied at every car and because I didn’t have a saddle, I usually fell off. We weren’t much good as cowboys.

My father began turning Lady loose to run with the cows. I had to go and get her myself. After that, when winter came, I went and found her and rode her home alone through the snow, clinging to her back over five miles of snowy road, keeping my hands from freezing by letting go the reins and putting my hands up under the heavy hair of her mane on her warm neck.

The dream and my determination wore out. I rode her less and less. There weren’t many places to go really and there were more and more cars on the road that had now been paved. And my father now used her as a kind of generic threat. Whenever he thought I had done something wrong, he threatened to sell her. He went on and on about her being an expense, a nuisance, a greedy useless waste of time and money.

There was only one way out. One day I said, “Fine, sell her then.”

He did. Some people came, a nice enough couple and then my father told me to ride Lady to Wynndel, where the couple would meet me with a truck.

Wynndel was twelve miles away. We had never gone on such a long ride. We rode there on a June morning and for once Lady behaved and didn’t shy. We rode past the wild roses and the swamp full of red and yellow-winged blackbirds, past Sirdar where I went to school, up the long hill and eventually to Wynndel. I slid off Lady’s sweaty brown-dappled back and handed the reins to the couple. I didn’t look at her. I didn’t say goodbye. I slumped into the seat of my father’s truck and we rode home in silence. I
never went out to the pasture if I could avoid it and I tried to stop dreaming at night about riding wild horses and escaping. But I never could. Night after night, I woke from dreams, in which I had almost gotten on a horse, almost gone riding, and then I woke up, bereft and lonely, in my white room with the rug made from my grandfather’s favourite sorrel mare on the floor.

Chapter Six:

For three seasons at the farm, school, chores, and weekends bound our lives. But summers were different; in summer, we belonged entirely to the farm and in fact, rarely left it. Time in summer wove in and out of contradiction; to our father, it was a desperate race to get all the work done. To us, summers were full of frantic work but they were also full of timeless hours at the beach, especially the long evenings on the rocky point where we headed each evening as soon as supper was done.

My father had organized the farm into an amazing place of subsistence where everything worked together. None of it made much money but it fed us and our animals and bits of money trickled in from here and there. A subsistence farm is an amazing closed system that works extremely well if there enough people around to do the work. Most of our food came from the farm: meat, milk butter, cheese, vegetables, and fruit. About the only thing we didn’t grow was wheat for flour, although for a while, my father bought wheat in bulk and ground it. What we never had was enough money. My father usually worked out at some part-time job, such as hauling lumber for the sawmill, and in summer, money came from selling cherries and raspberries to tourists from our fruit stand.
beside the road.

We had a small herd of cows, a milk cow, and usually a couple of pigs, as well as chickens and sometimes geese and ducks. Our Jersey cow, Tiny, gave astonishing amounts of milk and cream. No matter how inventive our mother was, it was hard to get rid of three gallons of milk and two gallons of cream a day and most if it went to the pigs. We started eating out of the garden in June, when the strawberries and rhubarb and early spinach and peas were ready. Then we went on stuffing ourselves through the summer and into the fall; an endless abundance that we took for granted. We had a half acres of garden where we grew peas, carrots, corn, potatoes, and squash, plus strawberries, raspberries, apples, plums pears, peaches, grapes, gooseberries, currants. My mother also made beer and wine.

One of our biggest chores was putting up hay to feed the cows through the winter. My father cut the hay with a cutter-bar mower he had adapted to pull with the tractor instead of with horses; all of the machinery on our farm was ancient and my father kept it running with a combination of ingenuity and adaptation. There was never money for parts so he made do or traded and scrounged for second-hand bits of machinery that could be adapted to fit. We had a Gibson tractor that was steered with a handle, a Farmall tractor that was a combination of several other Farmall tractors, and a Rumbley tractor that we hardly ever used. It had enormous steel cogs on its steel wheels; it could pull anything but it was huge and hard to start.

After the hay was cut, it dried in the sun for a day or so and then it had to be windrowed with a rake pulled behind the Farmall and then coiled into piles by hand. This all took a week or so and during this time, we all watched the sky. Rain would ruin the
hay and turn it into moldy compost fit only for dumping. When the hay was finally dry, we hoisted it into the hay wagon with pitchforks, drove it into the hay barn, and then lifted it out of the hay wagon with pitchforks into the barn where it had to be stacked again, and stomped down to fit under the roof. To build a proper pile of hay on the wagon required technique and care; I learned to stab the pitchfork straight down into the coil of hay, hoist it over my back straight into the air and bring it down flat onto the growing pile of hay on the wagon. When the stack was towering into the air and too high for us to reach anymore, we threw the last few forkfuls into the middle to tie it together. Bill and I climbed up and rode on the towering jiggling pile of hay while Phil ran ahead to open the gates. Once we got to the hay barn, my father heaved the hay up into the barn, forkful by forkful, while my brothers and I stabbed it with our pitchforks and tried to place it evenly into the corners of the barn. The first cut of hay in early July usually coincided with the worst of the mosquito season so we did all this in the middle of clouds of mosquitoes. We also did it in our bare feet. One day I was running behind the hay wagon on my way out to the orchard; I was behind because I had stopped to sneak a drink of lemonade in the house. I grabbed my pitchfork and started to run and then stopped. I stared down at my foot in astonishment. Somehow I had managed to stab the pitchfork right through my foot into the ground. All I could think of was how angry my father would be. I yanked it out and limped as fast as I could go back out to the field.

The hay was cut twice each summer. We also cut hay in marshy meadows to the north of the farm at Twin Bays and in another meadow to the south of the farm.

Our other job was picking the cherries and raspberries. We had about thirty cherry trees that we picked from twelve-foot ladders or by climbing to the very top of the trees,
balancing on slender brittle limbs, and stretching our hands to strip off every cherry. If we left any, our father made us climb back up and get them. We dumped the cherries from our buckets into wooden apple boxes, hauled them on the cart behind the tractor into the fruit stand, where whoever had been detailed for fruit stand duty weighed them out in five and ten and twenty pound bags and cardboard cartons.

Then there were the raspberries, seven long rows of them, which had to be picked every day or the raspberries would get overripe and fall on the ground. We got up at five to pick enough cherries to sell for the day, and then after breakfast we started in on the raspberries that we tried to finish by noon so we could go swimming. Every afternoon was a fierce and bitter negotiation over who got to go swimming and who had to stay and sell fruit to the tourists. We hated the tourists; there was no limit to the stupidity of their questions. They would ask things like, “Is this your farm? Are these your cherries? Can we pick a few ourselves?” Or they would quibble over paying ten cents a pound and demand to get a deal for buying a few more pounds.

By the time I was ten, I was as strong as my older brother; I gloried in my own strength, in my ability to lift more hay, to climb higher, work faster, to pick more cherries than anyone else. It was the only arena I had in which to excel, and I competed fiercely to be as good as I could be.

My father’s hands were huge, the skin thick as leather mitts. His hands were always littered with nicks and cuts, the lines embedded with grease and dirt. No matter how much he washed, they always had those black lines; they reeked of grease and motors.
I followed him everywhere. I had to stretch my legs to awkward lengths to match his strides. When he walked in the soft dirt of the newly plowed garden, I stretched hard to put my feet exactly in his footsteps, I stuck my hands in my pockets, grunted when someone asked me a question.

"You're just like your father," my mother would snap when she was really angry with me. It was true; I was my father's henchman, and his enemies were my enemies. I believed in his raging endless despair about work and money, I followed behind him, snarling at my brothers and sister who wouldn't, or couldn't, work as hard, as fast, as well, as I could.

Once we were walking out to the hayfield in the spring. Wind came beating in off the lake. We were supposed to spend the morning picking up rocks, shards of granite from the outcrop that my father had blown up with dynamite. He liked to blow things up. I did too. I loved to help him. It's a miracle he never blew any of us up. He used to hand us sticks of dynamite, the paper damp from age and leaking nitroglycerine.

"Don't shake your fingers," he said. We put the dynamite down the holes he'd drilled with his ancient compressor, covered them with dirt and rocks and tamped the whole thing down with crowbars. He fixed the blasting caps, ran out the fuse, said, "Get down. Open your mouths."

That was to protect our ears. We all got headaches from the blast fumes and our crazy dog Willy ran in and began pawing at the blast holes even before all the rocks had stopped raining down from the sky. Maybe he figured the world's biggest gopher was down there somewhere.

On the way out to the hayfield, my father began cursing my little brother who was
lagging behind. I was eight, so my brother would have been five. My father was ranting, about how we all had to work, when there was work to be done, you goddamn well did it, that it was work or starve, and by God, we were going to work.

I saw it. I got it clear. It was one of those moments when life suddenly made sense. We were all in this together. We had this thing to do, called survival. I felt a clear and religious hatred. I hated my brother, who didn't get it and was whining behind, scuffling his feet in the dirt and doing everything to get out of working.

Very occasionally, our father stopped cursing the weather, the fruit trees, the contrary cows breaking through fences and getting out on the road. Sometimes he played, went fishing, or took us all hiking up a remote creek across the lake to look for the rare and tender brook trout in the high rushing pools of Next Creek. In the summers, we'd go on picnics and winters we went skating on the marshy spaces of Rat Slough where he chased us with bulrushes breaking open in a foam of seeds.

One wintry day, frozen sleet coated the hayfield and he took us out there in the old Dodge pickup and spun it in circles until we were dizzy with screaming.

I always felt safe with him, even reaching under the shrieking buzz saw to pull away lengths of wood or the time he knocked a tree over the power line. When the wires lay snaked and sparkling in the grass he said, "Don't touch those," so my brother and I jumped over them instead.

And although I never told anyone, I knew it was my fault the tree had taken out the power lines. He'd told us to push on it as he cut through with the power saw because it was leaning and the wind was blowing, but when I felt the tree lean its awful weight
towards me I weakened and let go. It bent over to squash me but I was too fast and ran out and away.

The farm belonged entirely to my father. He extended his fury at us, his lazy children, to his disobedient and wayward land. The rain rotted the cherries, lodged the hay so it couldn't be cut; weeds over ran the pasture grass and the garden. One year, the chickens got coccidiosis and died, all six hundred of them, and every day for a solid year we ate chicken, which my mother did her best to disguise as something else but never could.

I was terrified of my father and I worshipped him as well. He made the small kingdom that was the farm run; there was nothing he couldn’t do, nothing he couldn’t fix, nothing that, cursing and wearing, he couldn’t manage, somehow, to deal with. Whenever he left, to go to work or to town, the farm felt different, as though a huge pressure had been relieved, for just a while. But we also knew that no matter how hard we had worked or what we had done, when he came home he would find something wrong, something to complain about.

But a war I didn’t understand and couldn’t win began between my father and me when I turned into a girl. Turning into a girl was a confusing process. For one thing, I loathed the whole idea of being a girl. Real girls had no fun; they stayed in the house and did housework. The few ordinary girls I knew from school were mostly silly. They weren't like me. They didn't know anything about the things I loved, farming, the woods, and horses. They weren’t tough. They cried instead of fighting.
I wanted to be a farmer and how could I be that if I was a girl?

But as I grew older, became more visibly female, more and more often, my father sent me in the house to help my mother. I was supposed to be cooking and cleaning, doing laundry with the wringer washer, washing the milk cans, making butter and jam and canning things and baking, the work my mother did with barely a pause in her swift pace from morning to night.

When I was inside, I was the one to whom my mother complained. “How am I supposed to buy shoes for you kids?” she would worry out loud. Or, “How am I supposed to get you Christmas presents?”

When my mother got a worry, she would chew on it, and then spit it at my father until both she and my father were exhausted. Most of the things she wanted, my father thought were silly, and a waste of money. I would go back and forth between them, trying to make peace. They sent me to each other with messages. Foolishly, I repeated these messages, trying to explain to each what the other one really meant. I always failed.

My father would respond, “You damn women, you all think alike.”

And my mother said, “Oh, you’re just like your father. You’re always on his side.”

I used to wonder which of them I could do without. I lay awake at night, upstairs in our creaking house and imagined soldiers coming, giving me the choice. Whichever one stayed, the other would die a peculiar horrible death. I lay awake, imagining one choice or another night after night. But I never did decide.

But now, as I spent more time with her, I was forced to begin to understand my mother. For the first time, as my mother and I talked, as we peeled fruit or mixed dough, I
began to see her side.

I was the only ally she had. She didn't have women friends, didn't drive, rarely went anywhere without my father except occasional long bus rides to Vancouver to visit her own mother.

My mother was always there, in the house, in the kitchen. Every morning, work stopped at 11 and everyone came in the house for tea or hot chocolate in the winter, or lemonade and cookies in the summer. And then at four, the work stopped again, and there was my mother, with fresh baking or a bowl of popcorn. She boiled the kettle, made tea, while we ate and drank and then ran out again while she got started on supper. She was just there, at the centre, and if the life of the farm had a soul, she was that soul, endlessly generating food, meals, and comfort. And when we came in complaining about our father, or about each other, she took the side of whoever was doing the complaining, so that each one of us, smugly, jealously, assumed that our mother loved us the best.

I began to realize how much my mother wanted, not so much a different life, as more, so much more, of things she simply couldn’t have: clothes and furniture and other small things for the house, for her kids. She wanted fun and joy and music and laughter. I promised my mother when I grew up and became a rich and famous writer, I would take her to the Metropolitan Opera in New York. It was the best thing I could think of.

Though we now sometimes sang together through the work, the work never stopped. She baked every day, at first on the wood stove, and then on the electric stove that my father reluctantly bought, sometimes twice a day, cakes and bread and cookies.
She made three full meals a day, porridge, eggs, toast and ham or bacon every morning, and lunch for my father.

Every day, my brothers and sister and I climbed down off the school bus to a house redolent with gingerbread or oatmeal cookies, with popcorn and hot chocolate. Then we scattered to do our chores while she made dinner. When all the pots and pans were on the stove, simmering and bubbling, she would sit in the old green rocking chair, under the lamp in the living room, put on her glasses and read something, usually the Reader’s Digest, for fifteen or twenty minutes, until it was time to hoist herself up again and dish up the food.

The summer I turned twelve, Dad got a job in Nelson, which meant he would be gone for the whole summer. All the work would fall on our shoulders. Somehow, we did it; one night Phil and I worked until midnight getting in hay because we thought a storm was coming. The next day, we were out raking the orchard hayfield to get in the last bits of hay; I was driving the Farmall tractor but I was half asleep. I saw that the tractor was heading for a tree but somehow I couldn’t turn the wheel fast enough to stop it. I hit the tree and the front axle broke. This was a disaster and my father had to hurry home and spend the whole weekend, cursing and frantic, to get it fixed.

The next summer, it was my mother’s turn to be away. This meant that I had to do the farm work as well as the cooking and dishes. She was only gone a week but this was the week that my father decided to build a haystack in the Twin Bays field. All through the hot and shiny day the two of us threw hay onto the wagon, hauled it to the side of the...
field and built a mound of hay. The idea was that it should be square. I caught each bundle of hay my father threw up to me and tried to place it to grow a square stack. I stumbled and floundered through the growing pile of hay; the next day and the day after that we did it again until all the hay was piled in some kind of conical stack. My father covered it with a tarp and we left it. Just before we left he stood back, studied the pile.

“Looks like a damn corkscrew,” he said. But I didn’t care. I knew that I had kept up with him through three days of insanely hard work; I was almost as strong as he was, I thought. I could do almost anything he could.

But that fall, I began to panic. Although we started at Sirdar school as usual, within a month the school was closed and we were all moved into a larger school in Wynndel. Mrs. Hare was sick, we were told. And the year after that I would have to go to high school in Creston.

It finally dawned on me that I was going to grow up and become an adult like the ones I saw around me. And that meant by then I'd have to understand the world away from the farm well enough to function in it. It seemed an impossible task.

By now I had knobbly sore breasts growing on the front of me that I hated and tried to cover with bulky shirts. I’d begun to menstruate which I also hated. I had to wear pads that I kept in a drawer in my dresser. Everything about being a girl seemed stifling, or messy or embarrassing.

I didn't know who to ask for advice. I couldn't ask my mother because she was the one who always asked me what she should do. Or, on the rare occasions when I did ask her what to do, she'd tell me some story about her life that had nothing at all to do with my life. When I was finally old enough to start resenting this, I decided she had got stuck
somewhere in her own past, like a needle stuck on a record. Her stories were all about
when she was a girl, that long ago and unimaginable time my siblings and I called "the
olden days."

Of course the olden days weren't real. They were stories our mother told us
sometimes after dinner to make us laugh, stories she had honed to a high art which left us
shaking and helpless with laughter, stories which that couldn't possibly be true – how she
and her best friend Louise stole a bunch of Indian horses one night and headed for the
border and nearly made it, or how my mother's brother wouldn't go to the outhouse at
night so he started peeing down the knothole in the back of his closet, and his mother
couldn't figure out where the stain was coming from that spread in a great yellow blotch
across the living room ceiling. She told us these stories over and over and we never got
tired of them, because she continually invented new details which that made them even
funnier, and more ludicrous and impossible than they had been the last time we heard
them.

So, the summer I turned thirteen, I should have known better than to listen when
my mother began telling me stories about the wonderful times she used to have with her
friends and saying how much I needed a friend. The next thing I knew, she had invited
someone named Janet to come and stay for the summer. I sort of knew Janet. Her parents
had a summer cabin next to our farm, and I saw her when we all went swimming
together. A couple of times she had invited me back to her parent's cabin, which was
lined with flattened beer cartons. Her father worked at the brewery in town and enjoyed a
special status among the men because of his endless supply of beer.
Janet was as foreign to me as a Martian. She was from town, for one thing. Town was only twenty miles away, but I only went there four or five times a year. When I did, I gawked like a tourist at some foreign land. Most of the time, my father drove to town by himself, bought what he thought we needed and came home again.

Town was a place of exotica. Town was a place where once or twice a year they'd show a Walt Disney movie and my mother would decide that we should go. She and my dad would fight about it for days before my two brothers, my little sister and I were finally bathed, dressed in our best clothes, and loaded, four kids and two adults into the front seat of the Dodge pickup, for the long ride to town. When we got there, we ran ahead of them all the way to the movie theatre, which smelled of popcorn and excitement. Then of course, they argued about whether we could have any treats, an argument which my mother eventually won, and finally, hands dripping with ice cream and popcorn, we got to go into inside the theatre. The movie was always an anticlimax after that.

My mother's idea was that not only would Janet and I have "fun" together, we could also get even more work done. She would pay us all some money this summer, she told us, for our usual summer chore of picking raspberries and cherries and selling them to roadside tourists. But this didn't work out so well because Janet, who was fifteen, wasn't remotely interested in working. She had only two interests, boys and smoking, about which I knew nothing. The boys came first but the smoking was important. It was an integral part of her preoccupation with her clothes, her blonde hair, and who she was going to marry.

One afternoon she insisted we cut pictures of our future homes out of old
magazines and paste them in a scrapbook. I probably pasted two pictures before I lost interest and began reading my father's old True Magazines. These were full of stories of hunting and fishing, about which I actually knew something. But Janet filled up the whole scrapbook.

The problem was, there weren't any boys. There was my older brother, who was too shy and out of it to count, and there was the occasional boy from the summer cabins next to our place. Maybe Janet had envisioned hordes of teenagers driving out from town to visit us. But she did what she could to liven things up. Occasionally, when she did find boys, we walked along the highway and smoked. Or we hid at the end of the raspberry rows and smoked. Or we all met in a cave near the beach and smoked.

Janet had this idea that we should fix up the cave as a cozy little place with cushions and a fireplace and God knows what else, so that we could meet more boys and smoke more cigarettes. I was half sick and dizzy all the time from the cigarettes. I agreed to everything.

By now she had actually found a boy, a totally forgettable monosyllabic male person who had some dim connection with my brother. But she had visions of a romantic meeting spot and though it looked like a damp miserable cave to me, I went on nodding and smiling.

In fact, I did whatever Janet did. In no time at all, I was her idiot twin, drooling and tittering in the background. I stretched my lips and giggled. Whoever I had been seemed to have disappeared, without a struggle. Actually, that person was still there, far away, hating Janet and waiting desperately for her to leave. Which I knew she would, eventually. But in the meantime, the only thing that mattered was that Janet must have no
idea of what an ignorant, untowny, nauseated-by-smoking person I really was.

This beach was a place where I had spent most of my time for many years, but the beach as I had known it vanished the second Janet set foot on it. None of the things I knew were of any use any more—how to build a fire from dry grass and wood shavings, or how my brothers and I used to race over the rocks and the long, thin tangles of driftwood logs laid between them. Or how I had once swum all the way to Red Man's Point across the bay, and jumped off a rock twenty feet above the water—none of this counted or mattered. My world had fallen away. While she was there, I had to live in this new world that Janet had brought with her.

Janet went away at the end of the summer and never spoke to me again. The next year I started at the high school in town where she completely ignored me. There I went on pretending I knew what was going on and trying to behave like the other kids. It was the only way to survive. The trick, I soon decided, was to get better at it but that was much easier thought about than done.

My mother said, "Oh, you'll have so much fun, there will be so many new kids for you to get to know."

My mother had never gone to high school. She imagined it as an idyllic place where we would all be girlfriends together, giggling and talking about clothes. She imagined and hoped that her lonely daughter would now be surrounded by friends, would finally be a girl among girls.

What she and I didn't know is that the principal from the elementary school in
town had been using me as a threat for years, telling the kids there that I was smarter than them. It was true; I got my picture in the paper every year for topping the local achievement exams. But my mother always said, “Oh, Mrs. Hare coaches you for those exams.” Since neither my parents nor Mrs. Hare had ever made a fuss over this, to me it didn't seem important.

Our high school was carefully ranked along hierarchies of intelligence and class. I was in 8-A, a class full of girls who were the daughters of the town, the dentist's daughter, the newspaper publisher's daughter, the daughter of the owner of the local sawmill. They had known each other all their lives. They knew how to dress and what to say and what was permissible. They knew the rules. They knew that they were the smart and fashionable girls and that they deserved this. I knew nothing.

I was too tall. I stooped over in a futile effort to look shorter. I was taller than anyone else, especially the boys. I didn't know anything about those girly essentials, hair, makeup, and clothes. I had just gotten new glasses. I wore hand me down clothes from my mother. I wore the wrong shoes. Everything about me was wrong.

There is no worse experience on earth than being alone at noon hour in high school where everyone else is in a clump, a gaggle, where looks and giggles follow you down the hall, and where loneliness is a yellow poisonous fog, a panic in which you are forced to dwell.

At first I hid in the library where I could pretend to be studying and where no one else ever went voluntarily. There were a lot of books in the library, more than I'd ever seen before. I began to pull them down off the shelves almost at random, take them back
to a table, and read. Then I began to take them out. I read books that no one had ever taken out of the library.

I read travel books and books by strange philosophers and novels and stories. I didn’t pay much attention to the writers. As far as I knew, writers were people who had once lived far away, usually in England and were now long dead.

As I cowered in the library, I made another discovery. There was a whole shelf of poetry books that some well-intentioned librarian had bought years before. I began to look at them and then I began to read. Then I took several of them home.

From then on, in all my classes, I sat at the back of the room with a book on my lap. My teachers, either out of charity or incompetence rarely bothered me. Algebra made such little sense to me I might as well have been looking at Egyptian hieroglyphics. Instead, I was reading Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg. In Math and Science, I was deaf to the teacher, thrilling instead with the discovery that words could make such amazing music. Poetry ran into my veins like wine. It resounded in my head like drums and bugles. I went around with “Fern Hill” banging in my head for weeks, thinking I was crazy, thinking I was the only one who had ever felt this way.

The librarian at the front of the room behind the desk never looked at me. The only other kids in the library were boys serving detentions. They blew spitballs and wrote notes to each other.

But even discovering poetry and travel books about places I'd always wondered about didn't make up for the tramp of feet and shrieks of girlish laughter in the hallways that I could hear from beyond the library, where usually, at lunch hour, there was just me
and the librarian. Even going to pee was an ordeal since because all the other girls went
to the bathroom in clumps. Once inside the bathroom, they backcombed each other's hair,
used up endless cans of hairspray, and rolled the waistbands of their skirts so that the
hems were just below their crotches.

It was the miniskirt, puffed hair, blackened raccoon-eyes era. Every night I slept
uneasily on huge spiked rollers trying to get my hair to puff, and every morning, by the
time the groaning orange bus had lumbered through town to the doors of the school, my
hair had fallen again into limp dullness. I hiked up my skirt and braved the washroom,
and then went to the library.

Every day on the long way home on the school bus, from the high school in town,
the big boys in the back yelled and farted and threw left over lunches and hit each other.
Johnny Fajnor, our driver, kept his head down, his eyes on the road, no matter the
craziness going on behind him. For the last five miles, the bus was mercifully empty
except for my brothers and sister and me. We never talked to each other on the bus or at
school. The hierarchy of seating on the bus was rigid and we never challenged it. The
front was for little kids, the middle for older girls and the back for the big boys. Coming
home, we sat as usual, my sister up front, myself in the middle, my brothers at the back.
When we stopped–our house was the last stop–I went in the house, drank several cups of
scalding tea and then I changed my clothes, and went outside, first to the lake, and then
up into the trees on the mountain above the house.

The journey into the trees was a miraculous passage. At the borderline, between
the trees and the pasture, I hesitated, waited, and then tentatively stepped into the silence.
The farther I went into the blanket of trees, the more invisible I became.

Inside was the opposite of school, empty of noise or movement except for the squirrels announcing, call upon call echoing, announcing that I was there, a stranger in the woods. Sometimes the ravens followed me, silent except for the faint hiss of their wings, from treetop to treetop. Some days, I found a place that seemed to be a room inside this castle of endless rooms. There, I sat on the ground like some miraculous fungus and tried not to think. I wasn't doing anything as fancy as meditating which I had never heard of. Sometimes I asked myself what I was doing there but I had no answer. I was doing what I had to, being nothing. Doing nothing, being nothing, barely breathing.

Entering in the forest was entering in another world – a door closed behind me and an infinity of doors opened. The forest was all possibility – room after room of mystery and discovery, but what I wanted most was to be hidden and alone, coming into some other dwelling, with other hidden residents all around me, leaving deer tracks, bird calls, chewed cone remnants at the base of a huge yellow pine, scuff marks by a hole under a stump.

One day I got off the stinking yellow bus and drank my tea and then went through Sawdust Bay and up the hill, over the rocks, down through the mossy ravine, to the place where seepage gathered into a round pond in the forest. The water was black and the poplar trees around it were bright gold. I sat on the ground. A muskrat made a thin line in the water pointing at me. It came out of the water, patted itself dry with its hands, then walked toward me and crawled up on my shoe. It sat there on my shoe and looked around. It was round and brown with gold tints in its fir. It picked up a poplar leaf and stuffed it in its mouth bit by bit, chewing along the edges of the leaf until it was done. I
could feel the thin warmth, the weight of it through my muddy sneaker. I tried not to breathe. Then very leisurely, it fuzzed at its fur and thoughtfully scratched an itch with one foot and waddled back into the water.

Coming home another evening, I stopped beside a porcupine who very nicely let me stroke its quills. I found there was one sandy hump above the lake where the coyote dens was and if I went quietly enough, the coyotes would sit there and watch me go by.

Sitting still, the only time markers were the wind breathing the trees, the little humming in my throat as I breathed.

In winter, I watched the rose-purple light fade to the faintest hint of blue along the edge of the mountains. I would wait until there was just enough light to see my way home and then I would get up, stiff from the cold and half see, half feel my way down the mountain.

Once I was in the yard, I would stand outside, watching through the yellow-lighted window at my distant near family, saying things I couldn’t hear, moving around. Oblivious of me. I would think of the deer and ravens and the squirrels in their dark safety, in their bitterly sweet cold world and finally, I would go inside. No one asked me where I went. I had no idea what my brother and sister did after school. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to know they existed. I only wanted to spend enough time in the silence; I needed to soak in enough to get me through the next day.

The only other bright spot in my life was our Grade Eight homeroom teacher who was young and new and energetic. She was also our English teacher. She was the first
person I had ever met who was interested in writing. She asked us to write stories and I did, a long story that went on and on for pages. Once I got started writing, I couldn't seem to stop. When I brought it to school, my teacher asked me to read it. I read it out loud while the other kids stared at me, rolled their hair on their fingers, looked out the window. Or passed notes to each other.

And then one day, my lovely young English teacher decided to start a drama club. The first meeting was held in a small room, fortunately, at noon, which meant I could go. All the other school activities seemed to happen after school, and since I had no way to get home other than the school bus, I couldn’t go.

The teacher handed out scripts for a play and asked us to read. Finally, something I knew how to do. I found myself cast for a lead part, and club began meeting almost every lunch hour to rehearse. The few other kids who also joined the Drama Club began to talk to me.

I no longer had to hide in the library at noon. I found a new home, even some new friends, and some new poetry. She asked us all to try out for parts in the first a school play, so I did.

My talent for mimicry and pretending finally had an outlet. With huge relief, I disappeared into the characters I played on stage as well into the role of the school drama queen. I still didn't have a clump of sisterly bodies to hide in but I had a role, and that was something.

In Grade Nine we performed Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. I was so excited by the idea of Shakespeare that I went home and memorized the entire play in less than a week. I loved Shakespeare. My mother had bought me a complete set of Shakespeare's
I turned myself into Katherine, the lead character. I became loud and quarrelsome. I fought with everyone at home. One night, I dyed my long hair bright red and that night, I didn't bother to sleep on huge lumpy uncomfortable curlers. The next day, I went to school with bright, red, straight hair hanging down my back. All day, girls with puffy bee-hived sprayed hair snuck up to me and said, “I love your hair,” but they said it with lowered voices, looking around to make sure no one else was listening.

"I love your hair," one girl who I had until then only admired from a distance said wistfully but with some pride, "I wish I could wear my hair like yours but my boyfriend would kill me."

The play was a huge success. After the play was finished, I began secretly, carefully, writing poetry in my diary. I knew it wasn't very good poetry but I published some in our high school newspaper. I went on reading, trying to figure out what I was doing wrong and why my poetry didn't sound like that of Dylan Thomas or Carl Sandburg. One day our English teacher invited a local poet to talk to our class. He was a gentleman farmer, from England who lived on a ranch a few miles from town and raised cattle. I didn't really understand his poetry but to me he was a revelation. He was a writer, and he was alive and he lived in our community. We were invited to ask questions and my hand shot into the air and stayed there. No one else seemed very interested.

But I had learned something. There was poetry. There was the sound of drums and bugles. There was the sound of words marching on their way to accomplish some great thing, to bring new truth and beauty into a plain grey world.
Poetry was many things to me, but it was most like music, a stark music, music made only with words and images, that sang over and over to me again while I skulked, miserable and hunched, down the corridors of the high school.

By now, I was not only reading poetry. In Grade Nine, I discovered philosophy. I had already asked my mother for a copy of the Bible, which she bought me one year for Christmas. I read my way through it and decided, regretfully, that Christianity wasn’t for me. It didn’t make enough sense although it was interesting enough. And I was quite taken with Jesus and much of what he said. But I also discovered Nietzsche, and Thoreau.

I sat in Math class, which was as understandable to me as Arabic, and read Walden Pond. I caught my breath at its magic and stared out the window at the maple trees on the lawn of the school; here was someone, finally, who thought knew about some of the things I knew. I decided on the spot that not only was I going to be a writer but also a philosopher. I read now incessantly – I read on the bus all the way home so I always arrived at the farm dizzy and sick. I read late into the night and over the breakfast table in the morning. Sometimes, on the bus, I would lift my head out of my book and think as hard as I could about the universe. Someday, when I got time and I had read every book, I would figure it all out. It was hard to find philosophy books in the library. None of my teachers asked what I was reading. But the philosophy books I did manage to find filled me with such longing and excitement about a world I might someday belong to, that often I had to stop reading just to breathe and think.

But what I really knew about the outside world was almost nothing. We didn’t have a television and my parents always diligently and dutifully listened to CBC news at
noon and during supper. So what I knew came from the radio and from books. Since most of what I read was nineteenth Century English poetry, novels, and philosophy, my view of life was somewhat skewed.

One day our English teacher said, in the course of some discussion, that she would never take that new drug, what was it called, LSD, because she was sure she would see snakes. She had a phobia about snakes, she said. I had no idea what she was talking about.

On Saturday mornings, CBC radio played, for half an hour, something called rock and roll. My mother was scornful about rock and roll. She said it was nonsense; it wasn't real music. Real music was classical music. She particularly hated Elvis Presley. But she let me listen to this CBC program.

One morning, John Drainie, the host, said he was going to make an exception to his general rule to not play songs longer than three minutes. This was a song, he said, that he thought was going to be important, that was going to change the music scene. And then he played all twelve minutes of Bob Dylan singing "Like a Rolling Stone." It's odd to listen to things that you know are important but you don't know why. It's like listening to echoes of a distant explosion. I listened to the whole song and I knew there was another world that I had to find out about. I began to listen more closely to the news. I began to think there was another world I could belong to besides the farm. I nagged my mother into buying me a guitar, let my hair keep growing, began to wear black and practice folk songs in the privacy of my room. I took a little bit of summer fruit-picking money and ordered a transistor radio from the Sears catalogue. And from then on, I would lie in bed at night and listen to bits and snatches of music, like messages from a far
away and unimaginably distant world.

But high school went on being miserable. I began to win prizes – I entered essay contests, public speaking contests. I won provincial awards for acting. But nothing I did made my classmates like me. Standing out was not the idea. Everything I won only made things worse.

The annual local beauty pageant was coming up. I looked at the rules. They gave each contestant money for clothes. I didn’t hesitate and I didn’t think about it. I needed new clothes to go off to university next fall. I entered the contest. We had a coach, a local woman who was supposed to show us how to dress, how to walk, how to turn. We were supposed to wear flower patterned suits, all the same with hideous pillbox hats. My suit was too small and the hat kept falling off. Every practice, every meeting, became an exercise in humiliation. Then I figured out that the contest was rigged; it wasn’t about talent or looks, it was actually about selling lottery tickets. The girl who sold the most tickets, we were told, would win.

The evening of the contest, the woman who was supposed to do my hair and makeup ignored me. One of the other women took pity on me. I got through the contest and the next day, I sat on the float in the annual parade in my new pink long frilly dress, and waved and waved, sick with nausea at how embarrassing the whole thing was.
In the fall of 1967, I went off to Vancouver for the second time in my life, this time to go to the University of British Columbia. The first time had been when I was eight and had gone, briefly, to stay with my grandmother. All I had been interested in on that visit was getting a good supply of comic books. The city hadn’t made any impression on me then. Now I looked at Vancouver and thought it was ugly – all straight lines and concrete walls. But it was a place I knew I had to try and understand.

I walked around UBC and went to my classes like a child who had found a golden castle in the sky and knew she could never belong. I hid in the library, where at least the books were friendly.

I was an odd and confused mixture of things. I knew I was smart, I could win contests, I could write and I knew that what I wanted most in life was to be a writer, and I knew that none of that really mattered. I wore my new clothes like a disguise, a mini-skirted polka dotted green suit with an emerald green raincoat. But even in disguise, I knew I didn’t, couldn’t ever really, belong at UBC.

And every time the bus went down Fourth Avenue, I stared out the window at the people living there, the people in beads and feather and bright clothes, who spoke a language I wanted desperately to understand. They seemed like bright angel people who had fallen from the sky. They would never speak to someone as ordinary as me. But they were free, I thought, the way I had once been free, in secret, in the woods.

I had also acquired a boyfriend because that seemed to be a necessary part of
growing up and fitting in. Now he and I moved in together and soon after that I got pregnant and then we got married. I went through the pregnancy and marriage, numb, terrified, and in despair.

I finished my first year at the university and turned in my essays. I had dived into philosophy like a starving person and now I sat, staring out the window of our small apartment at the Vancouver rain and reading the existentialists. I read and read. I plowed my way through Sartre and Camus and Simone DeBeauvoir and then I turned to Aldous Huxley and Erich Fromm. Some days when I stopped reading, it was hard to think of any reason to do anything.

Pretending came so easily by now. After all, I had practiced all through high school. Now I pretended as hard as I could be to be married and normal. And on my nineteenth birthday, I gave birth to twin daughters. Immediately after they were born, a starched looking nurse whisked them away to the nursery. I lay in the narrow white hospital bed, with my stomach, that so recent ballooned with babies, now caved in. I curled up on my side, under the bright fluorescent lights, on scratchy white sheets, my brain a puddle of incoherence and finally, I fell asleep. I dreamed I was under a grey sky, on grey sand, beside a grey ocean. I was carrying my new twin daughters in my arms and I was desperately running away. I began to sink into the sand. I realized I had run into quicksand. I held the babies up as high as I could and then, as the sand began to cover my face, I threw my children, hard, at the people who had been following me, from whom I had been so frantically running away, my mother, and my husband. I threw my children to them and then I sank into the sand and died. I woke up almost immediately, gasping for air, panic-stricken.
At some point, when I was a teenager, I decided I would never have children because I was going to be a writer. It seemed obvious to me that having children would not go with that ambition.

Besides, I knew nothing about children. My mother, stuck in the house, was trapped by work and poverty and caring for four children. I was determined not to replicate her life.

A couple of days after the birth, my husband and I brought our daughters home and I put them in the cribs that he had prepared for them. I wrapped them up the way the nurses had showed me and then I stared at them. I was afraid of them. They were mysterious with their gasping gaping mouths, their random hands, blindly seeking, and their eyes that looked everywhere and nowhere, that looked right through my pretensions and into my private heart.

“All right,” I said. “You can have me, all of me.” I meant it.

And the next day I started back to university while a kindly neighbour woman babysat.

A few days later, my mother and my grandmother came to visit. They seemed somewhat bewildered by my desire to keep going to school.

“Your life is over now,” my grandmother said sternly. “You must live for your children.”

But instead I went on being a student, and a mother, and I hoped, eventually a writer. Most of the time, these roles seemed to me to be irreconcilable. Nor was it
possible to give either of them up. Persistence, however difficult, seemed the only option. But such persistence made my life tense, frustrated and fraught with tension. Despite my vow, I was an inattentive and exasperated mother.

I practiced writing in the bits and pieces and cracks and fractures of my life; I learned to live there as well. I read there; books piled beside the bathtub and beside my bed. My husband slept beside me as I read. I took English and history and philosophy and I read and read—poetry and novels—Canadian poetry, Canadian novels. Leonard Cohen has just started publishing and I fell in love with his work. I began, again, writing poetry in secret.

In 1968, UBC was a colourful and amazing place. Protests against the Vietnam war were an almost weekly occurrence. Jerry Rubin showed up to speak and the students took over the Faculty Club. Other students occupied the Dean’s office or overran the Student Union building.

Whenever I went for lunch in the basement of the Old Auditorium, I stared in fascination and secret envy at the people in beads and feathers, in leather and Indian cotton. I tried smoking marijuana and that whole night, I lay awake beside my husband, watching optical miracles of colour and patterns dance across my inner sight.

However, a couple of years into this experience of marriage and parenthood, I realized that the situation with my husband was more than a bad friendship I could somehow slip away from.

Finally I told this very nice and kindly man that I was leaving. I sat up in bed one night and said, "I want a divorce." He had no idea why, and neither did I really. It was an
act of pure desperation – and even I couldn't believe those words were coming out of my mouth when I said them.

He looked at me. He was a teacher, hard working and respectable. The established realities in our marriage were that he was older and I was younger, he had a job and I stayed home, he was sensible and I was an idiot.

I wanted to take back the words mostly because I couldn't figure out who had said them. They just hung there, shimmering and vibrating like some kind of evil spell, like that green globe in the Sleeping Beauty movie, one of those long ago Disney movies. I'd been waiting in some kind of terror for years for that green glowing green globe to show up, hypnotize me, lead me up the stairs to the witch who would finally, gently, put me to sleep.

But now I wasn't going to sleep. I was waking up, into a place where I didn't know what to do next, although the situation clearly called for some action. All of a sudden I was a single parent, going to school and taking care myself and my two daughters.

The kids and I got by on our own for a while but it was hard work. I was hungry and lonely. After a while, various people started to come by to visit, and I smoked a lot of drugs and had sex like everyone else because those two things were at least easily available.

One day I had a great revelation while sitting around being stoned and waiting for it to wear off so that I could figure out what to make for dinner. I was staring out the window of my house and I saw someone walk by dressed as a cowboy, complete with leather jacket, white hat, and toy guns. I got it finally. Everyone was dressed up and
pretending to be someone. That meant there wasn't any truth anywhere, not in human beings, anyway. I just had to pretend better.

By now I was dressing in long skirts and had let my hair grow. I found another husband, who confirmed all my suspicions about people. He was a consummate charming liar, a person who had made up his life and thought that saw no reason why a made-up life couldn't be quite satisfactory, and even more fun than a real one. Mostly, in order to do this, he stayed drunk. Booze made living a pretend life a lot of fun.

But staying drunk made life ugly, mean and confusing as well. Booze could make a kind man cruel, could arm two people with words that cracked and shattered like glass. Booze had levels and layers to it. It kept whispering that there really was truth somewhere, but that I would never find it. Booze made it confusing as well. Some days I lost track of who I was pretending to be. I had decided to try playing the role of wife and mother for all it was worth. I cooked and cleaned. I had two more children, beautiful sons.

A long while later, I was sitting in the dark in a small white house in a hot and ugly city in the Southern United States. One of my small sons was only a year old and the other was two. After a loud and terrible fight with my drunken husband, I had slammed the door behind him and all the glass had fallen out in pieces on the floor. We had no money. The fight had been about him getting fired for being drunk.

But something was changing in me. My children ran and played while solitude wrapped its fragile wily tendrils around me. I sat wrapped in a blanket on the couch and watched the pattern of leaf-shadows on the ceiling. I read more and more books and piled
them in bridges and walls around the couch. In the evening I sat on the porch alone while the children ran through the dusk. At night I sat in a rocking chair, nursing the baby and dreaming.

The South was to me a place utterly foreign and peculiar, where people seemed to mostly go to church, drink a lot of Coke, and hate people of a different colour. In the long hot afternoons, I lay on the bed in the ramshackle white house where there were six of us were living–, me, four children, and my unemployed husband–, I discovered that if I held very still with my eyes closed and remembered every detail, every smell, the colour and texture of each rock, the feel of the sand, the blue silky water, the sough of wind, the damp, fishy green damp smell under the shadow of the cliffs, I could almost get back to the beach. The beach lit up in my head like a searchlight.

I hid some money in the lining of my coat. I made friends with one of the neighbours and because I didn't know her and might never see her again, I didn't mind telling her the truth of what my life had become.

After a while, and after a long, bedraggled grueling bus ride, I was back at the farm, back home, with four kids hanging on to my long skirt. We slept upstairs in my old bedroom for a couple of weeks, and then I slumped reluctantly into the welfare office, surrounded by kids.

Welfare is an interesting system. It's there to catch you if you fall, as long as you have fallen long and hard so you have nothing left, and you must crawl in there suitably bedraggled and skinny and repentant.

When I came into her office, the social worker looked at me with suspicion.

"What did you do with your husband?" she asked, as if he were a piece of luggage
I had misplaced.

I tried to bite down the various flippant answers that rose to mind. I hadn't eaten or slept much for weeks. In fact, friends told me later that I looked like a refugee, from a camp somewhere, skinny, exhausted and dressed in clothes that I had worn to rags over the last couple of weeks. But I was proud of the cheque she finally, begrudgingly handed over. It was at least a version of standing on my own. For the first time, I felt that I owned my life.

I bought a 28-foot trailer from a neighbour with money I borrowed from my parents, and the neighbour brought it down on a flat bed truck and placed it across the yard and around a bend in the driveway from my parent’s house.

The first night after we moved into the trailer, I sat alone in the dark. I'd bought groceries and clothes and shoes for the kids with the welfare cheque. The kids were all asleep in their bunks. I put on some music I'd borrowed from Mom, Tchaikovsky's *Winter Nights*. I curled up alone in the close and holy, music-washed dark. I was home again. I could finally stop pretending. It was 1974. I had been away from home for six years. Now two husbands, and four kids later, I was back, utterly bewildered by it all and totally ashamed of my new status as a welfare mother. I had been the smart one, the one my mother depended on, the one who was going to save her and take her away to New York, to the Metropolitan Opera.

Alan Wilson and I got the highest marks in our graduating class in the Provincial entrance exams. I came first and he came second. He had also dropped out of his first year of university, gone to Europe and now he was back home, working in his father’s business. He had married someone I had known in high school and they also had a child,
Jess, the same age as my youngest son Nat.

My mother soon found her consolation in her grandchildren. They adored her and spent more time at her house than they did in the trailer. She said to me, “Don’t think I’m going to be your baby sitter.”

And she never was. She never had to be. The kids were always at her house anyway. We all went back and forth from the trailer to Mom’s kitchen many times a day. When he was two, Nat used to get out of bed first thing in the morning, pull on a hat and run across the yard, barefooted and bare-bummed, to Grandma's house, where she would feed him hot chocolate and toast fingers with strawberry jam. When I would arrive in search of him, he'd be sitting up in her bed, propped on several pillows, grinning triumphantly at me.

At night, I would sit in the trailer and stare glumly out the window, watching for grizzly bears, UFO's, or my drunken ex-husband who had phoned with threats to come and kidnap the kids and kill me. I sat with the poker on my lap and listened to sad Linda Ronstadt songs, unwilling, unable to lie down and go to sleep. I went back to reading and writing, I started a book of poems, and I started writing a novel and short stories. I had left University a few months short of my BA. Now I wondered desperately if I would ever get back to that impossible golden city and find a way to fit in and prove I belonged.

And then my ex-husband, a man I thought I had safely left behind in the southern US, did show up. During the three years we were together, I was never sure just which of the stories he told me were true. They were many and they changed all the time.

When I had first met him, I was working on my own, with my twin daughters,
who were then three. He was American, handsome with lots of money and a flashy new truck. His stories were fantastic but alluring; he claimed to know everyone, to have fought in South America, to be part of an organized guerilla resistance movement in the US. With him around, I wouldn’t have to worry about money, or how to survive on my own.

We had rented a farm north of my parent’s farm and three months after Geronimo, my first son and third child was born, I got pregnant again with Nat. My husband was drinking a lot and stealing from everyone up and down the lake. He and my father had a fight; they went at each other with pitchforks while my mother screamed and cried. He came home and ordered me to load everything in the truck. We had left in the middle of the night, while I balanced one baby on top of my swollen belly and the girls squeezed in between us.

We had spent the next year in the southern US city where his family lived and then I had fled. Now here he was, with a car full of presents, swearing he had quit drinking, swearing he had straightened out his life. All he wanted, he said, was to visit the boys, to be supportive, to give us money and buy the boys new clothes. I let him drive out of the yard with them and a couple of hours later I knew he wasn’t coming back. I called the police, I called lawyers, and then I borrowed some more money from my father and got on the Greyhound bus for a three-day trip to the southern US city where his mother lived.

I sat on the bus in ancient fur coat that my grandmother had given me. I stared out the window as the land rolled past. My sense of myself as a person with a home, a past, a future, dwindled and disappeared. I didn’t eat or sleep, but sat and stared and waited and
tried to plan for the unknowable.

Staring out the window in the middle of the night, I thought I heard the land beyond the windows speaking. “You’re still at home here,” it said. “You can be home anywhere on the earth. You will be all right anywhere. Your home always goes with you.”

I held on to that.

I made it to the city and phoned and they came to get me, his mother and her husband. They took me to her house where my children and my ex-husband were staying. I gathered the boys in my arms and wept and promised to be a good wife and mother. I pulled out every dramatic trick I had; I begged to be allowed to stay, I had changed my mind, I said. I said I would become a Christian, if that’s what they wanted.

They didn’t believe me. They arranged for members of the family to watch me. They searched my clothes and purse but they didn’t find the wad of money I had stashed in the lining of the fur coat.

Finally, someone made a mistake and left me alone with the boys. I grabbed my coat and purse, put one boy on each hip and ran to the corner where there was a city bus stop. I took the bus downtown to a motel, and then the next morning I took a taxi to the airport and got on the first plane that was leaving town. It flew to Chicago. I got off the plane in Chicago and took a cab to the bus station. I had enough money left to buy a ticket to Butte, Montana. I called my parents collect and they agreed to meet me there. The trip would take two days. I had $10 left for food.

I sat in the roped off section of the bus station that was marked for women and children only and I prayed to whatever powers I could think of that might listen. Tall
black men prowled the walkways and corridors beyond this section. The boys wouldn’t stay put. Finally they fell asleep and then there was a bomb scare and the bus station was evacuated. I tried to pick up both sleeping boys at once and a woman I didn’t know intervened and offered to help.

“Where are you from?” she said, and I made up a name and a story that she didn’t believe. But it didn’t matter. She gave me some money and I thanked her and thought perhaps I could make the money last by just feeding the boys. We made it to Butte, my parents picked me up and we drove back to the farm and I thought perhaps now, my life could finally begin again.

But not quite. I was pregnant again. A month later I left my children with my mother yet again and got on a bus and went to Vancouver. It took a week. First I had to go before a three-man board of doctors and swear that having another child would endanger my mental health. Then I had the abortion. I wanted this child. I wanted all my children. But I had run into a wall I couldn’t get past. I had so little left in me, so little strength, energy and what I had, I wanted for my other children. And so, I let this unknown person go.

I took the bus home. I sat up, wide-awake for the twelve-hour trip. The sun was coming up as we came over the Selkirk Mountains, over the Kootenay Pass, and down into the valley. The sun stained the snowy mountains orange and pink and salmon. The trees were black beside the road. I leaned my head against the cold window. All I wanted was to be home, taking care my children and keeping them safe, but I knew I had to do more than that. I had to somehow, make a new life, both for myself and for them.
Chapter Eight:

The seventies were a colourful, intense and interesting time in the Kootenays. A new movement of strange but determined pioneers had arrived. They came in groups, usually, and they came with dreams although most of them didn't come for long. But they completely changed the small sleepy backwoods communities of the Kootenays by their presence.

There has always been waves of people wandering into the Kootenays, looking around, maybe finding something to exploit, maybe not, and then that wave has always receded, leaving behind a detritus of mine tailings, stumps, dams, or log houses and rusting machinery slowly being swallowed by thimbleberry and alder saplings.

These new people were following a long line of people who had headed into these same hills, looking for some kind of mystical metaphysical freedom and found it, only to find that they too had to live with neighbours who often didn't share their idealism, their ideals, or their approach to the land around them. There were the Quakers in Argenta, the Doukhobours in Castlegar and the Slocan, and the Mormon polygamists in Creston.

Although every place attracted its share of dreamers, the Kootenays has always attracted more than others. People have always perceived it as a place of cheap land, clean water, forests, empty blue valleys. Freedom, these new people told each other over and over, following their vision. Freedom to be anyone, to live how we want. They followed a pattern set by the first white settlers, finding a patch of available land somewhere on the mountainside, cutting down trees, building a house, making a patch of
Now in the early seventies, everyone suddenly seemed to have the same idea. People went back to the land in droves, and one of the main places they came was the Kootenays. They left the cities of both Canada and the United States in Volkswagen vans and old milk trucks and ancient school buses and trucks with painted campers. They came and for a brief while the country was a colourful place. People talked in wonder about chickens, about log houses, about yurts and teepees and solar heated greenhouses. Everyone was reading the new magazines that had sprung to serve this trend—such as the Mother Earth News out of the United States. Dire warnings were repeated at every party about the imminent crash of the outside world, of the economic system, the environment, and the social order that did seem to be collapsing in a great noise of wailing from the media about the nuclear family and hullabaloo about the younger generation going to hell.

But if there is one thing rural living is, it certainly isn't free. Everything costs, either in money or labour or time and it certainly isn't free socially either, as people discovered sometimes to their horror, sometimes to their relief, that their neighbours and in fact the whole community were watching every step they made and commenting gleefully to each other about each new hippie folly.

The new people were often draft dodgers, or deserters. They had visions and ideas and many of them had money with which to buy land, build their houses, and try out their
dreams of community. At one point there were five communal settlements in the Slocan Valley and who knows how many more up and down the roads of this previously secluded place. In theory, it all looked possible, and the one question no one seems to have stopped to ask was how they were going to support their ideas.

There is only one way to make money out of raw land and that's to exploit what it has to offer: trees, water for power, land for growing crops, minerals, fur, fish and meat. The newcomers of the seventies were coming to a land that they perceived as wilderness, but it took a while for them to perceive that it was in fact already under siege from people who wanted something from it, and that something was generally meant to serve the needs of the booming metropolis on the west coast.

The rivers had dams on them – the mountains had been logged once and were being logged again, huge clear cuts and roads spreading up every mountain valley. Although the era of mining and railroads had gone, the era of roads up every valley and along every stream had just begun. People kept finding little patches of soil to grow crops on – but the good soil, what there was of it, had long since turned into orchards or grain fields or hay fields or cattle pasture.

It was a land that looked wild but wasn't. Still people held on to the idea that this was a kind of wild utopia, where you could live out your ideas and be who you wanted to be, even if it was never as easy or mystical as it first appeared.

As new neighbours moved in, many different people came and went at the farm. My father was running a backhoe business and he kept coming home with stories of the strange people he had been asked to work for. That first spring, after the kids and I
arrived at the farm, I had planted an enormous garden to make extra money. I also
decided to supplement the welfare cheque by picking and selling cherries, as I had done
all those years as a kid. I got to meet most of the new neighbours this way. I started
growing vegetables to sell to the neighbours to make a bit of money to supplement
welfare.

One day, an ancient black Ford pickup rattled into the yard. Everyone in the truck
spoke French or German except for one little girl who informed me gravely that it was
her birthday, and that her family needed some vegetables. They came every few days
after that.

My parents did their best to cope with this onslaught of new neighbours. No one
who came to the farm ever left without something, a gift of apples, fresh vegetables, a
bottle of homemade wine.

Patti, my brother’s ex-girlfriend, lived just to the north of us in Marg Arnold’s old
house. She would pull into the yard every morning, on her way to work, usually out of
gas or in some kind of jam.

Patti was tall, with red hair and lots of energy. She couldn’t stay put. She told me
she usually moved every couple of months but she managed to settle down at Marg
Arnold’s old white house on the beach in Twin Bays for a couple of years. She worked as
a waitress in Creston, and drove a succession of ancient cars. When I was with her, and
we pulled up to the gas station, she would call out to the attendant, “Give me a gallon of
gas and a quart of the heaviest oil you got.” She chain-smoked and my father always gave
her hell for it. Her daughter, Tammy, and my two daughters quickly became
inseparable.
“Guess what happened,” she’d start, whenever she showed up. “Just guess what happened now.”

We never could. Her stories were always wonderfully on the edge of unbelievable. One winter morning she got up and in turning around, backed her car over the blackberry bushes and into Twin Bays Creek. Her horse ran away and was hiding on the mountain somewhere. Or her dog had attacked someone’s sheep or chickens again, and she was hiding it from her wrathful neighbours.

Summers in the Kootenays often include a lot of rain. On rainy July days, when the garden was too soggy to weed, the cherry crop splitting and rotting in the rain, the lake too cold for swimming, mosquitoes hiding sullenly under the trees and brush, we would all drift into Mom’s kitchen. Inevitably, Patti’s huge red fish-tailed Pontiac would squeal into the yard, spitting gravel as she swerved to avoid kids, bikes, dogs, cats.

Mom would bring out her latest batch of wine, “to taste,” she said, just a taste, fussing and nervous, saying she really ought to let it age a little longer, but we could have a glass, or maybe two. She made wine from dandelions, or from birch sap that my father tapped in the early spring. She made wine from strawberries and raspberries and cherries and plums. There was always a new vat brewing behind the wood stove.

The kids got to try out the new batch of homemade root beer, bringing the brown bottles up from the dusty basement, where they mixed them with dollops of homemade vanilla ice-cream.

Sometimes other neighbours would arrive, drawn by the idleness the rain created. The talk would be slow at first. Patti usually had a story about the latest man she’d picked
up and moved into the house to do mannish things like chop wood and change light bulbs, and how he had then disappeared into the bar for a week without telling her where he was.

Dad would start to talk and Mom would interrupt and their voices would ramble into familiar rhythms. The dogs always snuck into the house with each new visitor, and Dad would pause to snap, “Mick, get outside,” and Mick would ignore him because he was Mom’s dog. Instead, he’d sneak under the table where she fed him gingersnaps.

The rest of us would all talk at once, stories weaving in and out of the noise, several stories going at once, people joining in or dropping out. The kids would be somewhere, and then someone would notice it had stopped raining and suddenly, there was too much to do again, things to weed, transplant, pick, freeze, can, clean, mend, cook.

The sun usually came out by late afternoon. I’d drift out to the orchard to stare at the soggy trees, and the musty drip-smelling earth, heat lightning grumbling away behind Castle Mountain, and a purple thunder haze hanging sullenly in the crevice above Canyon Creek. I’d go back to work in the garden for a couple of hours and then I’d go down to the lake and wander along the rocks, beside the rain-glazed grey water. As the day faded into the long summer twilight, the mountains looked like a Japanese print, ranged one behind the other in dimming opaque shades of cobalt blue.

Finally, I’d come back home to the trailer, where the kids were watching our tiny black and white TV, their bodies mesmerized and still in front of it, and try to decide what to make for dinner.
I also bought my first car the summer we came home, a grey car called simply The Chevy. Dad had bought it from a neighbour who had a bunch of kids and a sad wife and needed to leave town. He paid $35 for a ‘62 Chevy station wagon, which had a new re-built motor but not much else that worked.

I had been desperate for a car. The farm was twenty miles from town and I couldn’t depend on the neighbours or Mom and Dad to haul around me and four kids. A car was freedom and independence. A car was one more step on the road to being my own person.

So now I had a car. Dad and my brother said reassuring things about the motor—slant six, they said, damn thing will never wear out. But I soon discovered the motor was about the only thing that worked. That, and the headlights. The back seat was gone and the floor under the driver’s seat had a hole in it that was great for cherry pits and peanut shells. It was freezing in the winter; there was no heater and the back window wouldn’t stay up. But with enough pillows and blankets and foamies and dogs, we survived.

One day I drove the Chevy up an almost vertical driveway to visit a woman my Dad had told me about. Some new people to the south of us next to the old Mannarino place were living in a tiny geodesic dome along with a couple of goats, next to two enormous geodesic domes they were building as a future home.

“You should get up there,” my father growled at me one day. “That little woman needs some help. Damn shame to see a woman living like that. She’s got a kid, too.” I asked my kids about her son, and they said, yes, he got on the school bus but they hadn’t
talked to him yet. He was a year older than them.

The woman, Carol, was living in a small, leaky dome beside two almost new, huge domes that her partner was building. But they couldn’t move in, he had ordered, until the new domes were completely finished. No one in the Kootenays in those days finished their house. They got the frame up, or the dome or the logs, or whatever it might be that they were building, and then they moved in. Everyone was living with pink insulation plastic-covered walls, no running water, and wood stoves.

I stayed for tea and we wandered over to look at the new domes. “Why don’t you move?” I said.

“Carl won’t let us,” she said. Carol always wore a scarf over her hair and she hid her beautiful blue eyes behind thick glasses. She looked down at the ground.

“Carl’s having an affair,” she whispered.

“Oh, I knew that,” I said. “Everyone knows. Everyone thinks he’s a total jerk. Carol stared at me. I wished the words back. Now she would think I was the jerk, interfering in her life and spreading gossip.

But instead, she smiled. “I didn’t know what to say or who to ask for help.”

“I’ll help you move,” I added. “Let’s do it this weekend.”

After that, Carol’s son Adrian started getting off the bus at my place and hanging out with the girls, and Carol, Patti and I got into the habit of spending most of our time together. Somehow the kids were easier to manage in a pack and if we pooled our money, our time and our resources, we felt less sorry for ourselves.

When winter came, the water in the trailer always froze. Carol didn't have running
water either. Once a week all winter long, we'd gather our kids along with a few other people’s kids we’d somehow collected for the weekend; we would all bundle up and make the forty mile drive to Ainsworth Hot Springs. It meant we could all get clean when our water was frozen.

The drive always turned into a three-hour marathon because we had to wait for the Kootenay Lake ferry. We loved the ferry ride. The kids ran wild, round and round, in and out the doors while we drank coffee and gossiped with people we didn’t see very often from that end of the lake. The ferry was always littered with lots of other kids, running and screaming; we tried to pretend we didn’t know them while the ferry guys rolled their eyes and disappeared into their own little room.

We always had just enough money to get to the Hot Springs and pay our way in. On the way home, everyone was always starving from the hours in the hot water. We pooled our pennies to buy the kids some soup and French fries at the restaurant by the ferry. Once we thought we had the problem whipped because we brought along Patti’s latest man, a rich boy from town with a white Corvette. God knows how she found him or what he thought of the Chevy. He didn’t say. When we got to the restaurant, he watched us pooling pennies and counting change to buy each kid a bowl of mushroom soup, and then he ordered a double deluxe cheeseburger and fries for himself. None of us said a word. We watched him eat the whole thing. The kids watched each French fry disappear. It was too bad, I thought, that he never got to hear our sarcasm and hoots of laughter at his expense after he got in his Corvette to go home.

The kids and I would probably have gone hungry anywhere else, but we had the farm and my mother. In the summer, food literally dripped off the trees and bushes,
raspberries squishing in the mud at the end of the rows where the irrigation ditches left puddles, the leftover cherries being hollowed out by wasps and ants, the plums and peaches and pears and apples and grapes we hadn’t managed to sell or give away or turn into juice or freeze or can being squabbled over by ravens and robins and wasps. I grew an acre of vegetables every summer as well, and all summer long I carried boxes and buckets of produce to the farmer’s market in town every week and stood in the blazing sun for half a day and came home twenty-five dollars or so richer.

The kids ran into my mother’s kitchen after school for cookies, popcorn, and hot chocolate. They stopped in there on their way to catch the school bus in the morning for treats for their lunches. Every Sunday, Mom made dinner for the whole family; my brother came with his partner, and often my sister and her children, and we all carted home the leftovers.

I gradually got to know most of the new people. There was a sense of fellowship and community among people who were, in a sense, a new wave of pioneers. Most of them had managed to buy land and were involved in building a house, raising children growing gardens and coping with trying to have time for all this, make some money, and still have time to create this new ‘counterculture.’

The counterculture was real and deeply felt; it meant being independent, self-sufficient, and building a life centred around family, community, animals, gardening, and nature. Drugs and alcohol were part of it but they were a means to an end, a way of adding to the sense of freedom. Sharing a joint was a ritual; dropping acid was a path to deeper understanding.
After a while, on Sundays, people would start driving into my yard around noon, unloading food, dogs, and kids. A soccer game or a baseball game would start up; the last dregs of the party would finish sometime around midnight.

When I was not working on the farm or visiting with people, I was reading. I had gone back to my habit of collecting books despite my acute and usually desperate poverty. I’d first read about feminism when I was trapped in the southern US. I saw an ad for a women’s collective who were helping abused women and I’d thought about phoning them but I hadn’t.

Now feminism was in the news; one day I bought a book called, *When God Was a Woman*, by Merlin Stone. I read it all in one afternoon. I woke up from reading and thought, I’ve been lied to. It was like a cold clean wind blowing through my head, blowing out the humiliation and the embarrassment. For the first time, I realized that what had happened to me, the abusive marriage, the children, the fear of university, hadn’t all been my fault. My life was part of a larger pattern. It was an astonishing revelation. I hadn’t just been ignorant and stupid. Although clearly I had made a lot of mistakes, perhaps if I began learning about what had happened to me and why, I could prevent it ever happening again.

I began reading every feminist book I could find, which, in our little rural community, wasn’t many. But there was a new bookstore in Nelson that I could get to occasionally and it had a shelf of books about women.

After I had read a few more of these books – after Merlin Stone there was Robin Morgan and Ms. Magazine and Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, a
book whose revelations and analysis ran like fire through my veins. I woke up from that one needing desperately to talk to someone. It felt like my head was full of ideas, of conversations I had yet to have, of thoughts I needed to share.

Fortunately, I had Carol; she and I talked incessantly. Our lives had run in similar paths, early pregnancy, early marriages that ended badly. Now we were single parent mothers and more than anything else, we wanted a way out, some kind of path out of the welfare trap and into independence. Finally, we decided to form a women’s group. It was something I’d read about. After all, there were a lot of us up and down the lake, single moms on welfare. The countercultural tide that had washed into rural BC on a tide of idealism and was already beginning to recede again, leaving a lot of wrecked relationships and women with small children behind.

We held our first women’s meeting at Yvette’s house. She was one of those people in the black truck who only spoke French. Once I had them sorted out, I found that Fred was Swiss and Yvette was French. They lived high up on the mountainside on the road that wound past the local dump. The house she and Fred had built together rested on posts set on a granite ridge, surrounded by huge cedar and fir. They couldn’t yet afford insulation, so whenever I visited, we had to sit huddled around their woodstove.

Our first meeting was on a soft March day. The road up the hill had turned to deep yellow mush. One by one, our cars slithered and roared and struggled up the driveway. Mud spurted onto my long skirt through the holes in the Chevy’s floor. The kids hung on grimly as we lurched to a stop.

We parked among the boards and stumps in the steep driveway. Then Patti, of course, it was always Patti, managed to gun her way almost up the hill before the Buick
slithered to a halt, slid sideways, and wedged itself against a cedar tree.

We gathered around and stared at the car. Someone suggested we send for help, for a man or two, who could slop around in the mud getting the car out while we drank tea and got on with our meeting. Then someone else pointed out the irony of us needing to be rescued by men while we were at a women’s meeting. We stared at the car some more. We weren’t without resources, we decided. We got a jack and fitted it under the car, then jacked it up, heaved it sideways, did it again, and then again. Just as we got the car back on the road, a man, a neighbour arrived and took over although there was nothing left for him to do. We let him back the car down the hill and park it, while we went inside feeling satisfied with ourselves and drank tea and sat around the stove for the rest of the afternoon until it was time to sort out our own kids from the screaming herd and take them home for supper.

That night, as I made supper in the trailer, with music on the stereo, the woodstove clucking and snapping, the kids gathered around the table, the light over their heads keeping off the darkness from the outside, I began to feel, for the first time in a very long time, safe in my life. I was still terrified that the boys’ father would come after them again; I was conscious that I was probably guilty of kidnapping, a felony in the US, if he bothered to pursue me. I had made up my mind that whatever I had to do, he would never find me and my children; we would hide, we would run, I would do whatever I had to do to keep them safe. I was often an inattentive mother; I woke from reading Lord of the Rings one day to find the kids had piled all the chairs in the trailer around me and I hadn’t noticed. But I was always a grizzly-bear mother, ready to defend my children from any threat, real or perceived.
That was our first women’s meeting but we held many more over the next couple of years. People in the community thought it was a great joke and the men, including my father, made endless nasty references to hen parties and women sitting around gossiping when there was work to be done, but we didn’t care any more. Something had changed. We knew we made them nervous and we didn’t mind a bit. We were serious, or some of us were, even though every week we had another argument about what it was we were actually doing or why or how. But it was important. I was beginning to realize I had a lot to figure out. I began to realize there was a lot that no one had told me.

Carol and Patti and I also did a lot of talking on our own. Patti used to tell us stories of her epic fights with her husband; once he shot up her car with a rifle and that was the last straw; she packed up her daughter, took his truck and left. After that, she kept moving to stay away from him. She told us once she had moved sixteen times in one year.

One night she relented after he phoned and begged to be allowed to see their daughter. This time, he got drunk and took an axe to her car. But it so happened that the night he did this, all our kids were watching out the windows with mystified fascination. Carol and I talked her into calling the police, but they seemed more interested in the damage to the car than any threat to her.

I was hoping the boys’ father, that I had left behind and far away, would drink himself to death and leave us alone permanently. Carol said she was determined to stop falling in love with men who looked interesting but were actually crazy; her last partner
had moved his new girlfriend, then his girlfriend’s brother, then his girlfriend’s mother, into the other half of the geodesic dome he shared with Carol. He said he was founding a new way of life. Carol just thought the whole thing was embarrassing.

Despite our developing sense of feminism, we also all lived in hope that we’d all get smart enough and meet men wonderful enough that we’d be tempted to try having a relationship one more time. But we’d be careful, we told each other. Very careful. We dreamed of nice men, fatherly men, men who would like our kids and want to hang around with them and with us and provide them with toys and double cheeseburgers with fries and all the other things we couldn’t afford. We talked a lot about how we might meet these new kinds of men because there weren’t any around that we knew.

Good fathers were important, we believed. Our kids needed a good father image, good role models, unlike their real fathers. And of course, men were good for other things, they fixed cars and stereos and washing machines. They could build houses. And there was sex, which we hardly ever talked about. But we all thought about it.

The other, partnered-up men in the community were nice to us. Sometimes they helped out but they had enough to cope with. We made them uneasy. I think they thought I was doing fine; I was mostly an amusing spectacle with my Chevy full of kids and dogs and laundry and vegetables. Eventually, I parked the Chevy and with the money I had scrounged from selling vegetables, I bought a Ford truck. The motor burned oil so my Dad found someone to help me rebuild the motor. Every day for weeks, I fiddled around with things called valves and rings. I never had a clue what I was doing. What terrified me was how many parts a motor had and how fragile the whole thing seemed to be. But then I put it all back together again and amazingly, it ran and ran well with a few minor
Once I arrived at my friend Joan’s house with a boiling-over radiator on my wonderful truck. She was married to my childhood buddy, Alan Wilson, our youngest sons were the same age, and they made the best coffee in the country. They were in the process of building their house.

I went inside for help. Alan and three or four other men were drinking coffee and discussing the niceties and particularities of septic tank fields, a topic that all the men in the community seemed to find endlessly engrossing. It was either that or the iniquities of different kinds of chainsaws that formed the bulk of their conversations.

When I explained about the truck, they strode outside and stood around in the hot sun discussing what to do. Joan and I drank coffee and gossiped. When they had things all figured out and fixed, they all tromped back in. I had to listen to a lecture on checking the water level in the radiator and leaky hoses that should be replaced and not merely taped up with duct tape but what the hell. The radiator always leaked. I’d just been too busy that day to put water in it.

Carol and I talked endlessly about what to do with our lives. She wanted a label, she said, any label that would stick, that would give her assurance and social respectability and a job.

Maybe we could go back to school, we thought, but what could we study that would guarantee us a real job and a good living and how could we ever manage school with our kids and all the schools were far away at the coast?

And of course, I still desperately wanted to be a writer, which seemed as unlikely as becoming an astronaut. The social worker who drove out from town once a year just
sighed when she saw the trailer and the kids and the chaos we lived in. She also turned a 
blind eye to the few hundred dollars I made in the summer from the garden. But what 
would happen when the kids were all in school. I’d have to get a job then, she said 
reprovingly. The government wouldn’t pay for me to just sit around and raise my kids. 
But neither would they pay for university. They might, she said; pay for a one-year 
course somewhere as long as it guaranteed me employment at the end.

I didn’t want to sit around on welfare either. I wanted them to pay my way 
through university. I went for employment testing at the local government agency. The 
bored man behind the desk asked me what I did. I described my life, gardening and 
picking fruit.

“Perhaps you could get a job mowing lawns or looking after gardens,” he said. 
But I wanted to give my kids someone, something, to live up to and mowing lawns 
wasn’t in my plans.

I kept working as hard as I could. Every spring I ordered a box of seeds and 
started baby plants under grow lights in my parent’s basement. By the end of February, 
I’d start pruning the apple and peach trees, and by March it would be time to start the 
tomato and pepper seedlings for the garden. About the middle of April, I started planting 
a market garden about a hectare in size. I usually finished planting by the end of May. 
Everything got planted in succession so that as one patch of lettuce or peas or spinach 
finished, another would be ripening. I experimented with all kinds of crops, soybeans, 
peanuts, or Jerusalem artichokes.

Then there were the usual summer chores of picking fruit and getting in the hay. I 
bought a food drier and a freezer plus my mother and I canned fruit together. In my spare
moments, I swam and lay on the beach reading books on women’s issues, or hung out with Carol and Joan and Patti, talking, talking, talking.

Winters were difficult and never got any easier. I chopped wood and tried to keep the house warm and clean and the kids clean and fed and onto the yellow school bus every morning at 8 am. I began to go to meetings, peace meetings, and environmental meetings. Nat still headed off for his grandmother’s every morning after the other kids caught the bus and I had an hour alone.

I tried to start writing a novel. I realized that I had no idea how to write despite the fact that I had been writing poems and journals in secret for years.

I knew the time was coming when I would have to make some decisions about the rest of my life but I kept shoving it away. One warm spring morning, in early May, I put on Dvorak’s *New World* symphony and opened the doors and windows. I shook out the rugs and took the ashes out of the stove and set the houseplants outside and rinsed the dust off them. I vacuumed the whole house, and as I danced with the vacuum and sang with the music, I began to be happy. Daffodils and tulips were blooming at the front of the trailer; the alder and birch were haloed in electric green mist.

It was a fine morning to be alive and to be dancing and singing here in this misty green sunshine. It was enough to be alive as the trees and flowers were alive, demanding nothing, simply alive and radiating joy in it. I danced outside and sang along to the trees. The universe unfolded around me radiant, a huge white flow, unfolding into a stupendous infinity in which I still danced.

After a while I came back to myself sitting on a rock in the sun, with ants crawling up my ankles. I went back in and finished the vacuuming.
The next morning, when I picked up the mail from the green box across the road, there were three things in it, a Sears catalogue, a gardening catalogue, and a university calendar sent by a friend. I looked through them all. The Sears one was full of stuff I couldn’t afford and didn’t really want; the gardening catalogue was full of seeds and ideas for bigger and better gardens. Just looking at it made me tired. The university calendar was from the University of Victoria. They offered a degree in Creative Writing. I didn’t know it was possible to study Creative Writing in University. I had been considering going to college to take a course in forestry or welding, anything with which to get a job. But now all those fine practical ideas went out the window.

I was going to go. I had no money, I had four children, I would never make any money as a writer, I didn’t even know if I could write. I was going to go anyway.

Chapter Nine:

I met someone, a man who my children took to immediately, who fixed my truck, fixed things in the trailer that made his shake his head in horror, like the bare wires of the cord from the TV stuck into a socket. And he wasn’t a stranger; he was one of the beach kids, someone I had known vaguely but never paid any attention to, someone who loved boats and the lake. He was building a house down the road, something I also knew but because he hadn’t come to any of the parties at my house, our paths hadn’t crossed previously.

We met at Joan and Alan’s house; we talked and went for walks and finally, I told him about going back to university.
“That’s a crazy idea,” he said.

“No, I have to go. I have to get off welfare. I have to at least try and be a writer. Otherwise I’ll never know if I can do it.”

Finally, he agreed, very reluctantly, to come with me. He had been dreaming of finishing his house and living on his own land.

Every month I picked up a cheque for $450 from the welfare office in Creston and put $200 of it in the bank. Previously, whenever it was cheque day, I bought two sets of treats, art supplies for the kids and a book and some magazines for me. And I bought food treats that we only had once a month, like oranges and ice cream and chocolate.

Now I only bought the barest necessities and not much of that. Most of our food came from the farm anyway, and now Len made up for the rest, taking the kids to movies and out to dinner. I was astounded and endlessly grateful for the generosity of this warm kind man and my kids deserted me entirely and clung to him.

Finally, one day in late August, we packed up my truck and his car and left the farm for Victoria. The kids stared out the window for a last glimpse of the farm, and their grandma. The two cats and the dog huddled together in the back seat. We settled into a basement apartment in Victoria; I found a part time daycare for Nat, who was just starting kindergarten and finally, I set off for my first creative writing classes at the University of Victoria. I had never been more terrified.

I took my poetry that I had been writing in secret for years and submitted one of my poems to the first poetry class I took. We had been asked to submit them anonymously. The next class, I drove my ancient pick-up through two red lights on my
way to University. The cop who stopped me was laughing. He walked around the truck. “You’ve got bald tires and no brake lights,” he said.

“I’m going to school,” I said. “I can’t be late. It’s my first class. We are talking about my poem this morning.”

He shook his head. “Well, I’ll let you off with a warning, this time.”

When I got to school, I got a cup of coffee and a donut. I had been writing for years in fifteen-minute segments in the local bakery while my laundry went round and round in the dryers next door. When I got to class, the professor shuffled papers around until we got started. Finally, he held up a poem that I recognized as my own.

He sighed deeply. “This is just a really bad T.S. Eliot imitation,” he said. My breath stuck in my chest. The other people chimed in with their criticisms but I couldn’t hear anything. There was a roaring in my ears, a red mist in front of my eyes. What did he mean?

Eventually, the red mist began to clear and I began to listen. He was going over my terrible poem line by line, pointing out its strengths, pointing out its weaknesses. I looked at my own copy. He was right. There was a way of thinking here, a language that I didn’t understand but I could learn. I would learn it, I thought. Somehow I would figure it out.

When I went home, I picked up my youngest son from his new daycare. I carried him down the block to our new basement apartment. The sun was shining and anything was possible. And finally, I was going to learn how to be a writer.

My two years at UVic were extraordinarily happy. The kids ended up loving Victoria, after they discovered the swimming pool, the library, and the mall.
And I loved UVic despite their (then) philosophy that if you were tough enough to survive their program, you were tough enough to become a Canadian writer. They also told their mostly female students not to write that ‘women’s stuff,’ that touchy-feely stuff, that “confessional” writing, as it was then termed. It was 1979. UVic had just started a Women’s Studies program. I took Women’s Studies and Creative Writing and ran happily through the halls of UVic on my way to my wonderful classes.

After two years, I had a degree in Creative Writing and a sheaf of poems and stories. Len and I loaded up our ancient white van and drove back up the mountain passes to the Kootenays. We had spent two years in the city dreaming of going home. We were still committed to the idea of land, of homesteading, independence and self-sufficiency. My friend and classmate, Julian Ross, who wanted to start a publishing company, offered to publish my first book of poems. His company, he said, would be called Polestar Books.

We arrived at the house-site on a late evening with everything we owned packed into the ancient white van that I had steered all the way from Victoria; driving the van was like driving a boat in heavy seas, turning the steering wheel almost all the way around before the tires responded.

The house, which Len had been working on for a couple of years before we moved away, had a floor, four walls, and a roof. That was it. We unpacked what we could in the dark, put up our new tent bought cheaply the day before in Vancouver. We unrolled sleeping bags and blankets, let the cats and the dog out of the van, and went to bed. In the sunny morning, the kids flitted like bright birds around the flat clearing below
the house, while I made breakfast over the fire, and tried to figure out where we were going to put everything. There was a small travel trailer parked in the clearing; Len had used it to store his tools. It was musty and full of spiders and mildew but would do for storage— for now. The boys would sleep with us in the tent.

The sun shone hot while I set up a camp of sorts, banged nails into the trees, stacked some bricks and boards for shelves. Alan and Joan came and we sat on logs, around the fire, drinking smoky tea. Yes, we said, we were glad to be home, out of the city back in the woods, back in our home community. The kids weren’t so sure. They’d gotten used to the swimming pool, the library, and the movies. They loved going to the mall, or London Drugs for snacks after a movie. They loved our carpeted apartment, the corner store, the streets down which they could ride bikes and skateboards. Only Len and I had hated it. Or so we thought.

I knelt on the ground with my face in the smoke and cooked and in the morning, I shook out our sleeping bags and tried to be glad I was home, to love our new place, which was only five miles from the farm and my parents. Len’s sister and brother-in-law were our nearest neighbours, we knew everyone; we knew every inch of the place. I was home, I told myself, so why was I so restless?

Every day I went for a walk with the dogs, and looked around. However familiar it was, it was still a new place, a new mountainside, and new trails on which to walk. And slowly the reality of what we were doing began to sink in. We had no jobs and only a bit of money that disappeared like magic in one visit to the building supply store. Len could always make money surveying, but jobs for women in our small town were specific.

Women were still, in that small logging and farming-based town, even in the early
eighties, confined to being secretaries or cooks or nurses or teachers. We were almost immediately trapped into the eternal dilemma of homesteading, or of people who wanted to be homesteaders, now or in the past. Homesteading, house building, acquiring tools and animals, even planting a garden—all of them take immense amounts of time and some amount of money. However cheaply we tried to do it, the house was going to cost money as well. And however basically we tried to live, we had four growing, eating, demanding children who wanted more than anything else to live in a real house with normal parents. So we camped outside and the kids got up in the morning, got dressed out of packs and struggled down the hill to catch the school bus. It was April but relatively warm and we could take showers and baths at my parent’s house.

Then two things happened—one day in early May, we watched a towering white wall of dust moving north up the valley. Mt. St. Helens had blown up the day before and the dust had taken a day to reach us. The dust left a sticky inch-thick layer of grit over everything and then it began to rain.

We moved into the house that evening. Len ran a line from the power pole and hooked up an electric heater. I hung a blanket over the table and we sat around it shivering in our coats with blankets and sleeping bags over our shoulders. That night we slept on the gritty sawdust laden plywood floor and began our new life in this house.

Our land was mountainside, unsuitable for farming or gardening or anything other than growing trees or brush, but with four young children, we needed a yard and a garden. My father came with his backhoe and Len had an ancient Cat and for a week, they felled trees, pulled stumps, and went back and forth on their machines, tearing up the
I was thrilled and excited about this—we needed a garden and even though I recognized that we had moved into someone else's habitat, I figured our small piece of land wasn't too intrusive. After all, the bears and coyotes and deer and elk had the rest of the mountainside above us, what wasn't logged or burnt over. I worked beside the machines all one day, piling branches against the stumps so we could have a good big fire when everything dried out, picking rocks and sticks and clods of brush out of the gray mountain soil.

But the noise of the machines bothered me. The Cat made a high-pitched squeal that sound like a child crying far away. It kept surprising me, I'd be working away and then I'd hear this baby crying and I'd look up but it was just the machines, snorting and puffing away and belching blue smoke into the air. After a while, I went in the house but I could still hear it, over and above the machine noise, even through the thick log walls of our house. I was relieved when the machines quit and I could get down to what I knew best, planting, weeding, mulching, and harvesting.

After we first moved in, bears and coyotes used to come by to see what we were doing to the neighbourhood, but they soon found out we weren't such good neighbours—too many dogs and too much noise and smoke—and stayed away.

But the ospreys came—there were at least four osprey nests close to the house because below the mountainside on which our place was perched was about 3000 acres of swamp—a diked-off wildlife reserve at the south end of Kootenay Lake. Whenever we went for a walk on the mountain or to the neighbouring farm, the ospreys followed us, winging in lazy circles over our heads unless one of us pointed a camera or binoculars at
them, and then they’d somehow disappear straight up into thin air until they were only tiny black specks in the high atmosphere. As soon as the camera or binoculars disappeared, they’d return, playing and sliding back and forth on invisible wind currents. They didn’t mind us. All they needed was fish and wind and a tall tree in which to put a nest. I often thought, however anthropomorphically, that they must feel sorry for us, so earth bound and slow.

We had every right, we thought as well, to tear up the ground and the trees and make a garden. We played at being pioneers, doing everything by hand, living with an outhouse, no running water, scrounging food from my parent's farm, and growing bits of our own. Farming was what I knew and what I wanted– although I realized early on that this mountain clearing would never be a farm– but it could be a home.

Eventually, we made a place for ourselves and our children that we loved dearly – a kind of fortress refuge place, a log house perched on the edge of a cliff, with a lawn and fruit trees and garden in a kind of hollow behind it, and then the mountain rising sharply, just past the edge of the lawn, where skinny fir trees leaned over our driveway. Our neighbours were far enough away that we couldn’t hear them. Even the noise from the highway below was distant and muffled. The main noises were birds, ducks, swans and geese in the swamp, and at night, the wind in the tall firs. Our driveway was actually the remains of the old tote road, which still ran along the mountainside for about five miles.

The dilapidated but still intact log cabin on our nearest neighbour's piece of land had belonged to Alan’s grandfather. The land we lived on was originally part of his land grant, about 800 acres of mountainside and swamp. The highway below us had once been a railway bed. Vestiges of recent history were all around us. The trees on our land had
grown up past the tall still-standing stumps left by the first loggers.

But there were very little signs of the life that aboriginal people had once lived in this area. Along the shores of Kootenay Lake, on flat granite rock faces, are drawings made with red ochre. There was one by the beach where I had grown up. It was on Redman’s Point– a pictograph of a red man with a halo around his head that looked like sunrays. Just past the point, under a shelf of overhanging rocks was another set of faded pictographs.

Little is known about pictographs, which are hidden on rock faces and boulders all up and down both sides of the lakes throughout the Kootenays. I once asked a Ktunaxa elder about them and he laughed gently and said maybe they were places people went to have visions or dreams or maybe they were just good places to hang out and catch fish.

One of the legends about Kootenay Lake is that the native people never lived there – they went there to fish, to hunt, to catch sturgeon, but they didn't live there because the energy was too strong. The same legend floats around about other places – about Nelson, or New Denver – to explain why the Sinixt people who once lived there left and went south.

My first poetry book came out. Julian made good on his promise. He organized a book launch and a party in Victoria and my friend Joan came with me. We drove back down out of the hills, and across the ferry to Victoria. People congratulated both me and Julian. For the first time in my life, I felt the possibility of writing as an actual career, not just a dream. But I was also terrified of the book, of the label writer, of the judgment of
real writers who I was sure were somewhere out there in the world, laughing at my
efforts. And then we got back in our tiny red Ford Cortina that coughed as it trundled its
way back up the five mountain passes between the coast and the Kootenays. We came
over the Blueberry Polson pass in a blinding snowstorm late at night but finally, we made
it home and I went back to being a mother, a housewife, a gardener and a farmer.

As always, the mountains called me out every day to walk. I had always been a
walker, ever since I started running away when I was three in Riondel. There is a
powerful pleasure in walking through country that is always familiar and always new. All
my life, when I came home from school, after tea with my mother, I would go first to the
lake. There was always a moment, every day, when I came out of the trees and onto the
lakeshore, the sun bouncing off the water and rocks, hitting my eyes, waking me up. If I
couldn’t walk, I couldn’t breathe.

Near our place, there was a little bump on the side of the mountain above the
highway called Mt. Pedro. From there, I could look north, could see the farm squatted
below the spine of mountain that ended in Red Man's Point, could see west over the river
channel below, into the swamp past the fringe of brittle cottonwoods where there was a
golden eagle’s nest I could never find, though I was pretty sure I knew about where it
ought to be.

A lot of animals came up to the bald and mossy top of Mt. Pedro. Perhaps they
liked the view. There was nothing else to tempt them up there. But in winter, there was
always a line of deer tracks and coyote tracks coming up through the long slope of moss
on the north side. Mt. Pedro wasn’t actually on our land and at one point, it was bought by someone who noised it about in the community that he was going to use it for vision quests or some such thing. When I went up there after we moved back from University, there was a round circle of rocks in the middle of the one grassy flat place.

Now, my brother and I had gone to great effort when we were younger to make sure that every loose rock we could find had been rolled off the top of Mt. Pedro. In fact, at one point we’d even brought crowbars with us to make doubly sure. One side of the mountain was sheer cliff, with a gully at the bottom that caught the rocks before they hit the road. Our ambition was to somehow roll a rock big enough so it would go through the gully and hit the road but we never did.

It took me most of the afternoon to roll those rocks off the cliff and into the gully and some of them were huge. I was amazed that whoever it was had managed to get them up the hill and onto the top of Mt. Pedro. But I doubted he would try it again.

I went there almost every day. After we had stared around for a while, the dogs and I would pick our way down the northern side of rocks, through the thick grey-green moss that layered its slick granite, down through the cedars, across the highway and into the swamp as the south end of the lake.

The swamp was a place of never-ending exploration for the dogs and me; the clay bank by the river was full of holes where the beavers denned; the willow thickets sheltered herds of whitetail deer. We would wander past the Rat Slough full of rattling cattails, across Boulder Creek, through the slim new forest of alder and cottonwood that had grown up since the lake levels were changed by the building of the Libby Dam. And then out onto the long finger of sand and mud that stretched out from the mouth of the
river into the lake itself. There was always a wind blowing and the lake stretched away like an ocean.

Once, when I was small and we were all out looking for the cows, my father brought us to this riverbank in the boat. He landed us on this sandy bank and handed us poles.

“Don’t stand in one place,” he said, “or you’ll sink.”

It was true, if I stood in one place long enough, water would seep through the thin skin of dried mud and I would begin to sink. I could make vast sinkholes of mud in the sandbar just by moving my feet every few minutes. When I jumped up and down, the whole sandbar shook like jelly.

I would always make it home from these expeditions by the time the kids got off the school bus, and then after they had exploded into the house in a welter of lunch kits and jackets, after the TV and the stereo had both gone on, and they eaten whatever snacks and food I had set out for them, I would go outside to work in the garden until it was time to make dinner.

For as much as I loved the house, the land, the garden, our fortress oasis, I was restless and I couldn’t make the restlessness go away. Words and stories and poems came and just as quickly, went. Sometimes I wrote in the mornings after the kids left, but the house was such chaos, spilled milk and cereal dripping off the counters, at least two loads of laundry to be done every day and hung out to dry, dishes piled in stacks on the still unfinished counters, beds to be made, flies and dust and sawdust and piles of paper to be gotten rid of, the woodstove to be filled, wood to be split and carried in, that I could only steal an hour or so before my conscience got the better of me. And outside there were the
chickens, the garden, the lawn, and the flowerbeds. My mother phoned every day to see if
I wanted to come for coffee. She was lonely but my mother had always been lonely.

Sometimes I wrote at night, or I wrote in the bathtub. I put things in the mail,
poems, and stories and sometimes they got published. Whenever I went to town for
groceries, I always went to the bakery. There was something about the irresistible
combination of coffee and sugar and the hum of conversation that would let me write.
But I could only steal half an hour away—there was always much to be done, and usually
some kids needing to be picked up from somewhere.

There is also something deadly and disheartening about sitting in a bakery in the
middle of a grey afternoon, with country music coming through the scratchy distant
speakers, with trucks grumbling by on the pavement, still dusty with leftover grit and salt
from winter, with the usual tables full of retired elderly men who met there every
afternoon, or mothers with small fussing children stuffing their mouths with sugar, or
occasionally, people like me, sitting alone and staring out the window. But I was always
the only one with a notebook, or even a book.

I watched the trucks and the tourists race by, on their way to somewhere else.
There was always somewhere else. There was still so much I didn’t know. I didn’t know
about the world, or about how to be a writer, or about how to be a part of something.

On every trip to town, I went to the library. I kept a list of books on order at the
library. The librarian usually disappeared into her office when I showed up, leaving a
volunteer to deal with my endless requests. Fortunately, one of the library volunteers was
my former high school English teacher who sympathized with my need for books. The
nearest bookstore was two hours away, and whenever I got a chance, I went there and
bought books and magazines I couldn’t afford. Books piled up beside the bed, spilled over onto the floor, climbed up the walls, threatened to become compost on the floor. I read and read into the night, while my husband slept beside me.

I read in the morning while I got the kids off to school and I read in the bathtub or in the car when I was waiting for someone to get out of soccer practice and I read while I was waiting anywhere for anything.

There were no jobs in the town. Occasionally I got a few part-time jobs but they never lasted. A job came up at one of the local papers and I sent in my resume. The editor called me to come and see her.

I went in her office and sat down.

“You know we can’t hire you,” she said. “I think you understand why.”

No, I didn’t actually. I was the only person I knew in the area with an actual degree in writing and journalism. Was that what she meant? I stared at her. She wouldn’t meet my eyes. I left, knowing there was nothing to be said.

The other newspaper in town was dying. I worked there for a while. I threw out all the whiskey bottles stashed in various drawers and stayed up all night writing the entire paper on the ancient phototypesetter that spit out long strips of paper that were then waxed and laid on the layout sheets. Eventually I added up the revenue from the few ads that were still coming in and the cost of actually printing the paper. They were far apart in the wrong direction.

A new woman had come to town. She was working for the other newspaper. She called me one day to ask if I wanted to help her organize a women’s conference. “We’ll make it about women and writers, like that women and words conference they had at the
“How do we do that?”

“The government will give us money,” she said. I was amazed. I couldn’t imagine the government doing such a thing.

The new woman didn’t stay long. She was far too smart and far too ambitious. She went off and got a job at the *Vancouver Sun*. She left me with an unfinished grant application and a desperate desire to be part of a women writer’s community.

I drove to Cranbrook to the women’s centre to see if any of this fantastic idea was even possible.

I spent the afternoon there and came home with an application asking the government to send me $10,000 to organize a conference on women and words, part of which would pay me to do such a thing. Apparently I had to have something called a board so I asked various friends if they would call themselves board members. Since I assured them it wouldn’t be any work, they all agreed.

I had no idea how to organize a conference but I figured it out one step at a time. I booked all the rooms in a motel in downtown Creston, organized speakers, made a budget, hired caterers, advertised the thing and waited with some terror to see if anyone would show up. Women did–they came from all over the Kootenays. They came to the workshops, applauded the speakers, thronged to the dinner, ate the lunch, and went home again. I spent the whole weekend in a daze, appalled and delighted at what I had done.

When the conference was done, I fled with relief back to the mountainside, to our unfinished log house and back to walking, brooding, reading, and trying to bring order
into the chaos of six people living in a small unfinished log house with no running water. But the idea had caught on. A group of women wanted to do the whole thing all over again in Nelson. I began going there two or three times a week, a long two-hour drive there and back. Usually I caught the last ferry home and usually I was the only car on the last ferry, driving the thirty miles home through untracked snow, crawling along, following my own lights through the blackness up the hill to the warmth and silence of home.

I had a computer by now. And we finally had running water. The fall before we had hand dug our way through a quarter mile of rotten granite and dirt, laid the black plastic pipe in the trench, covered it with sawdust and filled it in. It was a miracle—no more heating water on the stove in the mornings so the kids could wash their hair, no more hauling water in plastic buckets, no more trips to the outhouse in the middle of the freezing night.

The second conference went well. I read some poetry. After I finished reading, the audience all stood up and applauded. I fled the stage, the applause, the attention. I ended the evening wandering through the empty rooms of the college where we had organized the conference, struggling in a drunken daze to remember how to lock everything up, going to my room and doubling over with anguish and nausea and fear. Who had those people been applauding? One of the women at the conference was a well-known writer—she had congratulated me on my poetry, she had held my hand and looked into my eyes and said, “Send me some work. I’d like to read it.”

When I went home this time, I tried to go back to walking and doing laundry and
making dinner but a new person was looking out of my eyes. A new person lay in bed every night, reading, turning over, restless, sometimes getting up to go downstairs and read by the fire.

Even when I went walking, shadows followed me. I tried to out-walk them but they ran ahead of me. Some days the discontent lifted and I could breathe.

I went back to what I had done in high school, wandering through the woods looking for silence, trying to connect to the other inhabitants of the mountain we lived on. I had been practicing walking up to animals for most of my life, cows and horses and then wild animals, porcupines, skunks and wasps.

I had first discovered this ability from the hours spent in the orchard picking fruit. When the cherries or plums got over-ripe, every insect in the neighbourhood smelled the call to food and when my father insisted we pick the stuff, we shared the tree with wasps, hornets, fat bumblebees, ants and many other types of flying crawling creatures. Under these conditions, each piece of fruit became a negotiation; if I went slowly, asked by moving my hand for permission, the wasps and hornets would amiably move over and give me room. It was a tense process; I hated getting stung. I swelled up for weeks, my stung arm or hand turned bright red and fiery with itch. But after a while, I got blasé about hornets and wasps. I used to sit still and let them crawl on my arms and hands, or put my head down on the table and watch them eat pieces of fruit, chewing methodically from side to side with their strong tiny jaws.

When my husband and I began building our log house, it was a dry hot summer. There were yellow jacket nests everywhere; the kids got caught once crawling through
the brush below the house and my youngest son came home with dozens of stings.

When I went for a walk, I listened carefully for the angry buzz that would let me know there was a nest. There was pile of lumber near the house that needed to be moved, and as soon as I went close to it, I saw one or two black hornets flying lazy circles in the summer sun. Soon I located the nest, hanging underneath the edge of a board, a paper castle, a domed retreat of shadow and myriad hidden passages. As I went closer, a few more hornets came out and flew in circles around me, a couple landed on my clothes and crawled up hands and arms, smelling and testing this intruder. When I stepped back, they left. Their language was a precise etymology of space and distance. I began visiting the nest on a regular basis that summer, and on each visit, they allowed me to get a bit closer. I would sit on the ground, a couple of feet from the next, as they went out their private hornet lives. When fall came, I didn’t go back for a while, and when I did, the nest was a dry rattling empty husk.

I began to realize that in building our house and clearing trees, we had profoundly affected the neighbourhood. Every fall, the abandoned orchard next door on the Mannarino place attracted bears—they had been coming there since my parents abandoned the place; now my children got off the school bus every day and walked up the long hill past the orchard. One day they began telling about the twin bear cubs that met them every day after school. They said the cubs seemed to want to play.

The next day, I called the dogs and wandered down the long hill, under the yellowing alders and maples, past the orchard. The dogs took off, barking, and the mother bear streaked across the road in front of me. She paced beside me, just inside the trees, chopping her jaws, so I called the dogs back, grabbed them by their collars, and went on
down the hill, assuming she would leave.

But when the kids piled down off the bus and we started up the hill, she was still there, pacing back and forth across the road. Since a gaggle of kids, two dogs, and a grown human are a lot for an angry black bear to withstand; I knew something else was up. I sent the kids and the dogs back down the hill and looked around until I spotted the two small bundles of black fur high up in an enormous fir tree that leaned out over the road.

“Get your babies,” I called to her, with no faith that she understood the words, but, knowing she would understand a language of distance, I retreated slowly down the hill, still talking, and when I was far enough away, she went to the fir tree and bawled to the babies, who skidded down the tree as fast as they could go. Then her family disappeared into the trees and my family and I went home as well. We never saw her again.

Animals floated in and through our lives all the time. Dogs, cats, horses, chickens, came and stayed.

The chickens, in particular, created their own strange ecosystem. We got a few bantie chickens and stuck them into their newly prepared chicken house, from which they promptly escaped. One by one, that spring, they disappeared and I assumed that a skunk or a weasel or a coyote had done away with them, and then one by one, they reappeared, followed by a dozen or so adorably fluffy and cute baby chicks. A bantie mother is a formidably dedicated creature with a lot of enemies. The hawks and owls and eagles from the swamp circled our small yard; ravens sat in the fir trees above the driveway and
yelled messages to each other about the free food. While the chicks were small, the mothers kept them under brush and under cover. The dogs and I kept watch during the day, and at night I herded those chicks and mothers I could find into the chicken shed and locked them up. But as the chicks grew, the mothers became more determined to teach them how to roost properly, as bantie chicken should, in a tree.

Nightly the owls came and nightly chickens disappeared but bantie mothers are both persistent and prolific. And I was determined. I strung twine and nets over the bushes; grimly every night I tried to herd them back into their safe warm chicken shed. Despite the nightly owl raids, new bantie mothers kept appearing from under boards and bushes with new hoards of baby chicks. I came out of the house one afternoon and looked into the trees. Our silent yard was ringed by hawks, sitting in the tops of trees. The chickens were all squatting under cover. As I stood in the middle of the yard, a small hawk, obviously overwrought by the situation, launched itself at my head. It pulled up at the last minute when it realized I wasn’t a chicken but its wings grazed my cheek. It sounded like a small jet as it went by.

I borrowed a 22 rifle from my father but I felt ridiculous, sitting out there guarding my chickens. In fact, I couldn’t really decide whose side I was on, the hawks or the chickens. I had created an ecological nightmare and it was just going to have to play itself out. Which it did, slowly. After a while, the chicken population dwindled to a few discouraged individuals that I managed to keep penned in the shed. The hawks and owls went away. I took the rifle back. I realized I didn’t have the heart to make a real farm here in the woods. I was squatting here in someone else’s home.
I had started another novel and it crawled on. Outside, the world was full of ferment. I read more magazines, more books. I began to go to meetings, peace meetings, and environmental meetings. Every day I looked at the beauty of the world I walked through–then I read images of terror and pain. Nuclear weapons, ecological devastation, women marching on Ottawa, meetings and letters and dead animals and visions of mushroom clouds. One night, I found my son hiding under his bed.

“Why are you sleeping under there?”

“In case of the bomb,” he said.

I promised him—it was all I could do—that I wouldn’t let the bombs fall.

From our house perched on the cliff, looking out of the trees and the swamp, I could look out over the blue Selkirk Mountains and imagine a world where people were busy changing things. I kept going to meetings, lots of meetings. There had been a group in the town that I used to go to when the kids and I were on our own, the Survival Group it was called. It had several teachers in it that used to be my high school teachers and other people I had gone to school with as well as my friend Carol and me. It was my first experience of belonging to a political organization and it was the first time I found out that if you volunteered for something, you could end up pretty fast being in charge of it.

At that time, BC Hydro had a plan to build a diversionary canal between the Kootenay River and the Columbia River where they flow down out of the Rocky Mountains within a mile of each other. On paper in Vancouver, the plan probably made sense. It would have sent a lot more water flowing through the dams on the Columbia
River, both in Canada and the US, and that would, of course generate more power. It made financial sense as well, as long as no one took into account the flooding of a hundred miles of productive wetland that fills the valley bottom from Canal Flats to Golden. Or what would happen to Kootenay Lake if it suddenly lost eighty percent of its water flow. We began to write letters and hold meetings, driving hundreds of miles in winter to meetings in Invermere or Cranbrook.

One summer we organized a meeting in our tiny local community of Boswell, in the ancient Quonset hut that served as the community hall. All the locals, young or old, came and made speeches. Even my father made a speech. And for no particular reason that we ever figured out, soon after that the project was cancelled. But I always liked to think it had something to do with people like our neighbour, seventy year old, white haired Charlie Wilson, Alan’s dad, standing and declaring, “Well, I’ll lay down in front of them bulldozers myself if I have to stop this thing.”

Now I looked at the fear in my son’s eyes and I kept on reading and writing and talking to my friends. The more I thought about, the more absurd nuclear weapons became. I read Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth*. I signed up for peace newsletters and the more I read, the more it seemed obvious that if enough people simply pointed out how ridiculous the whole notion of nuclear war is, well, of course the government, which after all, was democratically elected, would listen, and then would change.

In 1985, there was a series of women’s peace conferences leading up to an international conference in Nairobi organized by the United Nations. It seemed pretty impossible, given the tiny amounts of money Len and I were living on, but I decided to go to the women’s conference in Halifax. I had no money at all for such a thing but in
those days, nothing much fazed me. I still had a lot of faith that if I wanted to do
something badly enough, it was probably possible.

I got bits of money here and there, and my friend Carol, now working as a dental
hygienist, always faithful and loving, chipped in with enough to buy the $800 round trip
ticket to Halifax. Len drove me to the airport and I walked away from my kids and my
family and my house and flew away. I somehow made it through the airport in Toronto
and got on the right plane to Halifax and got off the plane and there was a sign saying
 Halifax Women’s Peace conference, which was great because I hadn’t realized the
Halifax airport was twenty miles out in the woods and I had no idea where the conference
was.

When we went to get into the van, the other women there introduced themselves
and one who was blond and whose name I had heard on CBC radio looked at my ancient
backpack into which I had crammed my few good clothes and said, “Oh, going
camping?”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. I might as well have had hayseeds in my hair.
The other women were from Toronto and had smart luggage and great haircuts and
beautiful suits.

When we got to the university, we were shown to our rooms and then I unpacked
and stood by the window for a while and wondered what I was doing so far from the
woods and so far from home.

I thought of hiding in my room for the whole four days but then I got hungry and
went to find the cafeteria. It was full of women. I hesitated in the doorway, then
wandered towards the food table. As I was standing in line, the woman ahead of me asked my name and where I was from. She was from Denman Island. She had read a piece I had written in some peace newsletter. When we sat down with our loaded plates, I was soon introduced to a whole group of women. Perhaps I wouldn’t have to hide in my room after all.

At some point in the conference, I found myself sitting with a group of women who had volunteered to write the statement from the conference that would be presented to the United Nations. We argued for about three hours and then after everyone had gone to bed, I found a typewriter somewhere and wrote what I thought everyone had been saying and left copies of it for the group to read.

When I staggered into breakfast the next morning, everyone stood up and cheered. That afternoon, I stood and read the statement to the assembled group of five hundred women from around the world. The next morning, very early, I got back on a plane and flew home again, wondering just where I had been and what had been accomplished.

I went back to what I had been doing; writing in bits and pieces of my life. I planted the garden and went for coffee and long walks with my mother and waited every day for the kids to come home from school.

There was a herd of elk living that winter on the other side of the river. Occasionally I could see them from the house, brown shadows moving slowly along the bank or disappearing into the wall of cottonwood and willow. One day, I went down there to have a look. I went across the old railroad trestle and down the embankment to the sand. I had left the dogs at home.
The wind was blowing hard down the river and the elk couldn’t smell me although they could see me coming. They watched me all the way down the bank until I was only a hundred feet from them. They trotted back and forth, sniffing the air and snorting at it, while I stood. I stood still and stared out at the river.

When they went back to grazing, I moved each foot, one at a time, as slowly as I could, until I was about ten feet from them. By now they had decided I was probably nothing more interesting than a slow moving tree and went back to grazing on the dry yellow grass that grew out of the sandy mud, but they still weren’t sure. They kept putting their heads up to look at me, moving closer and away, trying to get a definite scent a sense of who or what I was. We danced slowly together, moving side by side. I stared at their delicate noses, their flickering ears, their round bright eyes. I was near them but not of them. I was also slightly terrified. I was conscious that they had large hoofs, long legs, that if they wanted to turn on me and stomp me into the ground, it was entirely possible for them to do so. I didn’t think they would but finally, the sense of trespass, of wrongness, was too much for me. I began to move backwards and away, and they, who had been suspicious all along, now had their suspicions confirmed. They snorted indignantly at being fooled and trotted, hoofs clicking, into the trees and I went home.

That autumn, I got a job in Edmonton, running a women's organization, and once again, I dragged my reluctant and unhappy family away with me.

Chapter Ten:
Three years later, I got an offer to teach at a First Nations college. Len was studying nursing in Kamloops and I was working at the Women’s Centre there. The time in Edmonton had left scars. The women’s movement, from which I had learned so much and in which I placed so much hope and trust, was fragmenting, disintegrating amid accusations of racism, classism, and political incorrectness. I had sat in a room and watched the organization for which I had worked pull itself apart, everyone demanding that it go in a different direction.

Len had left after the first year. He had decided he needed a new career direction as well, and had enrolled in the nursing program at Cariboo College in Kamloops. I left Edmonton, took the boys, and went back to the log house. The girls had left for university in Vancouver. The boys and I spent a long and lonesome fall while I tried to come to terms with my disintegrating life. The job in Kamloops seemed like a lifesaver but I was tired of the women’s movement, tired of feminism. Len was involved with school. The job at the First Nations college came as an exciting invitation to a new area of awareness.

I tried to remember what I knew or what I understood about First Nations people. Mostly, I remembered Mabel's O’Neil’s warm round face and riding wild horses and the night I ran away to live with the O'Neils. I had always identified with being something like an Indian; through my childhood reading, I had cobbled together fragments of identity, the person I most wanted to be resembled a crazy quilt combination of Robin Hood, Annie Oakley, Huckleberry Finn, and Crazy Horse. There were all those childhood dreams of running away, of hiding in the wood. There was the wandering around with a hatchet, a 22 rifle, and a can opener to heat my beans over the fire.
But I didn't know much about real Indians, other than what I had read, the standard Canadian and American history, sad stories of loss.

I hadn't taught much before either. In Edmonton, I had taught writing in the University extension program and I had read lots of books about teaching writing and I thought I could invent the rest. After all, inventing and playing a role was still what I thought I did best.

So I really I wasn't sure what to expect when I started teaching at the First Nations college.

During the first class that fall, I thought maybe we could go out in the bright sun and have a storytelling session, get to know each other, practice the concept of storytelling. When I suggested it, people were hesitant. But after a lot of fussing over the grasshoppers and whether the women would get grass stains and pine needles on their skirts, we settled down on a grassy knoll under a pine tree to tell stories about our lives. Three hours later, we were still there. We had used two boxes of Kleenex and I felt like my skin had been burnt off. All my years of working in the women's movement hadn't prepared me for these stories. When we finished, I went back to the campsite where I was staying until I could find a house. I wandered along the beach in the blazing sun, staring, stupefied, at the twisted fire varnished roots of ancient trees, the lava rocks. Finally I went and lay in the water and let it float me away. I felt like I had been given a load of burning stones to carry. I let them sink to the bottom.

Over the next two years, I tried to get used to horrific stories. Much as I loved the work and the people, I knew I wasn't going to be able to stay long. My uneasiness at
being a white person standing at the front of a classroom of native people grew. I dutifully went to sweats when I was invited. A women’s healing circle started meeting at my house. I sat on the beach below the beautiful cabin I had rented on Nicola Lake, tended the fire, the only white face, while women I worked with talked about their lives and wept in the light of the flames.

One day I went for lunch with my friend Sandra. She was a Tsimshian woman, who had grown up in Port Simpson, north of Prince Rupert but had gone away to school in Vancouver when she was twelve. She had started the healing circle that met at my house. We had banded together against the strange manipulations of the administration. I admired her immensely. She was beautiful, well educated, with an amazing instinct for figuring out what was really going on around her. We usually had fairly raucous lunches, a group of us would grab a table and then other people from the college would show up, students, colleagues, and friends.

But today was different. The cafe was quiet when we came in. We ordered our food and sat down and then someone handed Sandra and I that day's edition of the Vancouver Sun. There had been a famous court case wending its way through the BC Supreme Court, and now the judge had handed down his ruling in case that has become known as Delgamuuk.

Judge McEachern's ruling was negative. He ruled that the Gistkaan Wetsuoten people didn’t have title to their traditional lands. Silence descended over the small cafe as we all read the paper. Sandra began to cry. I sat there feeling stupid, wondering what to say and unable to think of anything. But gradually, another feeling came wandering by,
unexpected and confusing. It was a feeling of being a trespasser, an intruder. Politically I was aware of and the issues involved but this was a feeling of something older, deeper and unbridgeable. It was the fact of our race, and our history.

No matter how much I understood, and how much I sympathized, history stood between us. We could be friends in spite of it, allies even, we could understand each other but the facts of history are cold, implacable and unshakeable. We went back to work and continued our friendship but something had changed, something had awoken in me, questions I couldn’t answer. I had always been so sure of my place in the world, of belonging to a particular place, a particular piece of land. I had thought that would give me commonality with First Nations people. So where did this sense of intrusion, of non-belonging come from? And what should I do with it?

Sometime much later, I was walking along the beach by the lake with a group of students. For some obscure scheduling reason, I was trying to teach an English class on Friday afternoons. Everyone else in the school packed up at noon and went home and I was desperate to try anything to keep people in class and keep their attention. But my inventiveness had limits. So today I had proposed we walk along the shore to the site of an old pit house. It wasn't far and it might give us something new to write about.

But it felt so odd, walking through the sun with people whose ancestors had always lived here. Always. Whose ancestors might have built the pit house we were going to see. It wasn't that they knew any more about the place than I did. I had studied it, written about it, talked about it. But they knew it differently than me.

One woman remarked casually about having her grandmother's memories of where to go on this particular hillside to pick berries. Dust piled in my mouth. I wanted to
lie down on the sand.

No – more than that, I wanted to go home. I wanted to be at home, I wanted to find my home and belong there; no more wandering. If she had her grandmother's memories, what memories did I have? I had the O'Neils, and the farm. I had wild horses tearing through my dreams, my grandmother's fingers tearing at my hair, trying to get the snarls out of it, her voice tearing at me, her condemnation of what I loved.

I knew I had stumbled over a central crucial dilemma, not only in my life but in many people’s lives. I had read what First Nations people had to say about the meaning and importance of the land in their lives. I had thought I understood it. Now I realized there were depths and layers of understanding that might not be accessible to me, however well-meaning and well behaved I was. I had sat in meetings with thoughtful ecologists and environmentalists and heard them use the term Mother Earth over and over without questioning. Now I began to wonder where this term had come from and if we really knew, as white people, what it meant. I had tried to talk about my attachment to the farm, to the Kootenays, to the lake to a few friends and had been met with polite incomprehension. When I said I didn’t want to live anywhere else, people often looked at me skeptically. After all, I wasn’t living there. So what was I talking about?

When I first got the job in Merritt at the First Nations College, I tried commuting from Kamloops but it was too far. I rented a small cabin on the shores of Nicola Lake and spent the weekends with Len and the boys in Kamloops.

After they brought my stuff to the cabin and drove away I walked in the door and
was met with silence. I had never lived alone. I went to the Safeway in Merritt to buy groceries and wandered the shelves, unable to think of what I might want to eat. For almost twenty years, I had cooked for other people and had eaten what I made for them. I had no idea what I actually liked to eat, apart from tea, popcorn, and donuts.

In the evenings, the silence in the cabin was deafening. I was so used to voices, the fridge door opening and closing, the stereo fighting with the television, kids complaining, fighting, talking, singing. To fill the silence, I started a novel. I stared out the window at Nicola Lake, which in the fall, was full of gold tints from the bright yellow of the poplars on the hills. In the morning, before I left for school, a family of beaver came by. A brilliant male loon lived in the bay. A pair of golden eagles lived in a pine tree up the hill. It wasn’t Kootenay Lake but it was familiar.

Len graduated from nursing school and moved back to Creston. I didn’t go with him. I sat by the window while my life crumbled and kept on writing.

When I arrived at the college I had been away from the farm for over five years, moving and working and trying desperately to stay connected to my family and my marriage. But I was still a patchwork person, full of dreams and ideas, still desperate as well to be a writer, even though, by now, I had published a book of poems as well as lots of stories and journalism, I still hesitated to name myself writer, still didn't feel part of any kind of writing fellowship, and still didn't know what I was doing with my life.

During my first day at the college, I met a woman who was just leaving. "This place is a glorified residential school," she said. I had no idea what she meant but during my three years there, I began to get a glimpse of what she had meant.
I had spent my time at the college trying to figure out what was going on, trying to analyze the politics and find a place within a racial and political complexity. I had done what I knew how to do – I had read all the books I could get my hands on about First Nations people. I had read books about racism and the history of white and First Nations encounters. And I had tried to figure out what to I was supposed to do.

And I had listened and listened hard to the women who met at my cabin, who sat around the fire on the beach below the cabin, while the black lake water lipped at the sand and I realized for the first time that I knew almost nothing of who I was in terms of being part of something, part of a family, part of a community, a tribe, a history, a people. I was amazed that I didn't know this. Where were the stories, I wondered, of the people who had left wherever they had left and come to Canada? Why, in a family that lived inside stories, didn't I know the stories and the history, even about my great grandparents?

After I left the college, I began looking for answers to the many questions about history and memory that my time there had engendered.

Eventually, I found the history of my father’s family, of the Borderers, Scottish Reivers, outlaws, a people with a darkly romantic history.

The Borderers were famous as riders, men and women whose lives, whose livelihood, depended on their horses. I read that they lived by raiding their neighbours, riding their sturdy black horses.

I remembered galloping Lady to the top of the hill in the orchard, waving my sword. We didn't have television so where I got my models for the games of charging cavalry I played out in my head I'm not sure. They were like echoes of something far
away and long forgotten. Lady carried those echoes for me and then I carried them away from the college, back to the farm, into the future, and across the ocean.

I went with a friend to England and then to the border of Scotland. I felt like a combination of a foolish grinning tourist and an idiot child, journeying through England. I felt like was living through my childhood– it wasn't England or the English I was seeing but stories and legends. I was living inside all those books.

When I told my hosts in Carlisle, in Cumbria in northern England where I wanted to go, they laughed. "No one lives up there," they said. But that's where we went.

We drove past stone walls and over arched stone bridges, into hills polka-dotted with tree plantations. We went through villages with brick and stone houses, past farms and sheep and hedges.

It was May and the slopes and hills were layered with daffodils, bending in the wind and the rain.

"Damn flowers," said the young man who had been coerced into driving me. "They're everywhere, bloody fools are always planting them, something to do with some poet."

We found the cemetery eventually, a rough patch of ground on a high hill, surrounded by rock walls and fields full of daffodils. There was barely a house in sight. The wind blew hard up the hill and rain fell in my face. I wandered from stone to stone, reading the inscriptions, so many Armstrongs about whom I knew nothing, except for bits and pieces of stories and legends and songs.
The young man who had driven me there stomped his feet and swore at the rain.

"Let's get back to England," he said, "back to civilization."

But I was sitting on the ground in the rain, smiling to myself. The wind blew up the hill towards me from the names of my reading, the names of the stories, from the Liddell Water, from Mangerton Farm, from Newcastleton, from the fells and dales and swamps of my history.

I sat on the grass. I listened to the rooks as they wheeled and shook the sky with their announcement that a stranger was here. I sat and sat without moving, without thinking, I was nothing. I was happy. And I was thinking about those black horses and the people who had ridden them. I knew a little more about belonging, I thought, but not yet, nearly enough.

Chapter Eleven:

Finally, I came home again. The job at the college was clearly over. I had gotten into a war with the administration. I had gone to the principal at the college with some of the stories of racism that I had heard from other First Nations students and staff. He announced that there was no racism or sexism at the college because the college’s constitution forbade it. But I asked permission to organize an anti-racism workshop anyway. Everyone hated it and everyone felt hurt at the end. My friends from the women’s circle had talked, had told their stories. The coordinators did the exercises they had developed to raise awareness. None of it worked. The workshop was summarized by one First Nations woman who was married to a white man. “We should just all try and be
friends,” she said.

After that, the administration didn’t fire me, they just made my work life untenable until I quit. I said goodbye to the beautiful cabin on Nicola Lake that had been my refuge for three years; I packed everything in my car and came home, once more, to the farm. The week after I got there, my mother picked up a saucepan and walked across the yard, and moved into the new log house which my father had been intermittently building since I was a child. None of us had ever expected him to finish it but one day, magically, it was done. It was new. My mother, for the first time in her life, had new everything, a new stove, new fridge, new drapes, new dishwasher.

The old farm house, the house in which I had grown up, and which my mother and father had once made homey and comfortable, was now mine but it sulked after they left. I sat at night beside my computer, afraid to go to bed.

I loved the old house, but all our lives we had joked about it being haunted. When I first moved home, every evening the cat I had brought with me sat and stared down the hall, hissed and spat. I tiptoed down the hall and crawled into bed, tucked the blankets around me, hoping now to see any strange white shapes.

My mother had always loved to tell ghost stories. My children used to gather around her at night while she told them about Jimmy’s ghost on the Mannarino place, or about the ghost that tried to smother her. She sat up in bed the next night with her Bible and it went away. One night, she said, she sat up in bed and saw an enormous cat with glowing green eyes sitting on the chair beside her. By the time she woke my father, the cat had flowed like smoke off the chair and away.
When my kids used to come home from Mom’s to the trailer, they had to go by the place where my dad slaughtered chickens. They tiptoed by, then ran screaming, pursued by imaginary chicken ghosts.

Now the old house refused to let me in. Well, I had been hanging out with First Nations people. Had I learned anything? One night I lit sage and cedar and wandered through the house, asking for peace and harmony. The cat stopped hissing and I began sleeping better. I had some money from the Canada Council. I had finished a novel and sent it to a publisher. To my amazement, they accepted it. I started another.

Len lived down the road in our house; we had dinners and visits but there were too many shadows; we had managed to hurt each other too much by now to get past it all though we kept on trying.

At the First Nations college, there had been lots of talk about dysfunction, addiction, and general fuckedupedness. One day I went to the counseling office, cleared off a shelf of self-help books and spent the weekend reading them, but nothing had really made much of an impression of me. Over the years, in the women’s movement and in various other places, I had had a number of friends who talked about healing and other kinds of conversation that often seemed to suggest unhappiness was all a result of wrong thinking or some kind of wrong attitude. But my unhappiness, such as it was, had always seemed much more to me to be about being poor, about always having too much to do, about never having time to write, about being endlessly cold in the winter, and never being able to live the life I thought I wanted to live even though it seemed to me I had thrashed around in many directions trying to find it.

Len and I were still friends, still co-parents of the kids, but we couldn’t talk to
each other anymore. I missed him endlessly but I had also spent a long time thinking about how incredibly bad I was at relationships. One afternoon, in my cabin at Nicola Lake, I suddenly realized that I had never actually chosen to be in a relationship. I had fallen into them for all the wrong reasons, because I was scared, or desperate, or confused. But I had never, since High School, really lived on my own. During the five year at the farm as a single mother, I leaned on my parents, my friends to survive. And I never had five minutes to myself. Either I was working in the garden, or I was with the kids.

Now I was still desperately poor but at least I had time to write. I made the discovery that most emerging writers make; writing doesn’t pay much. After the Canada Council money ran out, I tried various ways to make money and finally I began driving to the college in Cranbrook, a round trip of 200 miles, once a week, to teach writing. From this, I made $600 a month.

I loved the drive. Every year, the long fall blended into winter; the gold tinged hills blended with the blue smoke from slash fires; I drove through a part of the county that was too cold and too high to be much good for farming; there were a lot of small discouraged looking places; beside the Moyie River, an abandoned trailer bled pink fading to yellow insulation out of its guts. I drove the long distance with Mozart or Pink Floyd wailing from the stereo. At night I slid back through a black tunnel, with giants trucks crashing through the slush, deer and elk peering from the frozen sidelines.

When I got home, I'd build up the fire, crawl into bed, watch David Letterman for five minutes, lay there listening to the snow hissing against the windows, and fall instantly, gratefully, asleep, glad to be home, glad to be not driving anywhere for a while.
The old farmhouse had never had any insulation in the walls, and no matter how much wood I stuffed into the roaring furnace in the basement, it never really got warm. My father, by contrast, kept my mother, in the new house, in a state of near greenhouse warmth, and still she shivered at the slightest draft. Four or five times a day, when I was writing, I ran over there to get warm and drink some more coffee.

A friend in Edmonton who had started a small publishing company, asked me to write a children’s book, not a genre I had considered before but I liked it once I got started. I wrote another novel, along with poems, essays. As often as I could, I threw brown envelopes into the green mailbox across the road and then went on with my life. I had no income at all from April to September other than what I could make off the farm but in summers the house filled up with people and there was always food and wine and trips to the beach in the late afternoon. It was the life I once thought I wanted.

But the dark periods, the restlessness, the itch to go somewhere else, the poverty, and the lack of recognition dragged at me. Winters were long. Some nights I stared into the darkness and drafted suicide notes as a kind of poetry.

After family dinners, I came home wrapped in loneliness. I missed my kids, Len, working, money. Depressions settled into my bones like a black core.

I got up one muddy spring morning and squelched across the yard, as I did every morning, to drink coffee with my mother. This particular morning, she looked at me and said, "You were such a happy child. What happened to you?" My mother always had a genius for poking a question into the most sensitive place she could find. I didn’t answer.
All I wanted was a cup of coffee and a chance to get warm.

But after I went back to my house, the question burrowed its way inside like a parasite and refused to go away.

I'd been writing all morning in scruffy clothes. I hadn't yet lit a fire in the ancient woodstove, so my house was freezing. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t make enough money as a writer to live without a constant undernote of desperation about things like winter tires for my car or paying my always enormous phone bill.

I’d also been noticing lately that my mother had started writing everything down in a notebook. She'd write things like "fold laundry" or "bring peaches up basement." She never talked about the notebook, just left it out on the table where she kept leafing through it. She wrote down all her grandchildren's birthdays, her sister and brother's birthdays. She wrote about music she liked and the names of programs on the radio but mostly she wrote down lists and lists of work.

My mother’s sister had come to visit the summer before. She told us the same stories over and over. Then my mother had recently got word that she had been placed in a care home. Mom wouldn’t accept this. “They’ve locked her up because they wanted her money,” she said, over and over. I'd given up arguing and just nodded every time she told me this.

I drove into town that afternoon for a doctor's appointment. That spring, I couldn't seem to shake off an endless state of pain, stiffness, and sore joints. Various doctors had looked at me, shaken their heads, shrugged their shoulders. I was pushing hard to finish a new book as well as keep up with the usual farm work. My niece was
living with me part of the time and I was trying to tutor her through home schooling.

After the appointment, I parked in front of the restaurant where I usually had lunch, and went in and ordered tea. My friend Nora saw me and came in to have tea with me. "Oh, look," she said. "They're towing your car away." I went back outside. The tow-truck guy was looking embarrassed. The parking ticket guy that everyone in town hated, said they were towing my truck because I had an unpaid parking ticket. Well, actually it was my son's ticket, but that didn't matter. I never paid parking tickets. I never could understand why should I pay to park on the side street of a town where there was never a shortage of parking. They didn’t need my quarter. Or, considering the number of boarded up storefronts in town that year, maybe they did.

Small rural towns sometimes seem to me like spider webs spread on the landscape. They look friendly and welcoming, set in the middle of pretty scenery, of trees and mountains and green grass. But they trap people. This town and I had never had an easy relationship. It was a place where I had been refused jobs, a place where my kids had hated their school. But it was also a place I was used to, that I understood. It's hard to leave a place where even the guy towing my car away calls me by name and mentions that he went to school with my brother.

I pointed out to the parking ticket guy that I'd just come from my doctor and if I had to walk home and died it would be all his fault, but this made no impression on him. Finally, I wrote a bad cheque for $45 to the tow-truck driver to get him to unhitch his shiny red tow-truck from my battered Honda, and then I went back in to finish my tea with Nora.

“You know,” she said reflectively, “when we were in high school, we all hated
When you were stuck out in that little one-room school in Sirdar, our principal used to go on and on about you, about how you were so smart. By the time you showed up in high school, we were determined to get you."

I drank some more tea. Thirty years later, I thought, and the hell that had been high school could still get me. But Nora was also one of the girls who had been, with her sister Eileen, one of my few pals in high school. We had been in the Drama Club together and we had kept our friendship after high school.

After Nora left, Kaca came in and we had a late lunch. If I wanted, I could sit in the restaurant all day like this while people came in, visited and left. Then I'd stagger home soggy with tea and have popcorn for supper.

"I might move to Costa Rica," Kaca said, "or there's a job in Kazackhistan with an oil company I found online." I was jealous. Kazackhistan. That had to be more exciting than here.

"Isn't there a war on there?" I said.

"Maybe," she said, "but that's okay. They have camels and horses. I am sure I would love it." Kaca was little and skinny and had crawled out of Czechoslovakia while the Commies still had it. Another war and a few camels wouldn't faze her.

After I left the restaurant, I bought $20 worth of groceries to get me through the week. The woman at the checkout counter in the grocery store said, "Are you writing another book?" I mumbled something.

“Well, you just keep writing them and I'll keep reading them," she said cheerfully.

I took my cheese slices and stoned wheat thins and went home. My dog came running, thrilled to see me; he was always thrilled to see me, simply because that was
how he was made. Sometimes he was really irritating.

I got the fire going and the evening looked better. There was tea, popcorn, silence, solitude, books, the dog, the cat, the consolations of my writing life. When I got cold, I turned on a black-and-white TV, which I had bought at K-mart for $50 in 1974, which the kids used to watch in the trailer, then climbed into bed, under my blessed feather duvet. It was a present from my mother without which I would have long ago have been found, one morning, a frozen corpse. I huddled there with the pile of books and magazines I had brought home from the library in town, while the dog snored and farted beside me on the rug. And all night I tossed and turned. It felt like my body was burning up from the inside.

My parents' voices still resounded in my head. "Work or starve," my father had said. My mother would always sigh, "Time to hoist the anchor and get to work."

I had my father’s attitude toward illness, that if I ignored it, or worked harder, it would go away.

Once, years ago, I was ill with the flu. Being sick always sent me into a snarling rage, sent trying-to-be-sympathetic Len away, silent. That was while we were homesteading, building the log house, clearing land, working, raising four kids. There was always too much to do. We worked from morning until night, fell into bed, got up in the morning, hit the ground running, did it all over again. We took our strength, our bodies' ability to keep up and keep going for granted. There was no time, no space for illness.

My father often spent long winter days cutting trees for firewood, and burning
the branches. He claimed that working around a good big fire was a sure cure for most things. So I got up and staggered outside. I could barely walk. My head spun. I made it to the place where we had torn down an old shed and left a mess that needed cleaning.

I started a fire, dragged boards, branches, torn paneling to the fire, cursing and sweating, fighting my own weakness. The fire got taller and hotter, I sweated and fought some more, and gradually, as the afternoon passed, the yard got clean and I got well. It works: determination, peasant stubbornness.

At least, it used to work until that spring. I went on for weeks being sore and achy and exhausted but it was spring. The garden had to be planted, the flower-beds weeded, the lawn mowed, the fruit trees pruned. I kept up somehow, stumbling from task to task all day, falling into bed at night.

One day I decided as a way of curing myself to mow the whole damned lawn, about half an acre of rocks, logs, bumps, dog bones, weeds, and some grass. I shoved the protesting ancient lawn mower around and around, sitting down often and then getting up to keep going. It was crucially important to keep going. When I finished and went inside, I could barely move. I decided a hot bath would help. (That was when I could still get into a bathtub.) It didn't. When I crawled out, I felt like my body was on fire. I was freezing and burning at the same time. I took six Aspirin with codeine, wrapped a blanket around myself, sat over an electric heater shaking, my teeth chattering. I kept fading in and out of things. Finally, I warmed up enough to go to bed. This time ignoring being sick wasn't working.

My parents were living on their pensions and what they could make off the farm.
But money from the farm had slowly dried up. Once they had sold eggs and milk and butter, fruit and vegetables. But those markets had gone. Now they were struggling to pay the taxes on the farm and there wasn’t much I could do to help.

My brother and father had logged the farm and my mother decided that my brother owed them money, so now every morning my mother said, "What are you going to do about your brother?" I dreaded this question.

"Mom, if you’re so upset, talk to Bill, or call a lawyer," I’d say. It was our morning ritual.

"Oh, your father wouldn't like that," she'd say. "Your father doesn't trust lawyers. If your father would only talk to him. Can't you get your father to talk to him?"

"Mom, he doesn't listen to me. I'm not a boy. I don't have a chain saw. I don't kill things."

"Well, we'll just have to sell the farm," she'd say. "We don't have any choice. We have to sell something." Nobody wanted to sell the farm, least of all my mother. I’d usually try to turn the conversation to something else, something cheerful.

Most afternoons in the winter my mother and I would walk to the beach. We would look at the water and clouds, say nothing, and then come home to tea with the winter darkness setting in and conversation about what each of us was cooking for supper. Every Thursday, we drove to church and back for choir practice. Our conversations ran endlessly in the same ruts, the kids, the farm, my dad, my brother, and what to have for tea.

Now that she had brought it up, I found myself trying hard to remember what
really did go on when I was a child. In my mother’s stories, my childhood somehow had become this marvelous magic documentary, fruit hanging on trees, and days spent fishing, wandering the mountains with my horse, or picking wild strawberries.

Then there was the other story, the one I had told assorted friends and lovers, about the endless work, my bitter critical father, my crabby siblings, my oh-so-poor, oh-so-sad mother, who told me once I just had to learn to manipulate men if I wanted to get anywhere. They were both true, like the two faces of Janus. It all depended on which truth I wanted to look at.

Now the farm seemed to split along these same lines as well; it became the sad farm, the funny farm, the place that broke my heart every time I looked at it. The place that held my life the way a mirror holds light or a glass bowl holds water. My border collie, Kin and I walked to the beach every morning, the same semi-circle of brown sand, framed by round granite loaves of rock. Bone Bay, we had named it, one summer, because a dead cow had washed up there. The O’Neil kids said they were human bones, ghost bones. It was the ghost beach.

One spring afternoon, the dog and I set out, he carrying his newly found soccer ball, long buried under the snow that was finally disappearing. The Delicious tree by the garden was full of robins; the garden a river of mud littered with islands of snow. Occasionally, one of the robins would fly down to pick through the mud. The yard was a patchwork of dead leaves, snow, ashes, and sawdust. Snow melting off the roof in huge crashing chunks had crushed the honeysuckle and the clematis. The potentilla and other shrubs were also flattened. Spring was always black and grey, sharp edges, black
branches like dead hair on the fruit trees.

We went down the hill, across the orchard, over the rocks and onto the granite sand. Mist hung over the lake. Kin worried the soccer ball until I kicked it into the icy water, and he crashed in after it. The lake was low, the water still. A sucker hung motionless, just under the surface of the bay. Fungus whitened its tail.

Rain began to dimple the water as we left the beach. When I looked closely, I could see, just under the mat of mud and dead grass, green sprouting already, beginning the mad growth that would swell into abundance through the summer and fall. By the driveway, tiny spikes of daffodils punched the soil's surface.

The next morning, I spilled tea on my computer and it spluttered and died. When I went to my mother's house, I listened to her litany about selling the farm. I wanted her back, the warm laughing mother I once had, but now there was no room in her thoughts for me. Everything was a potential disaster, even the flowers coming, and the snow going. There is nothing now in which fear didn't loom for her. More and more I avoided this litany, changed the subject, tried to be jolly, humour her out of it.

Today, I was the one needing comfort. When the dog finally talked me into it, I left for our walk, with my head down, sullen, deliberately trying to notice nothing. But at the beach, there was the timeless unchanging face of Castle Mountain. I was so temporary, walking through this ancient geology, the granite shell on which my feet banged and thudded. Against this, the chaos in my life realigned into being less important, but it still didn’t go away.

I was suspended in time, waiting for tomorrow and my computer to be fixed, hung
out between mountains, waiting. The radio had predicted more snow.

Some days all my friends and I talked about was weather. It would have been funny if the weather weren’t so pervasive, inside and out. As I came back to the house, I thought about how exhausted I was that spring, an exhaustion made savage by the mess and frantic at the thought of the coming summer season, five months with no salary, still the same painful weakness in my joints and muscles, and so much work to do. I shut the rage away, went in my house and got ready to drive to writing class.

After I came home from the class, I walked to the orchard. It was after eleven but still light enough to see; there was a crescent moon hanging over the lake. A flock of geese went by high up on the mountainside. They reminded me of women crowded together, talking, talking, sharing gossip and information and how are you doing and oh my sore wing, and wasn’t that last bit of marsh grass just delicious. I didn’t know what they were talking about and I didn’t know why as a human I responded so nostalgically to their gabble; perhaps because it was high and free and they were all together and I was alone. The lake was still. The sky was still faintly pink.

Who loves this place, I said? Who or what in me is so connected here? Who loves this flooded lake, this still night, these crazy geese?

I had committed myself to the idea of land when I was a child, I thought. It was love that committed me, love and beauty. I had been trying to find a language for it ever since. The animal in me knew what it loved, where it lived, what it was attuned to. Some animals, like cats, hate travel. Some, like horses, can adjust to it but mope. Some are gypsies. But all have homes, ecosystems, places they live. I have no answers. I only knew
That year wore on. I began to dream about leaving the farm but I needed somewhere to go and something to do. I had needed a master’s degree for a long time. Maybe with a master’s degree, I could get a better teaching job. I sent off an application to the University of British Columbia Creative Writing Department.

One day in late June, Kin and I set off to look for wild strawberries. There had been a lot of both rain and sun and the air billowed with the scent of wild roses; many coloured irises bloomed in my gardens.

I was always greedy for wild strawberries, the first fruits of the season; it's hard and satisfying work to get even a mouthful. My brother and I always used to hunt wild strawberries together when we were kids. It was one of the things we shared and loved and never talked about.

While I was hunting, I kept thinking about the small shabby house in a southern US city where I lived with the drunken man, my sons’ father. The yard there was bare and bleak and I had tried to dig it up and plant some flowers. I remembered my husband coming home one day and standing in the yard with another man. I watched their feet shift back and forth on the newly sprouted flowers as they talked, until there was nothing left but flattened ground.

My brother, Bill, worked incredibly hard. He and his partner, Claire had bought a house next to the farm and rebuilt it. Every morning, I would hear his diesel truck clatter out of the yard at six and I would roll over and go back to sleep. He made and still makes
a lot of money cutting down trees.

When I was a child, I didn't mind watching as my father shot and butchered cows and pigs and chickens. I never questioned my father's dexterity with a chain saw and giant machines. I could hardly wait to get a chain saw of my own. I liked helping to butcher. Now I only want to walk through life like I walk through the woods, quietly as a shadow, disturbing nothing and watching where I put my feet.

I went away through the woods next to the farm admiring the fine mat of driftwood along the lakeshore, the cold brown water lapping back at heights everyone thought it had been dammed away from. The dogs flushed a grouse right in front of me. She fluttered her wings and screeched; her tiny chicks scooted for a hole in the ground. When they were safe she flew into a tree and clucked her indignation. I passed by as quickly as I could, calling the dogs to come away and let her be.

One day in early July, I went swimming for the first time that year. I stood at the water's edge. Rain was slanting down on the other side of the lake, but the sun shone on me. The mountains were massive, dark green and blue in the slanted varying light.

I shed my clothes, waded into the water. It was warm at the edge and ice cold further out. I let it take my breath and kept swimming. I swam to the rocks circling the bay, hauled myself out and lay there for a while. It hurt but not too badly. There were no boats on the lake because of the storm. I sat there in the warm wind until I couldn't stand it anymore and slid back in the water and swam some more. I wanted to be in and under and full of the lake, full of summer and strawberries and the heat coming and the storm waiting on the other side of the lake and the mosquitoes hovering at the shore. I swam
and gasped and remembered all over again the sensual intimacy of swimming, like making love, slow rolling and rolling in the water. Seal woman. I couldn't bear to leave.

I could live anywhere. I could love anyplace. That's what I tried to tell myself. It's the utter familiarity of this place that translates into profundity. It's the same lake and the same beach and the same summer repeating itself like an ancient liturgical chant. Before I got sick, I used to swim out for half a mile into the lake, over the depths of black green water, and lie and bask and roll, spouting and playing like a demented goofy whale. The water always feels safe. It holds me up, licks me clean. I am its plaything as it is mine.

I came out of the water and leaned against the sun-heated rock. The kids used to warm themselves on these rocks. They claimed, when they listened closely, they could hear voices. I listened but I didn't hear anything from inside the rock. But it is true, sometimes the rocks hum; maybe it's insects or wind but they hum. I used to listen to them. They hummed and they danced in late afternoon the reflections from the water.

I rubbed my back against the rock. My scalp tingled from the cold and my skin was as soft and clean as a washed leaf. I finally left and floated up the hill, stopped at the garden for strawberries, a new cauliflower, onions and garlic, the first perfect raspberry and even a few half ripe Saskatoons. It was the grazing time of year, when the earth dripped with food. I found myself wandering through the garden, endlessly nibbling, a satisfied herbivore.

After dinner, the college phoned. They had promised me two writing courses next winter. Two courses meant the difference between desperation and comfort, between fixing the car and continuing to drive with no brakes, between buying wood and scrounging it, between fear and coping. Now they wanted me to teach the course as one
course, the second class simultaneously by videoconferencing. I would only get paid for one class. It wouldn’t save them any money. The money they saved in not paying me would go to pay for the technology.

I needed enough money to survive another winter, needed enough for snow tires, car, wood, electricity and my huge phone bill. I needed to catch up a bit. But these were bureaucrats dealing with budgets. What did my bald tires mean to them?

I went to Wilson's to watch the sunset from their deck. We sat in their screen tent to avoid the mosquitoes, tired, and hot. I felt bowed down by other people’s troubles. My friend Carolyn had been phoning every day because her mother had been re-diagnosed with cancer. My friend Mary's five months pregnant daughter-in-law had malignant melanoma. My mother wanted a family conference talk about selling the farm. I’d sooner have been put through torture.

The next day my friend Juanita and I spent a day picking strawberries and black currants. Over lunch, we discussed how much our community has changed, how we felt it slipping away. Once rural community was a network of taken for granted obligations. I learned from my parents that one gave whatever one had; friends and neighbours always went away loaded with whatever surplus we had. I learned the odd and wonderful lesson that the best way to manage the rural balance sheet was to give and give and give, with the assurance that in small and subtle ways, it would always come back. But those values were disappearing. Our wealthy new neighbours had ingested the idea of winning, of always getting the best of a bargain, of the sense that money is the only arbiter of value. They won and they lost.

Before she left, we wandered with our teacups among the flowers, peering at the
combination of neon lychnis, pastel foxgloves, and glowing white delphiniums, discussing colour and texture. That afternoon after she left, the yellow lilies opened.

My father has always hated weeds. Gardening is an endless battle against weeds but of course weeds are mostly flowers. He had spent years cutting down and poisoning buttercups and daisies and dandelions, He conceived a special hatred for curly dock. Maybe he was onto something. Maybe they really were out to take over. After all, he was running out of time, but flowers and weeds have all the time and persistence in the world. The irony was that, like most other people in the Kootenays, he had gotten interested in herbs and self-medicating himself, and he had begun drinking his own peculiar herb tea mixture every night and lecturing the rest of us about doing the same.

My friendships in the Kootenays are long ones. Conversations with my friends are variants on the same themes we have been pursuing over the course of thirty years of friendship. We used to talk with babies on our laps, sugar and tea puddled on the table, the older kids running in and out the door. Now our lives are neater, quieter, but other cracks are showing up. All of us have lived our lives as rural women. Carol came from the city, Joan from England via a small town; we've been neighbours and friends; our kids have grown up together. We have always all lived as pivotal members of our extended families, parents next door, kids in and out as they got their lives together, went to school, or came back for summer work. Now emotional pain seemed to be eating up what we thought would be the serenity of these years. Joan’s daughter had left home in anger; Carol was worried about her youngest son. Joan and I talked about the pain in our families; Carol and I talked about love and illusion and enlightenment. We were all
coping with of loss; Joan’s mother had died of cancer last year; Carol was working to keep her marriage together; I had the farm and my worry about my mother.

When I came home from Wilson’s, the mosquitoes pursued me to the door. Mosquitoes made our summer like winter; we hesitated to go outside, we wrapped up in scarves, jackets, and thick socks. They didn’t last that long but they ruled our lives while they did.

Last night I said to Alan that I might grow another garden next year...if there is a next year. The farm felt as if something, some spirit that used to animate us all, had left. We don't talk anymore, my family and I. For that year I didn’t talk to my father or brother. We turned our faces from each other. I was reading Buddhism now.

I sat every morning in my flower-filled bird-song filled peaceful porch, and read the commentaries of the Dalai Lama. Compassion, says the Dalai Lama, is the most important thing. But I could slide from compassion to anger and bitterness and back again in the blink of an eye. Contradiction must the part of the path to enlightenment. Contradiction seemed to be the twisted roots of my life here. Poverty and abundance. Love and bitterness. Spirituality and hillbilly squalor.

On July afternoons, my mother and I picked the strawberries together. Soon we would be drowning in the abundance of summer.

One July afternoon, the mosquitoes and I worked quietly away, me hoeing tomatoes while a soft gray rain fell on our heads. Mosquitoes don't hurt. They just quietly drive you mad, until, a million tiny pin pricks later, you run to the house, shuddering. All my life I have wondered how the animals endure it, not just mosquitoes but blackflies and deerflies and horseflies, and no shelter.
The gray afternoon wore on. There was a lid over me, over the valley. Nothing will ever happen, I thought. Up on the mountain, the ravens called and called with monotonous creakiness.

And then two real estate dealers showed up to measure my house. I didn't know they were coming. I told them to go away. When I tried to think of moving, I went blank. That morning, a magazine had come with a picture of Vancouver on the cover. I loved to visit the city, to play there. My children are there. I could probably work there. I could buy things. What made it so impossible to imagine a life there?

When I was a child, I would stare up at Castle Mountain, the broad-shouldered peak directly across the lake from the beach. It had a personality, something like what I imagined God to be, immensely old, imposing, lonely, terrifying and fierce. When I got older, and went away to university, to the city, to marriage, the unchanging eternal face of the mountains became my touchstone.

That summer went by in a rush, a blur of kids and visitors and gardening and swimming and long leisurely suppers.

In September, I came home from a visit to Edmonton to a woodshed full of wood, thanks to my sons, to peace and silence and a terrible feeling of unease. All night, on the first night home, I lay awake, exhausted and unable to sleep. Usually the house folded itself around me like a warm and welcoming blanket, but something was uneasy, myself or the house, I'm not sure, and I only slept when morning began to come.

The unease began coming back from the airport. Driving by Moyie Lake, the water was perfectly mirror calm, only dented with the small circles of trout rolling.
Coming down through the twilight, with the newly golden trees shining dim around the edge of the black lake. If only it was all so peaceful, if only this golden surface was the only truth I knew about this place. Coming back into my life here after even a brief time away was always like struggling back into clothes that didn’t fit anymore. The place I escaped to, the only place that had ever fit, was my writing; it was a lonely but clear place. There was just me and the struggle to put words on paper and through that struggle, to achieve something, some understanding, some clarity, something memorable.

"Are you still writing?" people in town would ask me over and over, mystified at my odd and obsessive hobby.

When I came home, I went to the beach for a long while and sat in the sun. The impossibly dreamy beauty of September blazed all round me, the smoky haze on the gold tipped mountains, the clear water, the sky I could fall into, lie back on the sand and fall and fall until I was only a speck among the golden stars.

The farm was temporarily at peace. The real estate agents had gone away. My father had left me at the airport with a bitter retort about the farm being a millstone around his neck. I had said nothing. I had gotten on the plane and flown away and had pretended to be a real writer for a week or so before coming home to the silence.

Chopping wood that winter was an exercise in torture as my arthritic hands swelled and curled into claws. I lay in bed at night feeling like my muscles were on fire from the inside. I had no energy left. It was hard to travel, hard to think, hard to work. When I arrived at the college to teach, it took me several minutes to get out of the car and straighten up. More and more, I retreated into small pleasures and comforts, fire, a good
dinner, a movie to watch later, some writing done, phone calls from friends.

Still I would go to bed with my head buzzing, ideas for new poems, the second part of the novel, bit and pieces of writing.

I wondered why the word *lonely* has such a sad ring to it. Perhaps lonely is different than alone, but they are also inextricably connected. I always thought that being alone in a crowd of people was far more difficult than going to bed by myself, with the dog, the cat, the pile of books and magazines that always littered the side of the bed. Loneliness was my drug, my consolation prize, the sweetness that flavoured the long hours at the computer, the companion that lurked on the path up the mountain or down through the garden. When I picked the last of the corn and peaches that summer, I wanted others with whom to share a sense of completeness. There should have been songs; there should have been a harvest festival; there should have been others lifting and carrying buckets of peaches alongside me. But there wasn't. There was me and the peaches and the land.

That fall I picked the apples and grapes and pears and planted a combination of blue and gold tulips in the garden. I carried in huge bulging bellies of blue and green Hubbard squash, fifty pounds or more each, enough to feed an army of kids through the winter... if we still had an army of kids.

The peace continued that fall. My mother seemed better and I was writing, working on a couple of books at once. It was a fall of rain alternating with sun. In the sun, the lake turned that deep royal blue it only gets in late fall and early spring. Even if I were deprived of my ability to see anything but the light, I would know the changing seasons by the quality of the light. It starts to change in late August, the first days of sliding
towards fall, to sleepiness and nostalgia and harvest.

My mother and I and my friends always turned inward during the winter. From November until February, we barely saw the sun down in the bottom of the valley. A layer of cloud, smoke and the dust from the sand and ice covered roads covered the valley every winter. I tried to turn this to my advantage, by burrowing deeper within, by writing harder and longer.

I always liked the way animals stand in the winter cold, perfectly still, pulled into themselves. If you come near, they move away slowly, like fish drifting in water. They stand still, enclosed hidden furnaces, burning dried grass and crushed seeds, steaming away like dark furry kettles.

Whenever I went to Vancouver to visit the kids, I remembered all over again what I needed that the city lacked. On the way home, I stared into the clear brown water of the Similkameen River. I fed off the moss on the rocks, the last leaves still twisting disconsolately on the mostly bare trees. I fed off texture, colour, taste, and smell until I felt I could breathe freely again.

January has always been my least favourite month of the year. That January, warmth descended far into the depths of the earth. Nothing came in the mail but bills. Money had almost disappeared from my life. I was taking yet another magic remedy for arthritis. I couldn’t remember what it was like to get up in the morning feeling well, to go down the steep basement stairs, chop kindling without wincing, throw logs on the fire, split knotty blocks of fir, go outside and prune apple trees, go riding, all the things I once
My mother seemed more and more fragile everyday. More and more, my father told me stories of his childhood, his tone insistent, desperate. They were stories I'd heard before but he told them as if there was something important in them I didn't understand before, something I have to learn.

But we were now a family with a story. Once our story was that we were self-sufficient, we worked hard, we grew our own food, we were tough as nails, we gave no quarter to anyone, we ignored the foolish suburban summer people. We were a family with land, a mini kingdom.

It was all work, work and survive, survive and no room for useless things. What held us together was our land and our sense of connection to it. Or maybe that was my story and my story alone. Connection is so easily something else; a bond is a chain, work is either glory or slavery. Maybe my brother, my sister's stories were those of bondage and slavery. I didn’t know anymore.

One day, I came home from town where I’d gone shopping and to pick up the mail. It had poured rain all day and the evening was coming fast and dark. I was crawling back out of the hole into which a bland official letter from four days earlier telling me I didn't get a grant had sent me tumbling, a hole filled with an acid sense of failure so bitter and intense that it burned my skin, shriveled my soul back down into its very core. I put myself to sleep dreaming of suicide, I woke to the same comforting dream. I couldn’t help but imagine the freedom from worry the money would have bought me. The impersonal cruelty of it was beyond dealing with.

"Don't take it personally," is the first thing every writer has to learn about
rejection. But how to do otherwise? Ever since I was a kid, I have reacted to pain by fighting back; if I fell off my horse, my bike, my reaction was furious, instinctive, instant, to get back on and conquer whatever it was had thrown me. But I couldn’t fight impersonal bureaucrats from far away who didn’t give reasons for their decisions and who never had to know the reality of what they had or hadn’t done.

So I did what I always do, what I knew best, split myself into a person shivering with anguish and despair, and the other one, who got up, got dressed, went to town, taught a class, smiled and made conversation, and drove the car home without sliding on the ice or hitting the deer which improvidently crossed my path on the Wynndel hill.

I arrived home to the comfort of a clean house, silence, tea, a New Yorker review of George Orwell's new collected writings, and finally, supper. I made a lovely supper out of popcorn, toast, and oranges. I phoned Juanita after supper and we reflected on the joys of our separate solitudes, in our winter houses, in the dark evening rain, the joys of uninterrupted reading, of hot baths. Being alone was the only time I was not in a small agony of self-consciousness. Perhaps solitude is, for some people anyway, a necessary kind of existence. Why isn't it more celebrated? There is much joy in it, much joy in simple pleasures, in being able to notice them. Are there things you can't learn, can't know, can't remember to recognize, in company? If I were in a relationship, would I forget to notice the intense pleasure of silence, of reading, of my bed, of long walks alone, of coming in after walks? Of course, I have Kin. He doesn't ask much. Walks, food, his couch. He likes solitude too.

After supper, I opened the mail. I had been accepted into the UBC Creative Writing MFA program. I had no money to go. But if there was one thing I was good at, it
was coping without money. I would go and hope for some kind of miracle.

After supper, the dog and I went on our evening walk to the beach. The mountains stood there the way they always did, pointing their shadows down into the heart of the black and glossy lake. I kicked the soccer ball into the water for the dog to fetch but it got trapped on the edge of a mat of driftwood that had clogged the small bay.

It took both of us a while to get the ball back—me poking and prodding at the logs to get them loose, him scrambling from log to log as they rolled and sank under him. I got out on the raft of logs as well. It was hard to see in the evening light. The water sucked at the logs with its many mouths. I got away but left a shoe as a gift. The dog and I were both soaked and tired when we got the ball back and he held it triumphantly in his mouth all the way up the hill.

We felt pretty good about ourselves as we strolled through the early spring twilight. Geese babbled nonsense overhead and the smell of warming earth rose up from under my feet, which meant it was probably time to plant something or other. Tomorrow I would phone my kids. Tomorrow, I’d start working on a new book.

After I decided to move away from the farm again, I needed money so I went to work in Edmonton, doing some editing for a friend. When I finished working in Edmonton, I drove down through Calgary, stopped in Fort Macleod, on to the foothills, through the Rockies to the Kootenays.

I had been living in other people's houses, living other people's lives for the past few months, working and trying to make money to go to school. I was tired of smiling,
getting up at odd hours, eating breakfast when I didn't feel like it, hanging up my wet
towels, stopping at two glasses of wine.

Now I was so tired of traveling that every place I saw, I imagined stopping,
finding a place, a house, and simply staying there, having a life of my own. And each life
would be in its own kind of place; in Northern Alberta, it would be among the poplar and
aspen and cottonwood, the gruff farmers, oil wells and hydrogen sulphide flares, flat
stretches of brush and sly greedy trees busily reclaiming any unplowed land.

I wanted to stop in Peigan country, near Brocket, where someone had spray
painted a sign saying, Free Nation, No Treaty Indians. Two men were standing beside a
fence post and tractor, stretching wire. The wind was blowing hard, hard, out of the
Crowsnest. The horses stood with their heads down and rumps pointing to the mountains.
Or down through the other side of the Crowsnest, maybe I could live in Fernie, I thought,
and never go skiing. I could have a little a little house on the dark mountains among the
elk and moose and hunters in the fall. I could live alone, in all that snow. I kept thinking
of my favourite Adrienne Rich poem about driving across the country, through towns she
might have lived and died in, lonely.

And then I thought of the place I had lived all my life, and how perfectly and
peculiarly lonely it was there, among the people I have known all my life. It's writing that
made me lonely. It's all writing's fault, I thought. Writing made me an exile the first time
I picked up a pen when I was six. Maybe I could quit writing and buy an RV, I thought,
and understood that fantasy for the first time too. Oh, I knew so much about everything
when I was driving. I imagined myself freewheeling it alone down the Dempster
Highway to the Arctic Ocean and standing there, looking at the blue-black ice on the wild
I would have my dog for company. I'd never have to get out of the RV except to go for long windswept walks beside the Arctic. These days, they even have drive in bank machines. I could have a computer and a satellite dish and a wide screen TV.

Of course, I'd have to have some money but that wasn't today's problem. Just tomorrow's, when I got home and stopped being tragic on a windswept highway heading out of Alberta and had to get ready to move again out of the place that holds my life.

I have always wanted to write when I was driving. When I was a little kid, I liked to ride around in the back seat of cars because I could dream there. I didn't get to do it much because we had a pickup. Four kids and two adults in the front seat of a '57 Dodge didn't leave much room for dreaming.

The day before I moved away to go to UBC, my son and I were driving the lake road with his son, my grandson, asleep in the back seat.

"Do you think your grandmother has Alzheimer's?" I asked. I was driving so I didn't have to look at him.

"She's fine," he said. "You worry too much."

The steering wheel shook because the tires were going bald. I never know what to do about tires. They're never just right for the time of year. Someone always tells me, "Oh, you shouldn't have your winters on now," or then they say, "Better get some new winter tires." It has worn me out over the years, worrying about tires.

"Should I get some new tires?" I asked.
"The tires are fine," he said.

"She phoned over to my house last week. She said she couldn't remember how to make biscuits."

Oh, c'mon, I had said. Of course you know how to make biscuits.

I wanted to say, "Do you think she'll die while I'm gone, do you think she'll fade away and forget everything?" but it was such a beautiful day, the road like a carved edge between the cliff and the bright blue lake.

“She's fine," he said again.

We drove on and on, balancing on the yellow line, the delicate and multicoloured exhaust trailing behind us in the cold fall air.

Chapter Twelve:

I never understood before that memories are also a place to live. Whenever I come home to the farm from Vancouver these days, I do the same thing. I prowl around. I look at every change. I see the work I can no longer do, the trees, which need pruning, the weeds in the raspberries, the unmowed lawns, the work I did for years, the work I don't do any longer. But I see it.

Kin and I still always go for a last walk before bed. Usually, we go to the beach. Sometimes we wander the old Hog Pasture, which hasn't been a hog pasture for sixty years. It's now owned by other people, has huge new houses on it that nobody lives in, both for sale. I'm trespassing but there's no one to see or care.

Plus I have some rights here. Or my memories do. And some needs as well.
Kin takes off, disappears into the darkness, running fast, nose to the ground. I depend on him to warn me about bears or cougars, but I'm not really nervous. Any self-respecting bear or cougar would hear me fumbling along and get himself as far out of the way as possible.

I'm never sure what I'm doing out here, tracing paths that only existed when I was a kid, paths that are now lawns and driveways. Still, I know the way, even in the dark. Over this particular path, I went every day after school to fetch Tiny, the Jersey milk cow with the huge doleful eyes. She used to hear me coming and hide in the brush. I had to stand very still and listen until the occasional faint clank from her cowbell would give her away. Once I found her, she'd begrudgingly head for the barn, her calf, her evening feed of grain and hay. I'd wander behind, a stick in my hand, which I didn't need, switching the clusters of snowberries off the bushes, or the last dried elderberries from out of the thicket.

I'm glad to see that same elderberry bush I used to walk by is still there. Elderberries are hard to kill. Maybe the new owner got tired of chopping it down, finally let it be and curved his driveway to go around it. An old European legend says that witches live in elderberry bushes. If you chop one down, the witch will curse you.

White people haven't lived long enough in this country to have similar legends. We don't know or believe anything about the spirits of the land. We don't think there are any. Maybe we believe that to our peril.

All my life I have watched people move in around me, chop down the trees, build driveways and houses and septic tank fields and lawns and gardens. Gradually, they have built places that hold other memories, not mine. But these houses are for sale because the
people who built them are both dead and their children live far away and don't want to come here.

My memories are of these places before they were owned, civilized, tamed. Mine are of the old paths, the deer trails, the moss-beds under the spruce, the snowberry jungle with the secret swamp at its centre. Mine are a child's memories – it is my childhood I am prowling through out here in the dark, feeling my way over paths that my feet remember, that would be hidden to me by daylight.

I have an odd fantasy that I can see the paths – that the layers of feet, mine, the dogs, the cows, the O'Neil's crazy wild horses, deer and bears and skunks and other animals prowling the dark, have left thin molecular traces of themselves, traces that shine dimly in the night. What is probably true is that the paths are a hidden unevenness in the ground, so they refract the little available light, from the stars or a distant yard light differently and so maybe it is true that I can see them.

But I like my fantasy better, that the path is visible to me at night in the same way as the smells of wild animals are visible to the dog's questing nose – that it shines in some way I don't understand, that it is available to my seeking feet.

The paths remain – and the names. The names remain within our family – I don't know if the neighbours with their new houses have any idea that they now live in Sawdust Bay, Haley's Pasture, the Hog Pasture, or Bone Bay. These were the farm names, acquired easily, lost just as easily. Sawdust Bay still has thick piles of sawdust layered over with pine needles where Pierre Longueval milled out the lumber for his house and barns and chicken sheds – Haley's Pasture is where one of the first white men
into the country trailed a herd of goats over the mountains, built four log cabins whose ancient bones still crouch under the fir trees. Someone has put a trailer on Pierre's sawdust piles; someone has built a driveway over the rock walls and rusty barbed wire Haley used for his goat pasture.

When I am home, I prowl the old paths remembering stories stored in the ground and waiting for me, shining up at me in the starlight. I prowl these paths looking for comfort, for roots, for balance, for reconnection. I know what I am really doing is wandering through my own history, looking for the next book, the new path, the next step on the road. When I lie in bed at night the paths still shine in my head. All night I walk their secret ways, at home and content.

When I need company or just to catch up on the gossip, I drive down the road to the Sirdar Pub, where there’s always good food and music and someone to talk to. Once, some years ago, the new owner of the pub in Sirdar got a new sign. As we drove down the long hill into Sirdar, the blurry badly painted B looked like a D so many began to call it the Pud. Some of us still do that but new people don’t get the joke because the sign has been changed.

Now when I sit in the Sirdar Pub, I stare across the tracks to the blank field that once was our school ground. One train still comes by each evening and when it does, everyone yells Train. The current waitress picks a number and we all look under our seats. The right number wins a free shooter.

The Sirdar Pub is where Alan Wilson and I went for dinner a month before he died. By then he was almost completely paralyzed by a brain tumour but we ate fried
chicken and talked about the things we always talked about, about the lake and the weather and our kids and what the hell was with the CBC.

When I was struggling to become a writer, I would go to Alan and Joanna’s house at least two or three times a week for coffee. I’d come in the door, sit at the dining room table, leaf through their collection of magazines while Joanna ground coffee beans. Alan would see my truck and come up from the workshop where he was sandblasting the handmade gravestones he made. We’d drink our coffee and exchange whatever new gossip we had and talk about what we loved and hated on CBC radio which we all listened to all day long while we worked.

The Sirdar Pub is where we all went for dinner one night when my son and Joan and Alan’s daughter were both working there. Marisa went into labour that night and Alan’s first grandson was born. A month later, so was mine.

The stuffed fish and deer heads that were on the wall when I was eighteen and went for my first legal beer, are still there, 35 years later. On warm summer nights when the mosquitoes gather in clouds around the windows, every new person enters to a chorus of “Quick, shut the door.”

As we ate dinner, outside clouds of smoke and a chorus of slaps rise from the new young people, the smokers, huddled together for protection near the back door by the kitchen.

Once, not long before Alan died, he and I were talking about Sirdar School and I couldn’t remember the name of Mrs. Hare’s dog that came to school with her every day and slept under her desk. When Alan and Santo and I were in Grade 7, the school was down to 8 students. When Mrs. Hare started going blind, they closed the school in the
middle of the year and moved us all to Wynndel.

It seemed sad and peculiar to me that I couldn’t remember the name of this dog. I wanted to hang on to as many memories of Sirdar as I could so on a kind of whim, I began phoning the few people I knew who had also gone to school at Sirdar to ask them what they remembered. They all agreed that Mrs. Hare had a dog but most people disagreed on what it had looked like. Some people thought there were two dogs but no one remembered their names either. It wasn’t hard to make the phone calls. There are not many of us and most of us still live in and around the area.

I asked Santo when I saw him in the bar and he said he would ask his sister, who owns the General Store next door, and his cousin who lives up on the hill next door to their grandparents.

I can’t remember what Mrs. Hare looked like either, since she always got mixed up in my head with my mother. I have no pictures of the Sirdar school or of Mrs. Hare. We didn’t have class pictures. No one I know has any pictures of the school or us or the building that was torn down years ago.

Just before I left, on my last trip, I phoned one more person to ask about the dog. “Yeah, I knew you were going to call,” he said. “The dog’s name was Terence, he was a black Cocker Spaniel, and he was old, that’s why he slept under her desk. Okay?”

But no matter how hard I try, I can’t remember Terence, or Mrs. Hare’s face, or the sound of her voice, coaxing me through the exciting process of sounding out words as I first learned to read. But I do remember that as soon as I learned to read, I wanted to also write, and that Mrs. Hare, of all the people I knew then, didn’t seem to think this was a
I live now, while I go to school in Vancouver, in a soundscape of cars and buildings and noise and exhaust fumes. Not a place I have been able to love even though I love so much of what I do here: classes at the university, playing with my grandson at the park on Sunday afternoons, with so many people of different backgrounds in easy familiarity with each other.

My life here is bounded by the university, by the library, by my grown children, who all live nearby, and my grandchildren. One night I had a dream that the university was next to the mountains at the farm. In the dream, I realized I could walk from the University and into the trees anytime I wanted or needed to.

When I woke, I realized the split in my life, between books and the farm, between the forest and poetry, had somehow eased, if not completely healed. My brother and I have an agreement to keep the farm together as much as we can. We have started planting more fruit trees.

Last summer, my son Geronimo phoned and said his ex-partner had agreed to let him have his son for two weeks in August.

“We can meet at the farm,” he said. “It will be good for Gaelin to spend some time with his great-grandpa.”

I wasn’t so sure. Even at eighty, Dad is still a big loud gruff man. Gaelin was
eight; and although he had spent time at the farm when he was younger, he had spent most of the last four years in the city, and the city was what he was used to.

We stayed in the old farmhouse, which sits, empty until I come; every summer I open it up, chase out the dust, the spiders, and the ghosts. We settled in, and began a routine of going to the beach in the afternoon and having dinner with my father in the evenings.

Three years ago, my mother had a stroke and then she had a fall, and then finally, she was taken to the hospital. I sat beside her bed, watched her belly rise and fall, held her thin hand. She was dehydrated and anemic; she had two broken ribs. My father had somehow not noticed that she had almost stopped eating and drinking. After she started to recover, it was obvious that she wouldn’t be able to manage at home. My sister and brothers and I talked it over and she was admitted to a care home.

Since she was moved to the nursing home, my father has finally, and reluctantly, learned to look after himself. My mother and I used to find it hilarious that this man who could fix a broken tractor with haywire, duct tape, and a hammer couldn’t figure out how to run the washing machine or the microwave. Now, he was forced to cook for himself; his cooking is a kind of freeform invention. He experiments with all kinds of ideas, making soup, and jam and even occasionally, a cake. He cans fruit in the microwave, not worrying when it gives off sparks from the metal lids. He makes bread in the bread machine and tomato and carrot juice in the juicer. If he could find a machine to do the cooking for him, then he could manage. He is proud of his new skills and shows them off at length to anyone who would listen.
Sometimes it feels that everything at the farm has changed since my mother left, except the look of things. My father has kept the house exactly the same, and on my visits, I don’t change anything either except to scrub the fridge and the bathroom. My mother’s clothes still hang in the closet, her dressing gown is laid out beside the bed and her notebook lies next to the phone, with long-ago grocery lists still in it. But the place feels different. Even when I was a child, I was amazed at how my mother’s presence filled the house, how empty it was when she wasn’t there, how the house would fill up with energy, warmth, food and comfort the minute she came home.

We all miss my mother, and we miss her meals. We miss the rich scent of roasting meat and the comfort of collapsing into a chair in front of the TV, knowing we will soon be fed and fed well. In my mother’s kitchen, we were always children. Now we have lost the luxury of being sometimes a child, allowed to be lazy, allowed to be pampered.

Gaelin has always been a fussy eater. Even when he was small, mealtimes were an ordeal; his parents started him off on a vegetarian diet and eventually gave up, resigned to feeding him whatever he would eat. Over the years, he and I have had various grandma/grandson discussions about the problems associated with a diet made up of too much Coke or MacDonald’s hamburgers or potato chips. But he was still hard to keep fed. Now, at the farm, every morning, I got up early and tried to offer him a decent breakfast, toast and bacon, or porridge, or pancakes with fresh fruit. But still, he only nibbled moodily at his food.

At first, Gaelin was shy around my father and my father seemed equally shy of him. My father never seemed to be able to remember his name and just referred to him as
“the boy.” My father is also (although he will never admit it) somewhat deaf and he had a habit, when Gaelin said something to him, of staring at him and then ignoring the fact that he had spoken at all. Gaelin never seemed to be sure what to say, or how loudly to say it.

Haying season came. This year, it would be my father, my brother, Bill, my son, and my grandson, four generations together. My job was to stay in the house, make sure there was lots to eat and drink, and admire their sunburns, mosquito bites, and hay-scratched skin when they came in to take a break.

All day, as they all worked outside, I hovered in the house, in my mother’s kitchen, among my mother’s pots and pans and familiar things. It felt like my mother would bustle in at any moment, putting the kettle on for tea, tidying, setting things to right, making the house feel warm, comfortable a home again. Now I tried to take her place – I made a pot of chicken soup and my mother’s special cheese biscuits for lunch, I made lemonade and gingersnaps and while I cooked and tidied and washed the dishes, I couldn’t help staring out the window at the distant hay field, listening to the roar of the tractor and wondering how Gaelin was faring. I missed my mother with an intensity that only increased as the day went on. It seemed so unfair, so wrong, that she wasn’t here.

The men trooped in for lunch, talking of tractors and weather, how much was done and how much was left to do. Gaelin seemed quiet. I asked him how his morning went; it turned out he had spent the morning sitting beside his great-grandfather on the tractor, had taken a turn at driving this ancient rusting machine which my father has continued to patch together from parts of other machines for all the years we have been
After lunch, I asked Gaelin if he wouldn’t rather stay in with me, or go to the beach, or help me make cookies. He looked at me. “No,” he said, “We’ve got to get the hay in.” I fussed at him about wearing a hat and sunscreen and he ignored me and went back out with his great-grandpa, his great-uncle, and his father.

By the end of the day, I could tell he was exhausted and sunburnt. I finally prevailed and took him off to the beach for a swim. When we came back up from the beach, we ate homegrown beef and new potatoes from the garden for supper, and for dessert, there was ice cream and strawberries. Gaelin hadn’t eaten much of the main course, and now he loaded his bowl with ice cream and the lion’s share of the strawberries.

“Gaelin,” I said, “that’s too much. Leave some for others.”

“Let the kid have what he wants,” growled my father. I stared while he took Gaelin’s bowl and loaded it with the remaining strawberries. Gaelin shot me a triumphant look and ate the whole thing. After supper, we all fell into bed early, knowing there was still another couple of days of hard work ahead.

In the morning, I woke, listening for the early morning sounds I love, the swallows under the eaves, the chickens in the yard, and the breeze in the giant cedar trees. Gaelin was almost always awake first; he would get up by himself and play quietly or draw pictures until I got up. But this morning he was nowhere around. I trotted across the yard to my parent’s house, came in the door, and there was Gaelin, sitting with my dad, eating breakfast.

“Hey,” said my father, “this kid’s got better sense than you. He likes my
Gaelin was sitting beside my father, eating the bread my father had made, covered with runny black currant jam. He had a full glass of my father’s tomato juice in front of him.

All my life, my father has been trying to make me drink tomato juice, and all my life I have detested it. My fussy grandson picked up his glass, drained it and held it out to his great-grandpa to be refilled.

I had a piece of toast and a cup of my father’s weak grey coffee. We talked about the hay, the weather, and when we would all have a chance to go visit my mother.

And then I went and sat on the porch and watched my father and his great-grandson walk side by side down the driveway to where the ancient tractor waited for them under the cedar trees.

When I was a child, everything around me was wild, or I thought it was and I thought I could be wild as well. It seemed to be right, to be wild, and not part of the confusing world of houses and people and rules that made little sense. Town and people were far away – we had neighbours, but even they were wild, or seemed wild, to me and all things wild seemed good and normal and right.

Now I look at mountains that are torn and seamed with roads, scabbed with slowly healing clear cuts, I know the wild is still there, still underneath waiting, just as it waits in cities and under pavement and highways and high-rises, behind dams, power lines, oil and gas pipelines, behind and between and under metal and glass and concrete.

When I come to the mountains after a long absence, I fall back with huge relief
into mountain time where I used to live.

When I come home, I wander around wanting silence and all of eternity to stare at the mountains and perhaps become part of them again. Mountains deny temporal time. They let me crawl back onto the fringes of eternity.

Time runs in infinite channels and my life is an eyeblink. I have sunk my dreams, hopes and fears into this one place, asked it to carry them. I have buried my future in the garden, under the marigolds and sunflowers, asked it to hold me there, keep me safe.

One night when I was home, I walked back in the dark from the lake. The moon was coming up behind the Purcells, behind a black and white slanted slab of hill. I saw the moon. I stood still and opened my mouth. All I could do was breathe and breathe, with the cold air and the snow falling in my open upturned mouth.

All I wanted was to be here walking in the cold night, the moon rising over the mountains, and the light falling over the farm where, just at the edge of the field, the coyotes were taunting the dogs, the coyotes in their snowy woods beyond the fence and the dogs running between the house and the pasture, while the sleepy grumpy cows shook their heads at the dogs, and I, standing, hesitating in the cold instead of going inside.
Writing about why you write is a funny business, like scratching what doesn’t itch. Impulses are mysterious and explaining them must be done with mirrors, like certain cunning sleight of hand routines. All the while I’ve been trying to grasp the reasons I have written what I have, in the manner I have, I’ve been working those mirrors for all they’re worth. - Patricia Hampl (1999), p. 205

We live in stories. What we are is stories. We do things because of what is called character and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark and rework our stories and we do it again the next morning and all day long, before the looking glass of ourselves, reinventing our purposes. Without storytelling it's hard to recognize ultimate reasons why one action is more essential than another. - William Kittredge (1999), p. 57

Writing about writing about oneself is indeed a funny business. Writers are used to being invisible – to standing behind or perhaps beside their writing, stark naked and totally invisible – at the same time. Writing about writing has traditionally been the province of literary critics. What has given me the temerity, the impulse, the desire, and the authority, to analyze my own work and look, not only at the memory and emotions that inspired it, plus the impulses and meanings that may have illuminated it, but also the
theoretical positioning, the space of inquiry, the liminal space, that might result from such an inquiry?

Partly perhaps, I share the impulse described by Rita Irwin (2004), when in writing of the concept of ‘a/r/t/o графy’, she writes of the kinship among “knowing, doing, making,” (preface) and although she is referring to visual art, I see no reason why such a concept isn’t translatable across all the art forms. And I also agree with Sylvia Wilson (2004), when she says that art as research is fluid, that “the process of creating, the research, and the final product are all integral to the final outcome” (p. 47). In creating my own memoir, I have explored some of this process as well as this kinship between creation, inquiry and a product. By actually creating the object of my own research, and in exploring theory around the form in which I have chosen to write, I have attempted to illuminate, for myself and for others, many aspects of this genre, such as the process, the performance, the re-construction of memoir writing, some of intricacies of crafting language, and some of the contextual issues involved in actually writing the memoir. In particular, the process of writing the memoir highlighted for me the ethics of writing about other people. Another issue both embedded and explored within the content of the memoir is the notion of an ecological self. The memoir also explores the conflicts between different aspects of my own identity, and some resolution of those conflicts.

Memoir combines an intense examination of subjectivity, memory, and images with the deliberate and thoughtful construction of the results of such personal searching. In the process of writing my memoir, I ran through a whole gamut of emotions; fear of exposing my life to public view was often equally combined with energy, belief and sense of purpose. In writing and revising the memoir, patterns of behaviour, growth and
understanding emerged that I had not seen clearly before. In walking through my own memories, I rediscovered and reaffirmed the particular experiences and images that have served me as guides; in making them conscious rather than intuitive, and in shaping them into narrative, I participated in performing my own subjectivity into text. Memoir was also a form that I needed to learn as a writer and I spent some time reading about it as well as writing it.

In his on-line essay, "Backtalk: Notes toward an Essay on Memoir," Richard Hoffman (n.d.) defines the nature and purpose of memoir in this way:

Ultimately, a memoir must be about the myriad ways the past and present conjugate to produce the future. This commingling includes the dead as well as the living, our forbears as well as our children. The memoirist's disciplined practice must include openness to grief, regret, and remorse in order to see reality clearly. This extrication from lies, shame, and silence, this liberation, is the result of many individual acts of truth-telling performed by choosing this word or phrase over that, by honoring the integrity of each event as opposed to modifying its contours to fit, by the quest to understand how time, along with place, class, and culture, has unfolded character and determined history.

Dr. Suzanne Bunker (2004), in a scholarly paper that she presented at the Fourth International Auto/biography Association Conference, held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in March, 2004, wrote:

The interaction of memory and imagination, reconstruction and re-invention of the past, implications of the past for the present and future, privacy vs. telling of secrets, the role of dreams and memories in memoir writing, real time vs. virtual
time, versions of the truth, fluidity of identity, self-consciousness in narrative, the
role of lies and confession in memoir writing—all of these are pertinent issues in
the study of narratives.

Susanna Egan and Gabrielle Helms (2002) write, in their introduction to a special
issue of *Canadian Literature* focusing on autobiography:

We live in an auto/biographical age that uses the personal narrative as a lens onto
history and the contemporary world. In every medium, cultures are permeated
and increasingly transformed by auto/biographical narratives, productions, and
performances of identity. (p.1)

It was this collision of contradictions and categories, as well as its
contemporaneity, that drew me to the genre of memoir, that pulled me in, and that enticed
me to sort out the ideas and memories that are part of who I am and what I know, have
learned and am still learning. As well, I found contradiction, confusion, and relational
complexity, in particular regarding the ethics of writing memoir. Embarking on writing a
memoir was an endeavour that proved to be the most complex, provoking and rewarding
learning journey I have ever undertaken.

**The decision to write a memoir:**

I have been a writer for many years – I published my first book in 1981 – and a
teacher of writing since 1986. But stories have been my teachers as long as I can
remember. I can still remember the thrill of reading my first whole book and the
impulsive awareness, then, that if reading was this wonderful, then writing should also
prove to be just as wonderful. As a result, at six years of age, when I announced to my assembled family that I would be a writer, I’m sure they had no idea what to think. Our family were farmers, on my father’s side, as far back as our genealogy can be traced. And yet, my family culture and our history dwell in stories. I grew up listening to stories from both my mother and father, stories of their childhood, stories of farming and animals, weather and work, and the contrariness of both things and people.

The impulse to be a writer came from learning to read and falling in love with reading as well as the process of language. I was fortunate, in the one-room school I attended for my first seven years, to have a teacher who supported and encouraged my love of both reading and writing. With all seven grades in one room, I soon learned to listen in to the older grades during their reading lesson. Impatient and bored with Dick and Jane, I quickly began reading books from higher grades and my teacher encouraged me. In fact the principal from the big school in the nearest town began making special trips to have me read to him and for many years, I regularly got my name and picture in the paper for having the highest grades in the valley. And my father also regularly made fun of me for my vocabulary, for my habit of using long words that I didn’t know how to pronounce, and for reading when I was supposed to be working.

As I grew older, my life took many different paths, but the need and the desire to write was always a priority. Along with this desire came an incessant and related drive to learn, to read, to understand the nature of stories, and as a result of this quest, to understand as much as I could about being human, being alive. I also understood at a fairly early age that stories were magic; that into story I could escape and through story I
could discover and fashion an identity. But what that meant in terms of actually becoming a writer was a much later discovery in my life.

Although my impulse to be a writer was born early, the impulse to teach writing came much later. In part, the impulse to teach writing was born out of my experiences when I attended university in 1979 to study creative writing. I was intrigued and fascinated by my wonderful instructors at the University of Victoria, who knew so much about literature, about writing, about being able to help people to improve their writing. I was also dismayed at some of their statements and philosophies. They wanted to make their students tough, they said, enough to withstand the challenges of being a Canadian writer. But such tactics worked against students, especially women students, who were sensitive or didn’t fit into this model of what it meant to be a writer.

However, I also studied newly implemented courses in Women’s Studies along with Creative Writing. As I studied, I also tried, determinedly, to read my way through the Canadian literary canon. I began to realize there were many voices missing, voices of non-mainstream writers; women, First Nations people, the immigrant experience, gay and lesbian writers, working class writers and people of colour in Canada. I began to wonder if teaching writing to marginalized people could in some way begin to help address this imbalance. Eventually, I began to teach writing specifically to emerging women writers at the University of Alberta Extension department. I moved from there to working with First Nations learners at a small private First Nations college in Merritt, British Columbia. I was astounded at the depth and emotion of the stories I both heard and read in within these two communities. It quickly became a ludicrous task, at the First Nations college, to try to ‘mark’ students’ essays. After reading a heartbreaking story about
someone surviving residential school, or sexual abuse, or alcoholism, or all three, I would cry, go for a walk, come back, write a long note to the essayist, and give it the most honest evaluation I could. Consequently, it took me an absurdly long time to work through a whole classroom set of essays.

After this job was finished, I began successfully to write full time, publishing novels, children’s books, poetry and magazine articles. The thought of writing a memoir had been a possibility for some time but it wasn’t until I completed a Master’s Degree in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia, that I realized that a personal memoir was the project that I wanted to tackle next. It was extremely fortuitous that I had the opportunity to begin working on the memoir within the context of being a Ph.D student in the Centre for Cross-Faculty Inquiry, in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. I had the opportunity to take classes, read theory and meet with fellow researchers engaged in using autoethnography and autobiographical inquiry as a methodology. And of course, I also continued to be both a working and teaching professional writer and editor.

And I had a secondary purpose in writing the memoir that dealt primarily with the content, rather than the form of the memoir. I wanted to share in and assist in creating an ongoing literary tradition and discourse about the nature and meaning of home, of place and of a sense of connection to nature and to a particular place. In preparation, I read literary memoirists whose work is based on ecological themes, such as William Kittredge, Annie Dillard, Rick Bass, David James Duncan, Barry Lopez, Sharon Butala, David Macfarlane and Trevor Herriott. In part, I was in search of, and am still trying to create, in a sense, a kind of ‘new’ language, i.e., stories of belonging, of care, of
ecological restoration. I agree with David Abrams (1996), for example, when he writes, “Our task rather is that of taking up the written world with all of its potency, and patiently carefully writing language back into land” (p. 273). I was particularly struck by the this statement David James Duncan (March-April, 2003) wrote in Orion Magazine:

Is ecological restoration possible without a simultaneous restoration of language? A literature of stories, poems, and essays that truly embody the distinctiveness of a particular place and draw their subject matter from the local wellspring of human and more than human lives can be a healing force in an increasingly globalized and technological world. (p. 78)

And of course, I also read or re-read other modern memoirists whose work I had discovered previously as well as recently: Nancy Mairs, May Sarton, David Sedaris, Mary Karr, Augusten Burroughs, Helen Buss, and older memoirists, such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf.

I was also concerned and worried about the role and place of memory within modernity. As David Gross (2000) says, “One of the most important consequences of modernity has been the precipitous decline of memory as a value” (p. 31). I wondered if a memoirist might have a specific role and responsibility in terms of recreating a kind of specific immediate memory that would serve a larger role of becoming a kind of iconic framework for a particular kind of story within society as a whole. It seemed to me that my experience of moving from a childhood as a self-subsistent farmer, through motherhood, then political activism and then to being a professional writer had many echoes within the movements of social change in my/our times. And yet, as a writer, I knew I wanted to avoid any tone of preachiness or persuasion. I also knew that I couldn’t
and wouldn’t know what the memoir was truly about until it was done. And in fact, even after it was done, every time I worked on the revisions, I would discover new aspects to my own story that I hadn’t previously considered. For example, there were difficult areas of my life, such as an abortion I had, when I was a young, single parent, that I didn’t include until the third revision.

In addition to all this, I also wanted to create an artifact that would hold my story and the story of our family within the family, as well as outside, and that would continue to exist into the future, not for my sake, but for the sake of future descendents of mine who might be interested in their family lineage, in their cultural, geographic history, and in stories of their progenitors.

**Guiding questions:**

Before I actually began writing my memoir, I had certain questions I wanted to ask, of myself, of the work and of the process of completing the work. I hoped, within this tripartite quest, that some answers would emerge but I was equally prepared for surprises. However, during the writing itself, even further questions emerged that became an ongoing source of inquiry.

Initially, I wanted to grasp how writing can function as a space of inquiry, a source of understanding. I wondered how would the actual process of writing a memoir change both my understanding of my sense of self, and my story? Were they the same? What would I understand about myself after the memoir was finished? And how could I or should I use such knowledge? Would I be left with a clearer understanding of aspects
of my identity, or would the artifact, the written story, obscure or even replace my intuitive experiential sense of my own story, the story that because it is my own, I believed I already knew and understood. I believed I knew what I was doing. Hadn’t I written a whole lot of other books? Like Patricia Hampl (1999), I assumed that “intentionality” was one of the most important factors in my writing. But as she says, “It turned out that things were not that simple” (p. 28). Although, as a writer, I knew that intentionality is only a small part of the creative process and that I should be prepared for some surprises, I was not prepared for the depth and intricacy of the questions sparked by the process of writing a memoir. Even as I finished the memoir that forms the major part of this dissertation, I was already engaged by the omission of material that didn’t fit in this memoir. In fact, I have already begun planning a second bout of non-fiction writing.

I was also curious about the strategies I would have to choose in trying to present my subject as somehow “real” to the reader when writing literary memoir. ‘Real,’ of course is a dangerously complex term; the implications and connotations of its various philosophical and linguistic meanings are grounds for rich discussion—but it is certainly a word that gets used frequently in connection with non-fiction.

Philip Lejeune (1989) initially defined the problem of writing about facts, or about the ‘real’ as a kind of autobiographical pact made between the writer and the reader. “What defines autobiography for one who is reading is above all a contract that is sealed by the proper name. And it is true also for the one who is writing the text” (p. 19).

When I began writing, I thought that the assumption readers would make about my work was that I had based my writing as closely as I could possibly manage on what I remembered of my own experience. I also trusted that it was the reader’s job to interpret
my story and I felt that I had indeed made a pact with my readers based not only on using my name but the names of many other people, including my family, with whom I am, on an ongoing basis, connected to in my ‘real’ life.

I made the assumption that because I was writing ‘my’ story, I knew what it was about and what it would contain. But of course memory is fallible and the construction of a story is complex and as I proceeded, such assumption came in for questioning.

And of course, I might never really know what readers in general would think of my work. In fact, despite the popularity of autobiography and memoir as popular genres, little is known about why people read them, or what these readers actually assume is ‘true’, or ‘real’ – and because readers bring their own subjectivity to a story, in fact, it would be very difficult to generalize in this area.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1996) point out that, “When we recognize the person who claims authorship as the protagonist or central figure in the narrative—that is when we believe them to be the same person—we read the text written by the author whom it refers as reflexive…” (p. 8). They add, “Autobiographical truth …is an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (p. 13).

In fact, I always advise my writing students to create a relationship with a person who can act as their editor and first reader, or to create an editing-reading group for themselves since, I tell them, it is difficult for them to know what they have written until they hear reflection back from a group of readers. I personally am a member of two writing/editing groups, plus I have a number of relationships with other writers with whom I can share my work, including my daughter, also a writer. However, these people
are usually reading my work as editors and critics so again, it is difficult to generalize what a reader unknown to me might perceive.

Working with an editor is part of the craftwork of being a writer. As a writer, as well as a practitioner and as a teacher, I have become familiar with the techniques, craftwork and strategies involved in writing poetry, children’s books and novels, all of which involve particular aspects and strategies of what is generally termed the craft of writing. The ideas and contents of writing are a complex and intricate craft. The perception of any text by the reader is influences in a myriad of subtle ways by the craftwork of the writer.

Because of my previous experience, I knew, or at least assumed, that non-fiction would make its own demands on my technique, my knowledge, my craft, practice and expertise as a writer, but I was fairly confident I would be able to come to terms with these demands and meet them.

However as I wrote, I also became increasingly concerned about the added dimension of the ethical implications of writing memoir, a concern I hadn’t met in my previous fiction writing. I began to wonder about the ethics of publicly disclosing material held previously only within a private sphere, or at least within the confines of a family or a relatively small rural community. I wondered how to define the two spheres of private and public; or whether they were really two spheres or part of a continuum, a dichotomy or something much broader and multifaceted?

How, I began to question, does the writer assume the right, the responsibility to tell her side, her view, and her idea of her relationships with others? Must she, or should she, or can she mitigate the implications and the impact of this telling on the people who
are both her subjects and her ‘material’? Can she anticipate how her intent and her actions will unfold? What indeed can she control or mitigate? Where in fact is the origin of the desire and impulse to write a memoir and what connection does the writer’s emotional stance toward her material have with the ethics of telling it? What, in fact, was my intent and the desired consequence? What was I hoping to achieve by telling my memoir and who was my audience?

As a writer intensely involved with a sense of place in my story, I also questioned what role and weight such a sense of place can play in a narrative and how this would be read and interpreted. I knew that geography and place are often an underlying motif in memoir writing but I wanted to add an ecological dimension to such an idea without sounding moralistic or sentimental.

And finally, as a writing teacher, I questioned some of the pedagogical applications of memoir and how the re-telling and reconstruction of lived stories plays a role in education. I believed, as an item of my personal sense of faith in writing and its power, that such stories are crucially important in furthering the understanding and continuity of cultural heritage and understanding. But I didn’t feel I could fully represent this important element of story until I understood the dynamics in such a process first hand. Most writers start with their own experiences; it is a natural place for them to begin.

I also knew that beginning or emerging writers, whether in elementary or high school, or even as adults, are often urged to write from their own lives and experiences. And I also knew, from my teaching experience, what an unsure and tender place this can be for writers. Emerging writers are often unsure of what it is possible or permissible to
write about; is it okay to write about abusive or traumatic events known only within one’s family, for example? And does a writing teacher, who is not a therapist, have the right to ask people to write about experiences that may have been difficult or traumatic or even just very emotional?

The teenage students I have worked with in school visits are almost universally engaged in writing fantasy or science fiction. The idea that these stories might be somehow based, or should be based, on their own experience often comes as a surprise to them.

And yet all writing comes from the subjectivity of the writer, in some sense, no matter how factual or objective such writing is supposed to be. In writing my own memoir, I stumbled over many questions that I had never before asked of my writing or about writing in general. Thus the process provoked and startled my sense of acquiescence in the writing process. I was forced to re-examine a territory that I thought I knew, as well as venture out into new territories full of interesting and possibly somewhat dangerous landscapes.

Beginning the Memoir:

My initial decision to write a memoir was also spurred on by two significant events in my life that happened shortly after I began. First, my mother was diagnosed with dementia and confined to a long-term care home, a traumatic and grievous event for my whole family. My mother had always been my confidant and someone with whom I was very close. She was also the heart and center of our family, deeply loved by all her
children, the one we all turned to in any time of trouble, the one we depended on to always be there for us.

Then one of my closest friends, a man I had known since I was a small child, because our mothers were both friends and neighbours, died of brain cancer. In a very real sense, my mother and Alan had been people I wrote for, people with whom I shared my work, and also the people I counted on for understanding, love and support. I wanted to write the book, partially, as a tribute and a memorial to both of them.

One of my writing teachers in the UBC Creative Writing program, Keith Maillard, once told me, in order to begin working in a new genre of writing, to read for six months in that genre. I took his advice, reading intensely all sorts of memoirs, both modern and historical. I also read books about writing memoir and autobiography. But I was still wandering around inside my own stories with no idea where to begin. Finally, on a Sunday evening on June 21, 2002, I heard an Australian writer named Richard Flanagan being interviewed by Eleanor Wachtel on CBC radio’s program, “Writers and Company.” All writers write about their earliest two or three memories,” he said. I was astonished by this statement. Was it true? What were my earliest memories? Finally, I began to re-create a scene of being hit by a rock thrown by a neighbour child when I was about three. Immediately I realized some of the dimensions of the difficulty of writing memoir. First of all, I had no clear memory of where or when the incident happened, and my mother’s memories, which might have clarified this, were no longer accessible because of her dementia. I had to figure out a way to re-create this scene so that not only was it interesting, it also set a metaphoric and emotional tone for the rest of the narrative. Deliberately, I chose details of this scene that I assumed were probably true although I
had no proof of their actuality. It was my introduction to the constructed nature of memoir and the ethical challenge of artificially re-creating reality.

**Writing as Research:**

As I wrote my memoir, I was also studying and researching within a new, to me, space of academic research. I became increasingly interested in what I saw as a creative and generative collision between traditional knowledge and research methodologies, and contemporary creative practices. I saw the possibility of the generation of new forms of knowledge and understanding. I understood that I was working in a kind of liminal space, where these possibilities are complex and even frightening and I was never sure of what I was doing, or where my inquiry might lead me. But I also experienced this as an exciting place of possibility, of movement and of new leaps and scattered pieces of understanding. I was very unsure of myself in this place. But I also knew that I had predecessors who had made a path for me; Carl Leggo and Gary Raspberry had pioneered writing as inquiry, and Renee Norman, had explored autobiography as inquiry. One of the sources of both this insecurity and excitement was the shift I was making in academic cultures; I was moving from a culture of Creative Writing where the ongoing pedagogical discourse is about the craft, the mechanics, the structures, the working process of creating a ‘product,’ that is, a piece of excellent writing. Now within the theoretical discipline of education, I had the opportunity to explore theoretical areas about which I had been previously curious.
And, I was also a writing teacher and deeply interested in creating curricular materials and structures with which to best convey to my students the ideas and theories of how writing works, not just the mechanics. I found there was a symmetry and synchronicity between my work as a writer, as a pedagogue and as a theorist that were and are intellectually satisfying.

I also became interested in what Michel Foucault (1994) has termed “askesis”, the “training of the self by oneself” (p. 208). Foucault writes that writing itself plays a “considerable” role within the creation of such understanding as well as the creation of a sense of morality and ethics within society. He writes:

Writing constitutes an essential stage in the process to which the whole askesis leads: namely the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into relational principles of action. As an element of self-training, writing has, to use an expression that one finds in Plutarch, an ethopoietic function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into ethos. (p. 208)

It seemed to me that this notion of writing as a method of understanding leading to a course of action was an important pedagogical link between the active work of being a writer, and the research work of understanding what writing is and how it functions.

In writing memoir, the writer works with material that is derived from his or her life: with autobiographical material, with memory, with family stories, with the stories of other people known to them. In my own reading practice, I have found that the best memoirs have a quality of luminosity, of illuminating the life of the reader so that the story being written also resonates with the story of the reader.
Nancy Mairs (1994) writes, “The not-me dwells here in the me. We are one and more than one. Our stories utter one another” (p. 120). Mairs doesn’t believe that her story, however personal, is private. She is notable for writing about family issues, sexuality, illness, and other matters many people might consider private. She believes that in all stories lie “vast strata of commonality, communality” (p. 120).

But the quality of this luminosity is much more than the recital of a series of events. A good memoir incorporates all the usual qualities of good writing with the believability that the reader can think about as true, as having really happened although the nature of this ‘trueness,’ is complex and the subject of much theorizing.

Life stories mirror the culture wherein the story is made and told. Stories live in culture. They are born, they grow, they proliferate, and they eventually die according to the norms, rules and traditions that prevail in a given society, according to a society’s implicit understandings of what counts as a tellable story, a tellable life.’ (McAdams in Fyvush and Haden, 2003, p. 200)

Could I incorporate this luminousity into my own work and what would it then illuminate for me, for my family, for other readers, that which had been hidden or obscure before? It seemed to me in part that the answer to this question depended on my ability to transcend my own barriers to disclosure and speaking about my life.

The writer as researcher is dependent, on his or her own permission to investigate what he or she thinks is important. Etymologically, the word permission comes from the verb, to permit from the French, permettre, and the Latin. Permittere which means "give up, allow, allow to pass through," from per- "through" + mittere "let go, send." So the writer gives up personal barriers in order to send him or herself through the process of
Autobiographical research isn’t easy and it can carry some risks to the researcher. Being able to really engage with one’s own data also depends on understanding one’s defenses and sources of resistance to difficult or even unexpected information and the writer’s reactions to such material. There can be a temptation to discard, ignore, rationalize or prematurely intellectualize the information and thereby diminish the insights it may generate if it is worked with.

This is not easy since the anxiety the data gathered in autobiographical research often unleashes can be great and the temptation to flee almost irresistible. Underpinning all of this is both the need for awareness of self and paradoxically, the search for greater self-awareness – perhaps these go hand-in-hand (Tenni, Smyth, Boucher, 2003, p. 6).

Defining the Genre:

Then there was the issue of actually defining the genre. When I began writing, I thought I understood what memoir is or can be. When I began researching, I discovered things are a bit more complicated.

Memoir is still a rapidly evolving genre within the popular writing and publishing worlds. Paul John Eakin (2004) that “autobiographies and biographies crowd the shelves of bookstores today, prompting columnists and reviewers to tell us that we live in an age of memoir, fostered by a pervasive culture of confession in the media” (p.1).

The lines within popular contemporary publishing, between the genres of creative non-fiction, literary non-fiction, autobiography and memoir have become increasingly
blurred and blurry and discussions among writers working in non-fiction often begin with a perplexed and perplexing attempt to define just what it is we are doing and what the parameters are of the genre we are working in. As Paul John Eakin writes: “Definitions of autobiography have never proved to be definitive but they are instructive…” (Eakin, 2004, p.1).

In academic terms, such genres tend to get grouped under the topic heading of life-writing which includes a wide and multi-varied assortment of writing, a term that is defined later in this text.

And as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1996) point out:

When life narrators write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time period or to enshrine a community, they are making history in a sense. But they are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, settling scores, conveying cultural information and inventing desirable future, among others. The complexity of autobiographical texts requires reading practices that reflect on the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims and narratives shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text (p. 10).

This all seemed like a heavy burden to take on, nor, as I know from experience, is it possible to write a story from a theoretical position. I tell my writing students to just begin anywhere, to get their ideas down on paper, and to re-shape and re-form their writing later through a self-editing process. I needed to understand theoretically what memoir was or could be, but I also needed to actually write one in order to truly see how such a form worked from the inside. It was time to take my own advice.
Structuring the memoir:

When I began writing the memoir, I found it was very different than writing a novel. I discovered, in fact, I had been coming to this book for years. I found many bits and pieces of the memoir hidden in previous stories, essays, and even poems that I had written and published. I spent quite a lot of time cutting and pasting pieces into the manuscript and then moving them around to get them in the right order. My initial idea was to write the memoir as a series of linked essays and so, as I began writing these essays, not in any particular order, I also looked back through years of writing and found bits and pieces that I thought would be relevant. Then I added new writing. It was an extremely nebulous process, completely unlike writing a novel. I had no plot, no storyline, and no specific thematic structure. I was very afraid that the book would fail, that although it might have pieces in it that were well written and publishable, overall, the book wouldn’t hold together as an integrated narrative. I also discovered some of the difficulties of accessing my memories and the memories of other people. The memories I had were fragmented and blurred by time. When I asked my brothers and my father about their memories, some of their versions of events contradicted what I remembered. In addition, my father’s memories have changed greatly over time.

The form of the memoir kept shifting and I kept looking for the deeper meaning of my own story, the underlying basis for the narrative and was unsure if I had actually found it, even when the memoir was finished.

I was relieved when I finished the memoir and gave it to several readers to critique, that they seemed to think that indeed it was a story and had a narrative.
Of course a memoir can be structured in many, many different ways, as can any piece of writing. Writing instructors, such as Tristine Rainer, who has written one of the most popular and enduring books about how to write memoir, *Your Life as Story*, often advise the memoirist to borrow the same structural techniques as those used by novelists, in order to make the memoir or autobiography catch the reader’s attention in the same way. She advises potential writers, in a rather formulaic way about the “elements of story structure” (Rainer, 1997, p. 65). However Joseph Campbell has theorized that many human stories follow the same structure as those laid down in myth. As noted in Rainer,

There are certain elements that all myths and powerful stories have in common in an invariable order. Joseph Campbell found the same elements in myths of diverse cultures scattered over the face of the earth. For instance, he found repeated that at the climax of a myth there is a transformation which involves a death and a re-birth, the phoenix of renewal emerging from the flames of destruction—the consummation of opposites in the creation of new life. All myths, he said share this thesis: There is an invisible plane supporting the visible one and the world of the spirit parallels that of the body. (p. 74)

However, there is a significant problem lurking here for the memoirist. Life rarely falls in a mythic pattern or the pattern of crisis and climax that Rainer suggests a memoirist follow, a problem she readily admits. “…in life, transformative climaxes don’t usually happen in a definitive scene at a particular moment” (p. 74). She suggests, however, that life is full of “climactic pivotal events—every time we make a moral decision, come to a new awareness, or leave one life passage and enter the next” (p. 75).
In my memoir, I finally found what I believed was a dramatic thematic core—that of my struggle to be true to and express my love and sense of connection to both my rural roots and my love of nature, along with my desire to become a literate intellectual, and a writer. The structure of the memoir began to fall into place with this realization, as well as the awareness of the irony that writing this memoir in the context of university was in some ways, finally, a resolution to this struggle.

Writing strategies

Memoirs rely on the power of recollection to reproduce the inward texture of experience. A crucial difference between memoir and autobiography is that the prime focus of autobiography is its endeavour to be a historically accurate document. But a memoir, in much the same way as a novel, is after the inner meaning of ‘what happened.’ Therefore, the author uses similar strategies to those of the novel, i.e. creating a plot, giving the reader a sense of the time, the setting and the characters that make the memoir interesting. The writer is free to digress, to create a weave of images to begin somewhere and then follow a back-story. Memoir writers braid texture to truth to create a more cohesive and satisfying whole, sometimes setting a private story against a public backdrop or weaving together threads from very different types of narrative cloth.

Helen Buss (2002), in Repossessing the World, positions memoir within a particular set of strategies. In chapter one, Buss cites the qualities memoirs share. Principally, she writes, memoirs are “episodic” in structure and “carefully
positioned within a particular history and culture” (p. 12). Memoirs use elements of the confession, by having at their core "the desire to reveal the hidden thing, the forbidden knowledge" (p. 12). Further, Buss contends, successful memoirs use a tripartite narrative voice that functions as participant, witness, and reflective/reflexive consciousness (p. 12). In addition, memoirs must be researched—in the broadest sense of the term—so that the subject is historicized and placed in a larger cultural context. The memoir writer also "performs" the self, working complexly through the self's various layers and stages (p. 13).

Memoirs are also structured narratives; that is, the writer structures them through a process of selection. The selection process in writing takes place about, and within many variables. A central question for memoirist would seem to be, what is the relationship between the strategies she chooses as a writer, and the effect of these strategies on the text.

Every piece of writing is a dialogical framework, a dualistic blending of both content and form. The memoir writer must choose a framework, a form, a narrative structure for the work – this can be a standard linear structure, a converging structure and flashback or an invented structure but all stories need to be structured in some way. A story also requires characters within a historical and geographical context and there must also be a conflict and some resolution of this conflict embedded within this narrative, however subtly.
This is not a dissertation about literary theory, so I don’t want to dwell on strategy except in relationship to the constructivity and variability of the interweaving of text and narrative, a space rich in possibility, contradiction, and intricacy.

**Some Other Aspects of Memoir as a Genre:**

Trying to define a genre of writing is an elusive and slippery territory. The definition of memoir as a sub-genre within the wider genre of non-fiction seems to be particularly slippery. First of all, non-fiction is a broad genre of writing defined by what it is not – i.e., not fiction. Part of the difficulty with such discussions is that the term non-fiction is an inclusive one but not a definitive one. Invariably, discussions of non-fiction among writers often begin with the perplexing question of definition. Or, as another writer wrote in an email:

Hi Luanne;

You've raised a question that CNFC (Creative Non-Fiction Collective) discusses endlessly: what is creative non-fiction? How creative does it need to be? Or does too much creativity take the work into fiction territory? Execution seems to count as much as genre.

Lynne Van Luven provided an excellent metaphor at our first meeting. She produced a drawing of an umbrella called non-fiction. Each its spokes bore the name of one genre. Since Lynn said she would be away for a week, I'll try to name some of those spokes: history, literary or narrative journalism, biography,
personal essays, travel writing, nature essays, cultural criticism, documentary, memoir and autobiography, and ethnography. And I'm sure I missed some.

Hope this helps.

cheers, Penney (Kome)

(personal communication, email June 30, 2005).

The academic term into which memoir seems to fit best is ‘lifewriting,’ which is defined by Marlene Kadar (1992) as “not a fixed term and that it is in flux as it moves from considerations of genre to considerations of critical practice” (p. 3). However, she adds, ”Life writing, put simply, is a less exclusive genre of personal kinds of writing that includes both biography and autobiography, but also the less objective and more personal genres such as letters and diaries” (p. 4).

Then there is the genre of autoethnography, as defined by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). It’s where one speaks for many. It is also a way “to make sense of our lives as a whole” (p. 746).

Leon Anderson (2000) writes, “Autoethnography provides an opportunity to explore some aspects of our social lives in a deeper and more sustained manner. […] Autoethnography is somewhat unique in research in that it is partially warranted by the quest for self-understanding” (p. 17). We push ourselves to move beyond just the facts of the story so we can share experience with others, the social world. One of the main benefits of writing autoethnographically is that it enables a researcher to move beyond
the traditional conventions of academic writing. A writer uses his or her own ‘voice,’ a voice that is made unique because of reverberations from relationships, from experience, from emotions, and from individual patterns of thought. Autoethnography allows writers to write from their sense of self, in relationship with others and from their own experience. Writers tell stories... “to inscribe our own melancholy, mourning, and release, and to evoke these same emotions in our readers and audiences. More than this, though, we seek to create a live, charged exchange with an audience” (Holman and Jones, 2001, p. 51). We write to feel and also to be felt.

There is certainly at present, some shifting and elision going on within the naming of the genres of autobiography and memoir. “The press has popularized the term memoir to the extent that it has begun to displace autobiography to describe any narrative or essayistic life writing practice” (Buss, 2002, p. 7).

I find in browsing bookstores that generally memoir, autobiography and biography are all lumped on a shelf labeled ‘biography.’ Even in the Vancouver Public Library, memoir is not labeled as a separate genre.

But one characteristic that many memoirists agree on that characterizes memoir most clearly as a genre is that it is a writing process that is primarily about a discovery of meaning, what Philip Gerard (1996) calls, “an apparent subject and a deeper subject” (p. 13), or what Lee Gutkind at the Associated Writing Programs conference in Vancouver, 2005, called “the private story underneath the public story” (Lee Gutkind, personal communication, April 2, 2005).
Getting to this deeper subject is often where the search for meaning becomes apparent to both the writer and the reader. Without this deeper subject, memoir writing remains on the level of anecdote, a recital, merely, of what happened.

Patricia Hampl (1999) writes:

The truth memoir has to offer is not neatly opposite from fiction’s truth. Its methods and habits are different and it is perhaps a more perverse genre than the novel: it seems to be about an individual self but it is revealed as a minion of memory which belongs not only to the personal world but to the public realm. As such, the greatest memoirs tend to be allergic to mere confession and mistrustful of revenge, though these are two of the genre’s natural impulses. (p. 205)

An on-line definition written by Dr. Beth Burch, (1999), a professor of education at Binghamton University, states that characteristics of the memoir form are:

...that it explores an event or series of related events that remain lodged in memory; that it describes the events and then shows, either directly or indirectly, why they are significant; that the narrative is focused in time and doesn't cover a great span of years; and in particular, that it centers on a problem or focuses on a conflict and its resolution and on the understanding of why and how such a resolution is significant.

Other theorists have pointed out that memoir has a moral and ethical dimension as well. Dinitia Smith writes, “One of the memoirist’s tasks is to raise awareness of the complex and intimate connection among her experience, ideology, and power and to make her readers conscious of the link” (cited in Ellerby, 2001, p. 132). She adds:
Memoirs provide a way to keep our focus on ethics because they demonstrate that ethical principles always animate the stories we tell about our lives. By interrogating the norms behind personal narratives readers can begin to see the unexamined influence of ethical principles on our lives. In their particularity, diversity and contextuality, memoirs can sustain contest or subvert universal ethical norms and thereby encourage readers to ground their ethical commitments in the concrete such as in fully realized narratives. (p. 132).

Nancy K. Miller (2002) writes:

The relational tie binding self to other has historically shaped the narrative of most autobiographical experience, beginning with St. Augustine… Feminist literary critics and theorists have argued persuasively that this sense of relational identity has characterized women’s lives in general and life writing in particular. (p. 2)

Miller calls memoir “the most generous of modern genres” (p. 14), and that the whole point of memoir is to “keep alive the notion that experience can take the form of art and that remembering is a guide to living” (p. 14). She writes that “we read the lives of others to figure out how to make sense of our own and in the process, we also admit to our wishes a future” (p. 137).

It is these multiple characteristics that, to me, give the form its compelling nature and generate some of its attraction to readers. Memoir comes from both the mind, from embodied experience and heart; but it is a constructed reminiscence of the mind, body and heart brought into a public space. One of the priorities of writing memoir is that it must constitute a good story, a story with the same vivid, metaphoric, and imagistic
nature of a novel; it also should seem to reveal the inner workings, an inner kind of truth about the nature of being human, and it should this in such a reflexive way that allows readers to examine their own values.

Thus memoir has particularly come to be characterized by the notion of the story beneath the story, by the idea that the re-telling of a ‘true’ story can illuminate some kind of interior truth for both the writer and the reader. How interesting and intriguing, I thought, in such a turbulent historical time as ours, that there should be such a wide and growing interest in memoir, and in non-fiction. I wondered if there is a connection between the growing public interest in so-called factual writing and a deeper search within society for meaning and understanding.

Above all, memoir as a genre serves multiple purposes. As Dinitia Smith (2001) puts it:

Writing my memoir and reading the memoirs of others has helped me, if not to unearth essence of my ‘self’, then at least to locate the multiple, cultural and social influences that connect me to some and alienate me from others.

Furthermore it has allowed me to probe my psychological history and delve into events that not only left me inhibited with self-doubt and prevented me from acting but also animated me to persist in my quest for acceptance and fulfillment (cited in Ellerby, 2001, p. 132).

Personally, I like the term memoir; I like its connection to the notion of memory, I like its literary allusions and in particular, the books that I am most attracted to all seem to have memoir in the title. Defining a genre of writing is always a tricky business – there
are so many influences that go into the business of defining a genre that I think, 
ultimately, it should be the writer that has a say in defining the form of his or her genre.

One result of writing my own memoir was to achieve a deeper and personal 
insight into these characteristics of memoir, to understand how and what ways they were 
created, how as a writer, what techniques seemed to work best and how the decisions I 
made in writing the memoir also reflected my own moral and ethical values.

The Age of Memoir:

The practice of writing memoir, as well as writing autobiographically has been 
around for a long time. However, memoir as a sub-genre within the larger genre of 
autobiography, in previous centuries, was a term used to connote the autobiographical 
recounting by some historically important figure, a politician or a general. Helen Buss 
(2002) writes:

The word autobiography, invented in the romantic period of literature was an 
attempt to prescribe a particular kind of autobiographical subjectivity—that of the 
esgo-centred romantic bourgeois rebel, professional, career-centred, bound on 
rising above the relational dictates of a mundane society to the place of the 
exceptional man, the autonomous man….memoir has required a human subject 
whose autonomy is compellingly intertwined with relationships, and community, 
a human subject that does not seek to disentangle herself from those compelling 
ties but builds autonomy based on them. For such a subject, memoir is the much 
older and more appropriate form, going back to the Middle Ages, written by all
sorts of people, most of them not professional writers, some of them women, whose lives were not as neatly organized as the newer term autobiography might require. (p. 187)

But in this century, memoir writing has changed in focus and emphasis; in particular, this focus has gone through a significant shift in the past few decades, as the memoir has grown in popularity and book sales. Writers such as Paul John Eakin and Suzanne Egan have speculated that this may be partly due to television and the cult of celebrity, and most recently the rise of ‘reality’ television. The growth of memoir, as a genre, within the last thirty years, can also most likely be traced, in part, to the political movements of the past thirty years as well as to the growth in interest and readership of what has come to be termed variously, literary non-fiction, or creative non-fiction. Tracing such growth and interest would certainly be an interesting subject for another future piece of research but I felt that such research, although linked to this thesis, was too broad and involved a subject to tackle at this time. It would be another whole thesis in and of itself to which I would be unable to do justice in just a chapter.

However, in his introduction to The Ethics of Life Writing, Paul John Eakin (2004) writes:

Autobiographies and biographies crowd the shelves of bookstores today, prompting columnist and reviewers to tell us that we live in an age of memoir fostered by a pervasive culture of confession in the media. Life histories are also getting a lot of attention in many academic disciplines and professional practices, including medicine, history, anthropology, psychology and journalism, as well as literary studies (p. 1).
Although such an investigation is outside the scope of this study, it makes for interesting speculation to wonder what other contributing factors might have led to our era being the age of memoir. Such factors might include the expanding influence of the media, and the growth of a global culture along with the concomitant rise of regionalism and regional awareness.

Nancy K. Miller (2002) writes that the 1990’s saw “a spectacular rise of the memoir which...became the most popular (and symptomatic) literary genre of our contemporary culture (p. 1).

In fact, within the last few years, the continued public desire for non-fiction stories has affected the movie business. Along with the recent popular success of such standard political documentaries such as Michael Moore’s, 9-11, have come other less classifiable films. For example, in 2005, the film, Tarnation, compiled by a 25 year-old amateur moviemaker, Jonathan Caouette, was an odd hit. The movie wasn’t advertised as a memoir, but in watching, it was clear that a new kind of memoir was the essential result of the montage of home movie clips, text overlays, photographs, music clips, and family interviews that make up the bulk of the film. Previously, this form of personal documentary has been primarily the province of public broadcasting systems, national film boards and art movies.

The change in public taste may also have something to do with similar changes that have happened in other art forms, a kind of democratization. It is as if the general public were beginning to recognize themselves as both participants and subjects in the creation of popular art, the art of their own life, and of arranging and recording their lives for public viewing. The media, not only the TV stations, newspapers, etc., but the
camcorders, webcams, etc., have created common mediums of expression and exchange, a common visual vocabulary whose technologies and techniques are viewed and interpreted with an informed, participatory empathy for the form.

In addition, political consciousness and awareness-raising over the last thirty years, have been motivated and enlarged by the personal testimonial writing of many diverse people with diverse backgrounds. Much of the networking, groundwork, and awareness raising in the feminist movement, for example, came from the simple but resonant idea that the personal is political, a notion that elevated the idea of personal story and personal testimony to the forefront of political analysis and calls for political action. Patti Lather (1991) describes this as “the dinosaur culture of master narratives struggling to retain dominance against what is perceived as the splintering, disintegrating, fragmenting effects of the partiality and plurality of contending voices” (p. xvi). She adds, “Language is the terrain where differently privileged discourses struggle via confrontation and/or displacement” (p. 8).

Many other causes could be posited, such as a hunger for connection, resonance, a desire for community and for recognition, but such an exploration is beyond the scope of this dissertation although it remains rich ground for further exploration and inquiry.

In my own reading, the work of May Sarton and Annie Dillard initially played key roles in convincing me that non-fiction memoir was a crucial genre that I wanted to continue to read and perhaps someday write. I read May Sarton’s _Journal of a Solitude_ in 1975, (it was published in 1973), and I well remember coming out of the book after several hours, rather like a diver coming up out of deep water, surprised to find myself in familiar surroundings and not in May Sarton’s world. Sarton’s work was revelatory to me
and to many other readers in that she was one of the first writers to use the simple details of her life, such as working in her garden and going for walks with her dog, to create a deeply compelling story.

Annie Dillard did something similar with *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, published in 1974. This book is a story of a spiritual quest, but it is conceived as deceptively simple stories about Dillard’s ramblings along a small nondescript creek that she described as being part of a cow pasture. This is a book I came back to many times over the years and which I still read with amazement at its power.

Both of these books both sold in large numbers and were well received by reviewers and critics. Through their popularity, they helped initiate the age of memoir and supported the idea that someone writing about the small close intimate details of personal experience was not just being narcissistically self involved but that such material could, in fact, be used to create literary works that critics saw as having high literary value.

The memoir genre has continued to evolve and has moved into many areas; for example, there is a genre of Holocaust memoirs, of illness and trauma memoirs and of testimonial memoirs, such as the book, *I, Rigobertu*, by Rigobertu Menchu, published in 1984. Such books can be part of the necessary work to claim status, identity, and assert public testimony about oppression and victimization. Menchu’s work, for example, brought public attention to the oppression and torture of her people in Guatemala and eventually won her the Nobel Peace Prize. Memoir offers an arena for these kinds of life histories, where writers injured and estranged by circumstances, in turn redress and change those circumstances through their writing.
Arthur Frank (2002) writes, “This linkage of personal troubles and public issues, which is the foundation of politics, begins in the cultivation of personal stories. People can move from experience to politics only when their experience is narratable to themselves and others, and thus made legible” (p. 8).

“Things come to matter and continue to matter insofar as they instigate stories that affirm those things in relation to how lives are lived” (Frank, 2002, p. 9).

Autobiographical writing has evolved so that now instead of “authoritative voices from an established culture” we now hear an “exploration of insistent voices determined to challenge the mainstream and affect cultural perception of previously undervalued lives” (Egan and Helms, 2001, p.5).

Personally, I do sometimes worry about whether the public appetite for such material could drive the publishing industry towards texts that become more salacious or exaggerated. In reading Augusten Burrough’s book, *Running with Scissors* (2002), for example, it is difficult not to feel a kind of horrified fascination at events that seem somewhat unimaginable and yet are asserted by him as ‘true.’

For example, one of the best selling memoirs in 2004, *The Glass Castle*, by Jeannette Walls, was a memoir by a woman who had grown up in a marginalized ‘hippie’ family, with wife, husband and parent swapping that eventually led to the family disintegrating. A similar book that led to a lot of criticism in the popular press was the publication in1996 of *The Kiss*, by Katherine Harrison, which detailed her incestuous affair with her father.

In the spring of 2006, a public furor erupted over the disclosure, on a web site called *The Smoking Gun*, (www.themokinggun.com/archive/0104061jamesfrey1.html)
that memoirist James Frey had lied about specific experiences in his best-selling memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, published by Random House in 2005. The book had been picked by Oprah Winfrey for her book club and consequently had shot to the top of the best-seller list. James Frey has subsequently made, at a conservative guess, several million dollars from the book. When the Smoking Gun disclosure hit the mainstream media in January 2006, James Frey, along with his editor at Random House, Nan Talese, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show, where Miss Winfrey demanded to know why James had lied to her and to his readers and never really received a satisfactory answer.

I am not a fan of Oprah Winfrey but I found this show ironic and disturbing, since there was no attempt or analysis by Winfrey or anyone associated with her that I saw in the mainstream media to realize that Winfrey’s show and others like it are partly responsible for creating a public appetite for books like Frey’s. In my understanding and cursory viewing of it, Winfrey’s show seems to feed off an endless stream of redemption and salvation stories. Frey’s memoir is a standard (and in my opinion, very badly written) redemption memoir of a rich young man who takes too many drugs, goes through a rehabilitation program and is in some way redeemed. Most of the articles I read about this book missed this point entirely. But many writers and publishers were disturbed by this event and my email in-box buzzed for weeks with discussions about this issue on the various writers’ list serves to which I belong.

Heather Kin (2006), herself a memoirist, wrote in Publisher’s Weekly that:

It's every writer's sacred honor to 'get it right,’ but perhaps the burden falls heaviest on the memoirist. As a memoirist, it seems to me, something has to have happened to you that you're burning to tell. You've undergone some kind of
transformation that matters not because it says something about you, but because it says something about the world; because it touches on the mysteries of suffering and meaning. There may be great leeway in being faithful to this emotional truth, but you have to have an emotional truth to begin with. The details you remember, your stance towards the people you meet, your interpretation of your experiences: all have to spring from this deeper level; this vision you carry around like a secret; the yearning to get it right that eventually drives everything you think, say, do. You have to have some kind of love for the world, with all its terrible suffering; you have to be willing to cut off your writing hand rather than betray by a word what it's taught you. The problem is that it doesn't seem to have taught James Frey much of anything, which is why A Million Little Pieces rings false, on both levels, from start to finish.


Just as the media discussion about the Frey affair was winding down, the Los Angeles Weekly reported that a writer who had represented himself as a Navajo, and had penned three bestselling books under the name of Nasdijj, was actually a writer of gay male erotica named Tim Barrus. This scandal received far less media attention and I was disappointed that there was no discussion about it on the list serves. ¹

Nevertheless, the search for personal, sometimes emotive, sometimes visceral truth in the writing of both memoir and the wider genre of autobiography, which, combined with its popularity, places it at an opposite extreme to the readership, aims and processes of objective, academic writing. Many emerging writers tend to begin with their own lives and the memoir form is an ideal form for such writing since it “is a form in which history much come into concourse with literature in order to make a self, a life, and to locate that living self in a history, an era, a relational and communal identity” (Buss, 2002, p. xiv).

Helen Buss is an academic, as well as a memoirist and novelist, and thus believes that the memoir form holds particular promise for academic writers, as well, as a form that has the ability to join “heart and mind” (p. 177).

As Buss points out, “The memoir form is a useful form to express the movement of those with subject locations on the gender, racial and national margins of a dominant society to the ‘central intellectual machinery’ (Lim, p. 230) that the university represents” (p. 177).

Buss also argues that “the memoir genre is coming into its own not only as an important mode of performing subjectivity but also as a mode in which women’s works are leading the way, both in number and quality of autobiographical texts” (p. 185).

“Writers who self-consciously work within a set of writing strategies, who practice and experiment with a generic tradition, as important a component of changing social discourse as readers who are conscious of the genre’s history and innovativeness” (p. 185).

Memoir as a form, therefore, would seem to have the potential to integrate many
pedagogical, as well as academic aspects of personal writing. It offers possibilities for moving from the known (or better known) to the unknown. The uncovering of new personal insights and information, of new knowledge and information can follow a similar pattern. The subject is the self, but the process of academic research and examination is parallel to this form of inquiry. The vehicles and vocabulary for disseminating good personal and good academic findings differ only in the level of their current accessibility to the intelligent reader.

I believe it is both because of this broad applicability and interest, as well as the many forms that personal autobiographical writing takes, both within and without the academy, that an examination of this form is useful. Helen Buss (2002) has suggested that this form is overdue for an academic examination (p. 7). There are many theoretical aspects to this form that provide rich space for discussion and understanding.

Michel Foucault (1977) traces the history and evolution of self-writing from the traditions of the Greeks and Romans, through to Descartes. Although he asserts that the notion of the subjectivity of the self has changed dramatically along the way, the importance of self-writing as an important quest for moral and ethical understanding has not.

People have been writing about themselves for two thousand years but not in the same way…there is a certain tendency to present the relationship between writing and the narrative of the self as a phenomenon particular to European modernity. Now I would not deny it is modern but it was also one of the first uses of writing. … Techniques of the self can be found in all cultures in different forms (Foucault, 1977, p. 477).
In *Restorying Our Lives*, Gary Kenyon (1997) traces some of the impact the idea of personal story and narrative has had in other fields. “…narrative perspective has spread from academic psychology to psychotherapy and psychoanalysis” (p. 11). He adds, “We not only have stories, we are stories…” (p. 11).

Theoretical and practical understanding of the role of story and narrative within all aspects of human culture have been grappled with by scholars across the disciplines from psychology to mythology, history, religious studies, literary theory, education, and gender studies. But the application of narrative as a methodology within the academy will continue to require both a broader and a deeper understanding of the demands and complexities of various forms and genres. It will also continue to require a broader and deeper understanding of the complex techniques and specific demands in its various forms and genres for organizing and relating individual phenomena within a global perspective.

Whatever the drive, impulse or interest, it is clear that personal writing, both memoir and the wider genre of autobiography, are genres that are and will continue to grow in interest and popularity.

**Restor(y)ing Land:**

At the heart of my memoir is the story of a relationship, an enduring love story between myself, and a particular place. My personal history is interwoven with my experiences of growing up and living there. My relationship with this place, not only our farm but the mountains, lake, forest, and wildlife in which it is situated, began when I
was five and we first moved to our farm on Kootenay Lake but the understanding, knowledge, awareness and questions about human interaction with the natural world that I continually derive from this relationship continues to shape my life today. I habitually test any new knowledge or experience against what the land taught me.

In addition, this land was part of my grandfather’s life and my children’s lives and is now part of my grandsons’ lives. I wanted to explore the continuity of the relationship, and its impact on the person I have become in my fifties.

I wrote in an essay for an anthology about the Purcell Mountains:

When I was a child, the farm where we lived, and the mountains above it were full of places that were, to me, in some way both magic and holy, terms I didn’t use for them, then. Those are aspects that now, when I think about it, radiate from my memories. But what those places accomplished, then, was to in some way lend themselves to my imagination. They were places that pulled me inside them for a while. The mountains, and the forest upon its slopes, became, as I explored them, an infinite series of rooms, into which I could enter at will. These rooms went on forever and they were all different and all the same.

Going into the woods meant going inside a place where I felt both protected and transported. It meant entering into a realm where my imagination could make these rooms into whatever I needed for whatever story I was living in – a castle, a battlement, a rocket ship, a Indian camp. Often these rooms became houses with smaller rooms, a space to sleep, to make a fire, to make a home. The forest, more than anywhere else, was home. (Armstrong 2005, in press)

My narrative sense about what land meant to me began primarily with sensory perceptions that I encountered long before I had the ability to assimilate or articulate these perceptions intellectually. In addition, I had the stories I heard in my family, about
farming, about animals, about gardening, and these formed a primary subtext, a kind of palimpsest, upon which I wrote new learning from books and school.

When I began writing a memoir, I wanted to write what I privately termed an ‘ecological’ memoir, by which I meant an examination of the complex and tangled threads of story and memory that connect me to one place.

Most of my life I have found it difficult to talk about my relationship to my ‘place.’ It felt to me as if I had no language to talk about this; in fact, I have rarely found, until recently, a shared cultural discourse on this topic. In settler, North American culture we have no traditional language, no ecosystem narratives, no stories to interpret for us a shared embedded cultural meaning of stories of place and home.

As I wrote my memoir, I began to wonder what would it mean to write a post colonial literature – what would it mean to write an authentic literature of place – have we yet begun to create such a thing? Would we recognize it if we saw it? Or would we dismiss it because it is unfamiliar, unknown, and unrecognizable as yet?

How, I wondered, can we begin to create the critical literature that would make a sense of place, of home, and a knowledge of place, a story that is equally accessible and culturally coherent? It seems at present, to be generally assumed that narratives about ‘land,” (even the terms are difficult to articulate) is the place of ‘environmentalists’ or people with technical expertise about some aspect of natural history, or people with a political investment in some aspect of their location.

Biologist Gary Paul Nabhan (1997) talks about “cultures of habitat” (p. 4), human communities that have a “long history of interaction with one particular kind of terrain and its non-human inhabitants” (p. 4). Other biologists and natural history writers have
considered what it will take to make people of non-aboriginal descent in some sense ‘native’ to North America. Nabhan’s question is whether there are already in existence “pockets of indigenous knowledge, love and understanding” (p. 4), within competing narratives about land and place, whose stories we have yet to hear? Was that the story I was trying to write?

I once heard an anthropologist at Deep Ecology conference describe indigenous communities by the following characteristics; she said they share a sense of belongingness to the world around them, a sense that they belong to it, not it to them, and therefore they share a sense of connection that is sustaining and necessary for their whole being, as well as an understanding of this interconnection, so that it is something acknowledged, public, social and communally understood; and that in partnership with this goes a tremendous knowledge of the ecosystems around them, knowledge gained through experience and history and familiarity. I had many of these characteristics as an individual; were there other people, I wondered, with whom I could connect to this sense of indigeneity as part of a community, even a geographically scattered one? My community on Kootenay Lake has some of these characteristics but only some; people often express their deep love and appreciation for the place but only a few truly understand its ecology and almost none live within a relationship that is both “sustaining and necessary.”

In North America, as a result of patterns of immigration and habitat disruption, humans have what Montana writer William Kittredge (1999) has described as many competing disrupted “narratives of habitation” (p. 55). He believes that humans in the
civilized Western world have lost their sense and their stories about where they live and how they should live there.

The American poet, CK Williams, has coined a term called “narrative dysfunction”, as a part of mental illness (cited in Kittredge, 1999, p. 55). Many of us, he has said, lose track of the story of ourselves and it doesn't just happen to people, it happens to societies. Kittredge writes, in *Taking Care: Thoughts on Storytelling and Belief*, that:

…mythologies and community stories shape societies. A mythology is a story that contains implicit instructions from a society to its members, telling them what is valuable and how to conduct themselves, if they are to preserve the things they cherish…We figure and find stories, which can be thought of as maps or paradigms in which we see our purposes defined, then the world drifts and our maps don’t work anymore, paradigms fail and we have to reinvent our understanding, and our reasons for continuing. Useful stories, I think, are radical in that they help us see freshly. That’s what stories are for, to help us see and reinvent ourselves. (pp. 52-53)

I have long been interested in environmental issues and have explored them in various ways, both as an activist and through writing and research. But in fact, my earliest stories about ‘ecology’ were derived from a neighbour of ours when I was a child, a trapper named Wally Johnson. Wally would drive into our yard, usually with dead animals in the back of his battered green Austin truck and tell my siblings and I long, fascinating and minutely detailed stories about the animals he had seen during his latest sojourn on his trapline. If I mentioned an animal I had seen, he always questioned me
very closely as to where, and when I had seen it, as well as what it looked like, and how it was behaving. When I was ten, I got into a fierce and prolonged argument with Wally, who believed that the only ‘good’ animals were birds and fish. Everything else was for killing. Even at that age, it was obvious to me that he was wrong and I was so incensed about it that I wrote an essay for our one-room school newspaper on “the balance of nature.” Wally read the essay and took it seriously and we continued our argument for most the years I knew him.

Another primary source of understanding was another set of neighbours, the O’Neil’s. In my memoir, I wrote:

It was late afternoon on a spring day just after we moved to the farm. I heard a crashing wave of noise, looked up and saw horses running through our yard. In retrospect, there were probably only four or five horses plus a couple of cows, but at the time it seemed like a whole lot more. My father was waving his arms in fury.

There were two girls with the horses. The girls were older than me. They waved back at my furious father; one of them waved at me, and then they were gone. I ran into the house to find out who they were. My mother never answered my question. Instead, she and my father launched into some tedious story about the O’Neils and all their kids and how Dick drank and beat his horses and his boys, and all those kids, and how did Mabel stand it. In a lowered voice, my father said something about Dick being a ‘squawman,’ which I didn’t understand but remembered. But none of this mattered. I wanted to know about the horses. The next day I walked barefoot over the mile of gravedled road between our place and theirs. The gravel was burning hot. When I got there, the whole family was out weeding the corn patch. They didn’t seem surprised to see me.

After the corn was done, the two girls, Nora and Shirley, took me down to the
barn. Even at five, I knew this was a wonderful place. They had a barrel with a saddle on it tied between two rafters. We played on that for a while but I wanted more.

We went into the pen where the horses were. There was a big white workhorse named King who stepped on my bare foot. I didn't say anything although my foot felt like it had been hammered flat. I thought if I complained or cried they might make me leave. There was a brown mare named Lady, a small black mare named Gypsy and a shaggy pony named Billy. They put me on Billy and led me around for a while then left me on my own. Billy immediately put his head down and began eating grass. Nora handed me a thick stick and said, “Here, hit him with this.”

I did – which got his attention. It was my first riding lesson.

I spent the rest of that summer on horseback. I now know that no parent in his or her right mind would have let us ride those horses. They bit, kicked, bucked and ran away. But I didn't know enough to be afraid, and Nora and Shirley had learned to be tough. My parents were far too busy to notice what we were doing. My mother had my baby sister and brother and all the housework plus gardening, canning, cooking, and looking after the milk things. My father was putting up hay, picking fruit, and working at the sawmill to make money to support the farm. Nora and Shirley were the youngest kids of the large O'Neil family. When I met them, Nora was nine and Shirley was eight. Nora was the leader; she had short curly hair, and sparkling dark eyes. My mother always said, “That girl is sly, I don’t trust her.”

So of course, I believed everything she said. Shirley was beautiful, with long black hair and my brother Phil developed an immediate crush on her. I never did meet them all. There were two older brothers, Art and Jack, who still lived at home and who logged the mountains with their dad. There were three older sisters who
came home occasionally, and at least one brother or perhaps two who had
drowned in Kootenay Lake in a canoeing accident. At the time, none of this
mattered to me. What mattered were the horses, the smell of sun on shiny
horsehide, the gripping on to the neck as we slid down a graveled hillside, took
the horses down to the beach and made them swim, or trotted home behind the
O'Neil's milk cow, which had to be rounded up every night. (Armstrong, 2006, in
press)

The O’Neil’s taught me about freedom and fearlessness. In fact, I have often
reflected on how important the presence of the O’Neils was, in my life. Nora, who was
two years older than me, unwittingly taught me one of my most important life lessons.
One day we were jumping from the loft of the barn to a haypile below. When she saw me
hesitating she snapped impatiently, “If you feel like you can do it, you’ll be okay.” I tried
it and it worked and from then on, faced with a new physical challenge, I used Nora’s
advice. From the O’Neil’s, I learned to be physically tough, to swagger, to trust my
instincts, but I also learned, intuitively, a way of life that called to my nature. The
O’Neil’s lived close to the land because that was what they had to do to survive; they
knew about animals, plants, logging, picking berries, because theirs was a land-based
pioneering life. I have remained grateful to them to this day for taking me in so easily and
then letting me stay.

My mother and father taught me conflicting and complex lessons about land. My
mother loved flowers, gardening and animals. She was gentle, caring, adored her children
and adopted any stray animal that showed up in our lives, often in the face of my father’s
anger.

My father fought with our land as if it were his enemy. In some sense it was. It
was his job to wrestle a living out of our land, to force it to yield food and produce we
could sell. And despite how hard he worked, weather, insects, disease, all seemed to conspire to defeat him.

My father and I have deep differences in attitude toward land, animals, plants, and other aspects of our shared rural life but we also share a strong sense of values. My father taught me to be tough, to never complain, to work hard and to survive. I also still appreciate and to some extent share his disdain for people who spend money on things they don’t need, or buy food they don’t grow. But our attitudes toward our land, towards animals, and to ideas of ecology are very different. To some extent, these differences are generational, of course, but they also highlight to me in a powerful way the kind of shift that other people also need to make or that many people have made in terms of their thinking about the natural world.

I considered that by exploring how my own relationship with the world of farming, animals and the outdoors had developed, even as I worked along side with my father and listened to his stories, that I might be able to enlarge on this aspect of my narrative.

As I got older, I translated my interest in the environment into activism and into study. In 1976, I fought BC Hydro over their plan to divert water out the Kootenay River into the Columbia River in order to generate more power. This plan was eventually defeated, not by my efforts but because economically, it wasn’t feasible.

At one point, before I developed a severe chronic illness, I was trying to finish a Master’s degree in Feminist Ecology. Because of the illness, I withdrew from this program but not before I had read widely in the fields of feminist ecology, social ecology,
Deep ecology and related areas. I do consider myself reasonably widely read in the field of ecology and environmentalism but by no means an expert in any particular area.

When I began my memoir, I looked for models of the kind of writing I also wanted to do.

A book by a southern writer named Janisse Ray (1999), *The Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, was useful in terms of supporting the idea of writing an ‘ecological’ memoir. Ray’s book, which has been very well received and reviewed in the United States, blends the story of her family history, her austere and difficult childhood growing up in a junkyard in southern Georgia, and her growing awareness of how the ecology of that particular shaped her family and by extension, her life and her character.

Another model I found exciting was Canadian writer Trevor Herriott’s *River in a Dry Land*, (published in 2000) which is a braided memoir that combines personal history, ecological background, and natural and regional history as well. I found this model of combining the personal and historical, element of natural ecology alongside the effects of settler impact, was one that gave me new angles from which to view the memoir genre.

Most recently, my friend and fellow Kootenay writer, K. Linda Kivi published a book, (co-authored with Eileen Delehanty Pearkes) titled *The Inner Green*, that details her own explicit conscious search to feel and be at home in a particular place, along with intricately researched stories of the natural history of the Columbia-Kootenay mountain ecosystem. K. Linda and I have had many long, intimate and useful discussions about the issues involved in land and place and I was thrilled to see this book evolve partly as a result of our discussions.

Other writers such as Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Rick Bass, David James
Duncan and Terry Tempest Williams served as models of “nature” writing that I enjoyed. What these writers have in common that appeals to me is a personal engagement with issues of identity, land and place as well as a deep understanding and knowledge of natural history: animals, plants and ecosystems.

Issues of land and writing about land are deeply complex. In *The Lure of the Local*, visual artist, Lucy Lippard (1994) points out that in North America, there are really three interweaving strands of land narratives, “physical land, metaphorical land and ideological land” (p. 12), and that often the three are confused in discussions about land issues. She writes:

> The intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand—our land, our place, the local. The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, on antidote to a prevailing alienation. The lure of the local is that undertone to modern life that connects to the past we know so little and the future we are aimlessly concocting. (p. 12)

It was these intersections of nature, culture, history and geography in which I was interested and that I wanted to write about in my memoir. I was also interested in trying to write outside and beyond some of the accepted parameters of the genre often labeled ‘nature writing,’ which often connotes a kind of romantic and somewhat dated approach to nature.

As Lippard (1994) says, “Land is an amalgam of history, culture, agriculture, community and religion…” (p. 12) and sorting out the complexities of such an amalgam
is sometimes nearly impossible. What I wanted to do was try to sort it out on a small, personal basis, using my own history, one place and one person so that, perhaps, through my eyes and writing, other people could then see reflections of themselves and their own story that they found useful.

It was exciting to read Lippard since much of what she wrote, I had sensed but not articulated. For example, I have often wondered about the role and place of my memories of the Kootenays before the land was developed: roaded, logged, and built on.

Lippard (1994) writes “If a place is defined by memory, but no one who remembers is left behind to bring these memories to the surface, does a place become a no place or only a landscape” (p. 23). She adds, “Every place name is a story, an outcropping of the shared tales that form the bedrock of community” (p. 46).

When I was a child, we had shared family names for every place on the farm and in the surrounding area. In the beginning of the memoir, I wrote about the stories attached to these names:

There seems to be a time-honoured tradition in rural Canada that summer people and the locals don't mix. But if I get a chance, I'd like to tell them that where they have recently plunked their cabins, their trailers, their kid’s swing set, their tubes and boats and folding plastic chairs and barbecues, the place where they have cleared and graveled roads and dug waterlines, we have always called Sawdust Bay.

Once, about sixty years ago, there was a cabin there where Mabel and Dick O’Neil and all their kids lived. Pierre Longueval, the man who first homesteaded
what became our farm also lived here. The old cedar picket fence (that I see now someone has knocked down and driven over), is the remains of the original fence that Pierre built; the pile of sawdust on which they have placed a trailer is where Pete had his original gas sawmill; he cut the lumber for the eighty-year old farmhouse in which I am now living. (Armstrong, 2006, in press)

As I worked on the memoir, I worried about how people would hear my stories. Lippard (1994) says that a sense of place depends on “lived experience and topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in traditional educational fields” (p. 33). I knew I had the topographical intimacy. I once wrote in an essay that I knew this land the way I had experienced knowing a lover. But could I find the language?

William Kittredge (1999) was a particularly helpful guide. He writes:

Arguments about the meaning of words like nature and wilderness and wildness seem to be potentially endless. Words denote both concepts and the infinitely complex systems of energy behind the concepts. Nature is both a construct and something actually out there evolving. Constructs and actuality each qualify our sense of the other. Nobody cares if I’m comfortable with that notion, it’s simply true. Narratives try to avoid this problem by inciting us toward making up our own complex constantly reforming stories out of what has been told, inviting us to look into the mirrors of our own selves and form our own complex and mostly unnamed value systems out of responses to what we experience. In this way narrative attempts to avoid coercion, which is of course a political objective. (p. 57)
Kittredge (1999) calls for “…fully imagined and precisely rendered storytelling about creatures and communities, human and otherwise in the so-called natural world…” (p. 70). He believes this can “lead us to the once upon a time quite commonplace, now rarer pleasure of inhabiting a sense that we are irrevocably wedded into electric processes of what is actual, that we are participants in the system of energies in which we feel whole” (p. 70).

I agree with him that “finding that story increment by increment is our most urgent communal enterprise” (p. 70), and that such stories can have “luminous significances” (p. 70).

Kittredge adds, “We yearn to live in a place we can name, where we can feel safe. We want that place to exist like a friend, somebody we understand intimately” (p. 77).

Lippard (1994) points out that “every landscape is a hermeneutic narrative” (p. 33). She adds that, “finding a fitting place for oneself is finding a place for oneself in a story. The story is composed of mythologies, histories, ideologies, the stuff of identity and representation” (p. 33).

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1996) discuss what they term sites of storytelling:

In many narratives, the geographical location strongly inflects the story being told…this aspect of life narrative, as yet rarely studied by critics who tend to see the site as a backdrop, shapes the contexts of autobiographical subjectivity and the kinds of stories that can be told. (p. 58)
In choosing to write about my relationship with land and place in a series of stories that were also embedded within an autobiographical narrative, I hoped to avoid romanticizing my own past and to at least in part fulfill Kittredge’s call.

Neil Evernden (1996), one of the most esteemed writers of eco-criticism, calls the notion that human beings can be separated from where they live a “pathetic fallacy” (Evernden cited in Glotfelty, 1996, p. 91). Evernden writes that the most “subversive element in ecology rests …upon its basic premise, inter-relatedness” (p. 91).

Evernden believes that the only relationship that “is really relevant to a discussion of man (sic) and environment is the relation of self to setting” (p. 99), and that there is “some connection between the individual and his particular place” (p. 99), and he quotes environmental activist Paul Shepard as saying, ‘Knowing who you are is impossible without knowing where you are from” (p. 91).

Autobiography and memoir are, in fact, often focused on the experience of home and landscape, in particular the place that has shaped a child’s first memory and cultural understanding of their sense of self.

Simon Schama (1995) in *Landscape and Memory* tells us that there is no landscape without culture. Landscape or home in autobiography is focused through the lens of the viewer, or the narrator, and is often associated with that moment of transcendence, when the child wakes up to memory.

As Annie Dillard (1995) writes, for her, autobiographical writing is:

…about waking up. A child dreams over and over again and notices that she’s living. She dreams along loving the exuberant life of the sense, in love with beauty and power—oblivious of herself – and then suddenly, bingo, she wakes up
and feels herself alive. She notices her own awareness. And she notices that she is
set down here, mysteriously, in a going world. The world is full of fascinating
information that she can collect and enjoy. And the world is public; its issues are
moral and historical ones. (Dillard cited in Zinnser, p. 55)

To love a place deeply is difficult to write about. What I know about my home
comes from not only living there, but deeply experiencing ‘there’—no other place is quite
as real to me. I am helpless in this love in the same sense that that I am helpless in my
love for my children and grandchildren. It is not a choice or something easily subject to
analysis and yet it also demands analysis, because it is a relationship, a relationship that is
vital to my well-being.

I agree with Max van Manen (1990) in his discussion of phenomenology when he
suggests that much of the process of a writer is trying to find a way to frame experience
in a language that can be heard; he terms it a “poetizing language, a language that
includes many layers, the poetic, the mythical, but also the cultural, social,
environmental…a language of inclusion” (p. 12). Phenomenology, he says, is “poetizing
– tries to be an incantative evocative speaking, a primal telling” (p. 13). For a writer to
lead the reader to wonder, he or she starts with his or her own “wondering, wandering”(p.
5). In this sense, such writing is research; it is a “carving out, we want to know what that
is which is most essential to being” (p. 5). In addition, we can only understand
“something or someone one for whom we care…knowing is not a purely cognitive act”
(p. 5).

Language that authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly speaking of it
is a language that reverberates the world—that sings the world. Many writers speak of
land or of earth, in body terms—our language is full of metaphoric/imag/ic terms that embody the earth and our relationship with it in anthropomorphized language, but this is of course, while sometimes useful, also problematic since it means we are constantly framing narrative of place within a wholly humanized perspective.

I also found reflections of my own journey within Mitchell Thomashow’s (1995) writing about the concept of ‘ecological identity.’ He defines this concept as:

…all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, valued actions and sense of self. Nature becomes an object of identification. For the individual, this has extraordinary ramifications.
The interpretation of life experience transcends social and cultural interactions. It also includes a person’s connection to the earth, perception of the eco-system and direct experience of nature. (p. 3)

I had never actually thought about having an ecological identity. Now I wondered if that was what I was actually re-constructing, in which case, the term of “ecological memoir” would be further justified.

Thomashow (1995) believes that autobiographical writing means that a writer must reconstruct events in her life into a coherent and linear narrative, a narrative that holds meaning for the writer and the reader. In his curricular practice, Thomashow (1995) uses autobiography and the re-construction of ecological identity as a key component of an education process. He writes that:

Autobiographical analysis encourages learners to reconstruct their lives—coordinating their experiences into a coherent vision, linking the present to the past, providing continuity for the future. Ecological identity work is heavily
based on the reconstruction of life experience taking otherwise disparate memories and suggesting new ways to connect them. (p. 170)

Through writing my own memoir, I was endeavouring to make the story of my own love and sense of connection to a particular place to make sense, to be part of a coherent narrative. I wanted this to mean something both to me and to others. I wanted to write a story both about taking care of land and caring, a story in which I expanded on the vague sense I had as a child, of places being somehow special, even sacred. I wanted to write a story about making use of the place where my family and I lived without ruining it, which so far, rather miraculously and accidentally, we have succeeded in doing.

Much of the craft of writing involves using sensory detail to create vivid imagery for the reader. David Abrams (1996) writes that “the sensuous world is always local” (p. 265). He adds that “…a story must be judged according to whether it makes sense. And making sense must here be understood in its most direct meaning: to make sense is to enliven the sense. A story that makes sense is one that stirs the sense from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and ears to their real surroundings…” (p. 265).

The guiding questions that Thomashow (1995) outlines for what he considers necessary to do ecological identity work are similar to the questions that any memoirist must ask.

He writes that necessary questions are:

…where do things come from? What do I know about the place where I live? How am I connected to the Earth? What is my purpose and responsibility as a human being? We consider these questions through the real circumstances of everyday life: domestic responsibilities, jobs, neighbors, family and children,
home repairs, schools, and backyards. When we experience, the significance of these moments, then our ecological identity exists in our homes and communities. Out of this shared wisdom, we discover how we connect to the earth and what we have in common as members of the human community. (p. 188)

To write an ecological memoir means understanding my place within the overall ecology of the systems within which I had grown up; it involved the key point of understanding my sense of self within the larger context of systems within systems, a social and cultural system inextricably linked to the natural systems in which it has grown. Thomashow (1995) writes that ecological understanding involves remembering and integrating “three types of childhood experiences…childhood memories of special places, perceptions of disturbed places and contemplation of wild places” (p. 188).

In the memoir, I tried to give myself scope to remember what the landscape was like when I was a child and most of the country around us was wilderness as well as to contemplate the profound changes that have taken place in the country, the landscape and the ecosystem over the past fifty years. I consider myself incredibly fortunate in having grown up in a time when I had the opportunity to be in places that felt special, that were beautiful and to spend enough time in such places to understand some of the aspects of what they meant to me. And of course, I am still able to go to many of these places and contemplate on an ongoing basis the depth and meaning of this connection.

Whether we acknowledge it or not – and increasingly, in this age of globalization we are going both towards and away from an understanding and acknowledgement of the role of place in our stories—we are influenced by and are an integral part of whatever landscape that shapes our stories. A story is often as much about the meaning of a place
where the story happens as it is about the events that happen there. Just as the style and substance in a story cannot be disentangled, neither can the place from which a story derives be disentangled from the meaning of that place. And, as many critics have noted, a true story is universal—paradoxically, a true story is tangled in the minute particularities of place. The meaning and interpretation of place is never neutral—it is dependent on and indicative of the cultural, social, historical, racial and educated state of the storyteller.

Our stories are shaped by and influenced by and are an integral part of whatever landscape within which a story happens – the meaning and interpretation of the place within a story is created by each person within his or her life – each person brings his or her particular understanding to this process. The sense of place is no more neutral in a story than other elements, but it is also more indicative of cultural, social, historical, racial, and educated stances regarding the location of humans in relationship to nature and within land. I am certainly aware of the complexity of the term ‘nature’, and that it is a constructed term with intricate historical, cultural, social implications.

In fact, one reason environmental issues are so complex is that everyone’s story about land and place is so particular, so varied and so personal. Such stories are influenced by people’s biographies, their personal narrative, their family history, community history, and their sense of location and/or dislocation. Generalizing or making broad statements about a sense of home or the meaning of place invariably leaves someone’s experience out. In such circumstances, people over and over again revert to the one place where there is a sure grounding of their experience, in the personal, in relational experiences with nature, in contact, in wonder, and in questions.
Because of this issue of language, environmentalists and others have had a tendency to try to borrow language from cultures that are seen as being in some mystical or romantic or historical way attached in a specific way to land, or to a particular concept of land, such as First Nations cultures or third world cultures, but using such terms as Mother Earth, or speaking in mystical tones about being connected to land, without an analysis and understanding of what such a connection can or might or does mean, is only an invitation to further confusion. The western European influenced connection with the earth and with a sense of place has been so contorted, our historical mythical technological relationship with the earth so complex, that no kind of simplistic adoption of a phrase or philosophy has seemed to have an effect in lessening this complexity.

Personalizing the earth as a body, personalizing the earth or a place with which one has a relationship, is immediately problematic. Nonetheless, it is upon the earth and within the place we inhabit, that we in some way inscribe our sense of self.

My stories about land begin and end with one place, one part of the earth's surface that I know intimately, with which I have intertwined my sense of who, and what I am and what I am doing, so that what I write comes from this place and the place is so overgrown and weedy and matted with my story and the story of my family that I sometimes marvel that I can see it at all. My story has so many hooks, so many ties into who I was and who I have become: I am anchored to this land through memory, fifty years of stories now, each memory a story, each story a memory, each story tying me up, tying me down, each story a frame I live within. I could have been born anywhere, I could have felt the same about anyplace, this is where I was blown to on a cosmic wind,
given to this place and with the great good fortune and presence of mind to fall in love with it as well as to wonder what that meant.

There are flashes of memory from my childhood that for me, illustrate the beginnings of this attachment. Such memories took place long before I had any ability to articulate the meaning of these experiences. They come back to me now as reflections of a deeper meaning and interpretation of my interaction and inter-being with this place. In fact the place where I first ‘woke up’ was at the farm. In the memoir, I describe it this way:

_Since I was around, my father did what was most natural to him and found some work for me to do. He said from now on I would have to feed the chickens. If I forgot, he said, the chickens would go hungry and it would be my fault. Bantie chickens dusted themselves and scratched and squatted under every bush. He showed me where the grain was and threw some on the ground. The chickens came running._

_From then on, when I went to the shed and got a bucket of grain, chickens came running from all over the yard. They crowded around me, ate what I gave them. I loved their colours, their magnificent glowing iridescent feather, their red combs, and their golden-wise eyes. But mostly I loved the fact that they came running, that they followed me, and trusted me to feed them. One evening, I stood with my small tin can of wheat at the edge of the yard, staring across the pasture, where the evening sunlight was slanting over the emerald grass, and I fell into belonging and responsibility. I understood. This was our place, my place; this was my work. My feet sank into the grass, my head swam in the warm air while the chickens pecked and scratched at my feet. I was home now, and I knew it, knew that wherever I roamed, from now on, on this land, it would belong to me and me to it, and that I would care for it as I cared for the chickens pecking at my feet._

(Armstrong, 2006, in press)
This moment has in fact been one of the guiding images of my life. It has always felt to me that I made a pact, a vow of some kind at that time, a vow that I have never gone back on but which has remained difficult to articulate. It was, in some sense, a vow of allegiance and belonging.

Christopher Hanes writes that our culture has created “an immense silence, a world of ‘not saids’ called nature” (Hanes cited in Glotfelty, 1996, p. 17). He contemplates a language “free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern post-humanist perspective. In short, we require the language of ecological humility…” (Hanes cited in Glotfelty, 1996, p. 17). I like thinking about ecological humility. In fact, the more I think about land issues, my relationship to place, to animals, to rocks and trees, the less I think I truly know and the more I have to understand. Walking on the farm can sometimes be bewildering in my knowledge of the complexities of the life going on around me and my awareness of how little I understand or am part of it.

Here is another story from the memoir about land and silence.

When I return home the farm receives me as the dark lake beside my house receives rain. It tells me stories, feeds me pears as round and sweet as children's bellies, yellow plums full of syrup, the fat of the land, the cream of the crop, the pick of the patch.

The lake washes me clean. I roll in the lake water. The lake body is huge, cradles me. I am small and human, full of love and need and desire, wishing this body metaphor into existence in spite of myself.

I know this place as intimately as I could know a lover, each wrinkle and bump, the colours, the twisting surprises of weather. But I am lonely in this; I want a language, a way of talking, a way of thinking, and a way of writing, about this land, this dance of connection.
I have looked for stories about connection. I have found it named in other cultures. In North America, what I’ve read about connection to land always seems to originate in aboriginal cultures, but a deep sense of belonging lives in me as well, white, Scottish, transplanted. When can I be indigenous here? Can I be part of these blue hills, the hot smell of Douglas Fir and cedar on an August afternoon, the taste of a Gravenstein apple as I walk across the orchard to the beach in September through the gold and blue weather?

With no language, I am dumb as the animals, dumb as the bear, deer, elk, cougar, grouse, wild turkeys, ravens, jays, coyotes, on the mountains above me, dumb as the rainbow trout flashing through the clear green depths of the lake, dumb as the wasps I dance with in the plum trees each September, dumb as the ospreys whistling over the farmyard each morning, fish in their claws.

Once by picking plums in a tree full of wasps, hornets, bees, a tree buzzing with intensity, so alive I thought it might rise into the air and me with it, clinging to a branch, I learned the language of polite distance, each plum a small dance, a bowing, a negotiation, my hand coming forward, the wasps moving away. And thus around the tree we went all morning until my buckets grew full of ruby plums and I went away.

I have my power to name things, to make stories about what I know, the power this gives me also makes a distance between me and the place where I live. I can name this place and everything in it; I know the names of plants and animals, rocks, creeks, mountains, trails, places. Name this land, this place, this valley, this lake, these mountains, name my ownership, my living here, my possession, my property, name this place.

But in naming, in proclaiming my knowledge, what have I proved? What have I done, except removed myself? Stepped back. The real stories—those of the mountains, the lake, the wasps have told me, have no words, no names. There are no names on the mountain, only things as they are.

What I want is to understand some other language. I want to hear stories coming back, voices naming me, naming us, over our lifetimes, over generations,
names which will shape us into belonging, shape our existence, shape our
habitation, habits, who we will become.

In a thousand years, will my people be indigenous here? And then,
perhaps will we begin to learn the stories of this place? Will we then have a
language in which to finally tell stories of belonging?

When I come home, I sit at my desk, upstairs in same house where I have
lived all my life. This known world spreads out around me, infinite with
possibility. I make patterns from where I sit, looking outside; there is new snow
on Castle Mountain and the yellow leaves of the vine maple are still hanging on.
Twenty years ago, there were golden larch trees instead but my father cut them
down and maples and alders have grown to replace them. The red cedars have
always been there. Beyond them, I can just see the tops of the peach trees that
bore cascades of pink and yellow fruit this summer.

I make patterns out of all this while this world makes patterns in me. I
want to write my passion for this place, for this world, not as a possessor, but as a
partner. When I write it down, the words pass through me, the wave leaving the
leaf unturned, unmoved in the water. But I make something new, a new pattern,
some words and a shape for them.

"Eating peaches is erotic," I once said to someone and she laughed,
thinking juicy, succulent, sensual, but we missed each other. I was talking about a
circuit sustained, a connection made, a reaching out from the peach tree to me
and back again, both of us embracing our purpose, the tree to make peaches, and
mine to eat them. (Armstrong, in press, 2006)

Such a miscommunication is not a fault or a mistake but a result of language and
culturally embedded meanings. The ecological literacy movement and the efforts to
establish ecologically sensitive pedagogy are ongoing and intense but are, of course,
pitted against a much larger and more entrenched system of capitalistic resource
exploitation and an equally intense set of stories about the benefits of commodification
and consumerism. Whether we will avoid a “cultural wreck” in our future or not is
completely unknown. What we do know is that this struggle is deeply embedded in an ongoing social discussion about the meaning and nature of the society in which all of us might want to live, about the ability of stories to give a voice to the voiceless, and about the values, that ultimately, our stories about ourselves and the places we will live will transmit to our children, both within our families and within pedagogical institutions.

Telling such stories, writing memoir or autobiography is a hopeful act, a stone thrown into the dark water of the future. It is an act predicated on the belief that such a story is worth telling, and contains a structured meaning that can be transmitted across the gap between writer and reader, between generations, within extended periods of historical time.

Time runs in infinite channels and my life on our land is an eyeblink. And so, I have sunk my dreams, hopes and fears into this one place, asked it to hold me, carry them. I have buried my future in the garden, under the marigolds and sunflowers, asked it to hold me there, keep me safe. And now, as well, I had managed to tell some of the stories of what this place means to me and by extension, had illuminated, I hope, for others, some ideas about the meaning of home.

The process of reconstruction

Writing a memoir is essentially a painstaking process of reconstruction. I found the experience much different than that of writing a novel. Writing a novel often feels like discovering or uncovering a story that somehow exists outside the writer or in some mysterious place within the writer’s semi-consciousness. Writing a memoir meant
examining my personal memories, as well as the stories other people had told me, re-
constructing them into a written narrative, then linking them together into a longer
narrative form.

However, I was also aware all through the writing of the memoir, which often felt
more constructed than written, that the process of creating this narrative self was an
artificial one, that I was deliberately and continuously throughout the process choosing
what to leave out as well as what to put in.

There is also a profound kind of silence in memoir, the silence of what is left out
of a story, the silence that informs and creates the background and context for the story,
the silence of what the writer chooses, for many reasons, to leave out or which she
chooses, for other reason, to put in, the scenes and moments that then frame the walls, the
structure of the story, that contain the story within itself.

In addition, the process of writing is a profound examination of self and
experience; the writing itself becomes a search, an exploration through areas of memory
and experience that may have been previously unexamined. Writing a memoir is a
process of discovery, a journey towards new understanding. I was surprised to discover
connections and patterns between different periods in my life; writing the memoir gave
me the chance to examine my life on both a macro and a micro level.

What interested me was how difficult I found some areas of my life to write
about; the process was like edging slowly along a path in the dark. Each time I rewrote
and revised the memoir, I felt like I filled in and added more necessary details that I had
simply forgotten or been reluctant, previously, to include.
I also felt profoundly, after I had finished the memoir, that I had a new and solidified sense of knowledge of who I am. Not only did I have my memories, my stories, and experiences, but I also had examined and recognized the links between them.

Judith Barrington (2002) explains that the difference between memoir and autobiography is that “memoir makes no pretense of replicating a whole life. Indeed, one of the important skills of memoir writing is the selection of the theme or themes that will bind the work together” (p. 23).

Thus the problematic nature of writing memoir is compounded, both by the chosen and constructed form of the narrative, as well as the chosen and constructed content of the narrative.


The choice of what to put in and leave out is made for aesthetic reasons, for thematic reasons and for a myriad of personal, privacy and other subjective reasons. Aesthetically, this choosing allows for the construction of a coherent and thematic narrative that while it in no way tells a comprehensive story, allows the writer to concentrate on a particular facet of a much broader story.

Stanton Wortham writes, “The predominant explanation for autobiographical narrative’s power cites their representation functions. Telling the story of his or her life gives the narrator an opportunity to redirect that life when the narrator tells a coherent story that foregrounds a certain perspective or direction” (Wortham, 2001, p. 5).
This position leaves the narrator in the position of examining her own life and
reconstructing it at the same time. Such a process can, paradoxically, be both somewhat
fraudulent and also insightful. “By definition, autobiographical narratives involve the
doubling of roles for the narrator” (Wortham, 2001, p. 137). This doubling allows the
construction of a narrative mirror in which the narrator examines a portion of his or her
life and positions herself both within and outside it. “… Autobiographical narrators can
partly construct themselves as they interactionally position themselves in characteristic
ways while telling stories” (p. 157).

But in memoir, not only is the writer positioning herself as a character within her
own story, she is then called on to interpret the meaning of the story, a deeply
contradictory feat, somewhat akin to standing within and without oneself at the same
time. In some ways, then, memoir could conceivably be a location of suspicion by
researchers and critics, since much of the authority for the interpretation of the memoir
rests with the writer.

And yet good memoirs have the ability to charm and thrill their readers, as I was
charmed, thrilled and captivated, for example, by such writers as May Sarton, Annie
Dillard and Jill Ker Conway. While reading these books, the depth and profundity of the
story being told captivated me as a reader and reflected what I believed was a profound
sense of meaning in these writers’ works. In these writers’ lives and in their
understanding of their lives, I was able to see reflections of my own life and to learn from
their wisdom, interpretation and understanding, and consequently I found their work
utterly absorbing and admirable.
Experience, Memory and Identity:

Memoirists are architects of memory. Memoir writing, however complex, is fundamentally a task of memory. Memory is one of the primary tools that the writer uses in creating her text. However, memory itself is a complex space.

Memoirists have as a primary resource, their subjective memories and often the memories and stories told to them by other, not only of what might have happened factually, but of other more abstract things such emotions, imaginative states, desires, dreams, and fantasies.

David Gross (2000) has pointed out that in our present time, the status of memory has changed. Memory was once seen as “historically important” but it is now seen as less important and even somewhat unreliable (p. 18). In fact, he believes that “one of the most important consequences of modernity has been the precipitous decline of memory as a value” (p. 31) and that our present time is actually “suffering acutely from dememorization …ie., rapid turnover of ideas, values and practices” (p. 109). He adds that “this speeding up of modern life has led to a kind of deritualization of experience that has itself been destructive of memory… a drying up of public ritual” (p. 109). He attributes this to the influence of the mass media on memory, the “overlapping and interpenetrating world of mainstream newspaper, magazines, tabloids, compact discs, videos, radio, film and television that have now become omnipresent in the post industrial west” (p. 122).

The study of memory has often been the province of science rather than writers. And yet some of they have to say is reminiscent of what writers say as well.
Neuroscience tells us that memory is both complex and highly social. For example, neuroscientist Dr. Daniel Siegel (1996) writes:

Narratives are felt to both help make sense of the world and provide themes which drive future action. The carrying out of these themes, called enactment, may shape a person's style of behaving with others. Autobiographical narrative thus historically documents events, deriving meaning in an attempt to make sense out of them, and guides plans for future action. As such, narratives are simultaneously shaped by mental models and states of mind internally; externally, as a form of discourse, they are influenced by listener expectation. Views of thought as an internalized form of dialogue point to the notion that attachment histories devoid of discussions of the child's internal state may lead to a paucity in autobiographical narrative capacity. Stories are driven forward by both explicit, consciously accessible memory, and by implicit memories in the form of emotion, behavioral response patterns, somatic sensations and perceptual recall. The telling of stories may thus be a primary way in which we can linguistically communicate to others-and to ourselves-the contents of our minds. (p. 7)

Because we essentially live our lives looking backwards, memory can also be very much a dwelling place, a reflective place. As people grow older, their long-term memories become more intense. I am very conscious these days of wanting to create good memories for myself, of trying to store up, when I am the park with my grandson or having the family over for dinner, or at the beach at the farm, details of memory. As I age, I am conscious of the weight of my memories, of deliberately spending time in
memory. Some days I try deliberately to re-create good memories, such as time spent with my mother. I do this, not for writing purposes but to remain close to her.

The contradiction is that however fallible and elusive memory can be, it is also the main source of material for writers, not only for experiences but for “factual information, skills, or events… we can also have memories of more elusive things such as ideals, goals, intentions, commitments, symbols, emotions, promises, states of mind, desires, earlier selves and much more” (Gross, 2000, p. 22).

Reconstructing these memories into an artifact is one of the most important ways we as humans can directly archive our experiences for the future. I was conscious, while writing my memoir, that I was creating an artifact that would probably have a longer life than me, at least in my extended family. I was also very conscious that some of my memories were places that I did not want to re-visit but needed to do so. For example, I only included the experience of having an abortion on the third re-write of the memoir. I did consider leaving it out, although I believed it needed to be in the book since it was emotionally a very difficult time. In addition, it was a turning point in my life where I made a resolution to reshape my life for the better. But it was a place in my memory that is still painful and that I did not want to revisit. But in revisiting it, my understanding of my own courage and resolution was heightened, and I felt some admiration for the strength of that person I had been.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that “Narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be recovered” (Sidonie and Watson 2001, p. 16), but of course, the great contradiction is that such an interpretation is also suspect and artificial.
But memory is also a created artifact, one that is moderated and modified culturally, socially, politically and historically. The importance of remembering and the cultural practices of remembering change over time.

Sidonie and Watson (1996) point out that:

…techniques and practices of remembering change. How people remember, what they remember and who does the remembering are historically specific. A particular culture’s understanding of memory at a particular moment of its history makes remembering possible for a life narrator. Narrators at a crossroads of competing understanding of memory…may place the competing practices of memory in creative tension with one another in order to explore and interrogate the cultural stakes in remembering through a dominant modern mode and an alternative indigenous mode. (p. 18)

The politics of remembering means that “what is remembered and what is forgotten and why change over time” (Sidonie and Watson, 1996, p. 18). Therefore, a written record, a memoir, becomes a bulwark against such changes. It privileges the writer, in that the weight of the written and published voice often can take precedent over orally transmitted memories. But it also becomes an important part of social discourse as well. “Autobiographical narratives…signal and invite reading in terms of larger cultural issues and may also be productively read against the ideological grain” (Sidonie and Watson, 1996, p. 18). They also solidify the disappearance of what has been deliberately forgotten, ignored or left out of discourse.

But memory is also an inescapably intersubjective act, and the identity of the writer is formed irrevocably from the recreation and re-enactment of stories through the
medium of memory. Thus memoir also reflects this intersubjectivity in order for the identity of the writer as a character to come to life. Buss (2002) writes, “Memoir is a form in which history must come into concourse with literature in order to make a self a life and to locate that living self in a history, an era, a relational and communal identity” (P. xiv).

She continues:

Memoir narrators tell you as well as show you. They also refuse the historical narrative’s dictum to objectify the personal interpretation through the device of documentation of many sources. Memoirs, because of the very nature of their form, admit the limitation of their sources. Because of their dependence on narrators who are never fully impartial, and often highly opinionated, memoirs have been consider to be both bad history (which assumes objectivity) and inferior literature (which prefers narratives that show rather than tell) despite what would be viewed as disadvantages by some readers and writers, I found in the memoir the perfect medium to embroider my own rebellious discourse. I like that it was a marginal form, even a marginal form of a marginal discourse, Life Writing. (Buss, 2002, p. xv).

Thus memory is a primary tool within the memoirist’s task of re-constructing the story. When I began writing the memoir, my memories were not a smooth and linear narrative. Rather, they felt like a ragged patchwork; there were familiar stories I had told to friends and family; there were half-remembered flashes of things I thought might have happened but of which I wasn’t sure; there were stories I had buried and was reluctant to un-earth, memories that were in some way embarrassing, shameful or sad. When I
finished the memoir, I had an odd experience. In conversations with friends, I often found myself repeating the stories I had written within the memoir, as if they had now taken primacy within my sense of the past and I often had to consciously stop and search for new stories or ideas to talk about.

One of the more multilayered theoretical difficulties of autobiographical writing is just this notion that it is through such writing that we understand our sense of ‘selfhood.’ In 1970, Philip Lejeune defined autobiographical writing in an essay called “The Autobiographical Pact.” He wrote that autobiography is “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus in on his individual life, in particular, the story of his personality” (cited in Eakin, 2004, p. 2).

Cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner (2003) says that storytelling is implicit to the creation of human culture. The process of creating and telling stories appears to be fundamental to our understanding of not only what it is to be human, but how it is we are human.

The narrative gift is as distinctively human as our upright posture and our opposable thumb and forefinger. It seems to be our ‘natural’ way of using language for characterizing those ever-present deviations from the expected state of things that characterizes living in a human culture. None of us knows the just-so evolutionary story of its rise and survival. But what we do know is that it is irresistible as our way of making sense of human interaction…it is through narrative that we create and recreate selfhood; that self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity. There is now
evidence that without the capacity to make stories about ourselves there would be no such thing as selfhood. (Bruner cited in Fivush and Haden, 2003, p. 222).

Storytelling appears intrinsic to the human psyche, but writing involves complex processes of choosing language, sorting and decision making in terms, not only of ordering events but ordering the words with which to portray those events. It is within that choosing, within that construction that the meaning of story is created. In a non-fiction story, in a story built from the remembered events of a writer’s life, the writer picks and chooses from the recreated panoply of her life, in order to make a story which is true to the spirit of those events.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty has written that “all action and all love are haunted by an expectation of an account which will transform them into their truth” (as quoted by Mairs in Smith and Watson, 1998, p. 473). It is as if the construction of a story, which is both a re-telling and a re-creation, gives that story both a new life and an enhanced meaning.

One central difficulty with all of this, however, is that human beings are made up of many kinds of stories, and these stories themselves are multi-faceted. Not only that, but every story changes as it is told, is affected by the audience and attitude and mood of the speaker. The difference between oral storytelling and written stories is that a written story becomes fixed, at least in its form and its details, although its meaning and the audience’s understanding of the story will change over time and a result of cultural or contextual shifts.

Such an artifact is a far different creation than the complexity of processes that combine to produce a sense of identity in a person. Writing an autobiography or a memoir can be a key component in a person coming to terms or gaining a larger
understanding of a particular segment of his or her story, but such an understanding is limited by the person’s subjectivity, as well as their social, cultural, religious, ethnic, educational and class background.

Nor is one version of a memoir or an autobiography a definitive version of that person’s life, of ‘facts’ or ‘truth.’ As soon as I finished my memoir, I began thinking of other stories that didn’t fit within the boundaries I had set for it, that didn’t connect to the thematic notion of relationship to place, for example, stories of my work in the women’s movement for example, or the stubborn struggle to be both a good mother and a good writer. Some of these topics I have begun already to write about in essays. But others, I am surmising, might require a piece of longer writing in order to tell the story I wish to tell. Memoir is a limited expression; it illuminates moments around a theme, or intent, but it is not an overall telling of a life.

The weight of a story; questions of ethics

Several years ago I was teaching a weekend writing workshop in northern British Columbia. It was a wonderful class, full of intelligent, insightful men and women, serious about writing. But by the end of the second day, some of what I was telling them began to seem, at least to a few of them, dubious. One woman finally looked at me and said, "My mother always told me not to wash my dirty linen in public, and now you're telling me it's okay?"

I am used to this question, or some variation of it, since it comes up, at some point, in almost every class I teach. “What is it okay to write about?” people ask. “I don’t
A clichéd but true piece of writing advice is that students should write what they know. And what they know is themselves and their lives and the lives of their families and friends and thus, as a writing teacher, I generally encourage them to begin with such stories. However, I am often intrigued by their shyness and reticence in dealing with stories about themselves. I decided I needed to have a better answer for that woman and so I decided to investigate issues of ethics in non-fiction writing and related issues of privacy and writing strategies. I began looking for material on the ethics of autobiographical and memoir writing, and was surprised to discover that in fact, there has been little written in this area, and most of what has been written has been in the popular press, places like the New York Times Review of Books, the New Yorker, Vanity Fair and other, more literary magazines.

In the course of writing my own memoir, I came across personal ethical dilemmas and decisions; eventually I decided it would be necessary to consider the relational implications of what I was writing, that is the implications for my family, for my community and for myself. As well, I wondered how other writers had dealt with this. In particular, I felt I needed to consider my family’s situation; members of my family still live within a small, close rural community and what I write could have a direct impact on them.

Although I have been a writer for many years, primarily of fiction but also of journalism and essays, on only a few occasions, have my children and friends let me know of their surprise and their sense of self-consciousness on finding bits and pieces of
themselves and their lives in my writing. As all writers do, I have consciously and unconsciously borrowed from my friends and my family. One of my friends is quite proud that her cluttered dining room table found its way into my second novel – but at other times, people have let me know of their discomfort, most noticeably, one of my daughters saying to me, with some anger, "We're just material to you, aren't we?" – a remark that occasioned some painful soul-searching on my part.

I have changed pieces of my writing because of these complexities and as a result of such changes, have also had to consider the fluctuating grey border area between non-fiction and fiction. Non-fiction writer Lee Marvin stated at a recent panel discussion at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference in Vancouver, “the lines between fiction and non-fiction are blurred and arbitrary” (personal communication, April 2, 2005). In trying to re-construct my own experience, and my own history, I ran into such blurred moments where I made arbitrary decisions, not only about what to include, but how to include it and such arbitrariness presented me with a specific ethical problem in terms of the actual writing of the memoir.

For example, when I first began writing, I tried to re-construct what I remembered, about being four. What I had for memories of being four were fragments, and odd flashes, that I assumed to be reflective of something that had happened. Unfortunately, because my mother now has dementia, she, who had been the story keeper and the storyteller in the family, was no longer able to verify what I thought I remembered. I also knew, as a writer, that these fragments needed to be anchored in image, in metaphor, in the techniques and craftwork of scene-setting. Early on in the process, I wrote this scene:
I stayed inside at first, underfoot and unsure of myself in such a new environment. My older brother had started school and my younger siblings were too young to play with. One day my exasperated mother said, “Go outside, there’s lots of children out there. Go make some friends.” I didn’t want to but I went outside by myself, loitering by the back door, shuffling my feet in the muddy dirt. Finally, I saw a boy coming down the dirt street and I went towards him. The next thing I saw was a rock spiraling towards my head—I saw it clearly but I didn’t have time to duck, in fact, I was too astonished to duck—then the rock hit me and shattered my faith in making friends and I ran wailing back into the house. (Armstrong 2006, in press)

What I actually remembered in this passage was the rock. The rest is a construction of what might have been, and likely was possible. Lee Gutkind, editor of Creative Non-Fiction magazine, has spoken of the need for writers to anchor their work in specific sensory details (personal communication, March 19, 2005).

Other writers, such as Patricia Hampl, (Hampl, 1999, p. 223) write about the resemblance of non-fiction to poetry, in terms of illuminating text through image and metaphor. Non-fiction writing teachers such as Philip Gerard (1996) say that a storyteller persuades by creating “scenes, dramas that occur in a definite time and place. (p. 132). Through these scenes, readers can feel they have been invited inside an active narrative.

But such scene creation by the writer is a dichotomous and conflicted process, where the continuum of structure between fiction and non-fiction indeed blurs. What my memory shows me, is that I when I was a child, I got hit by a rock. The rest is reconstruction of what, probably, happened. Did this rock shatter my faith in making friends? The reader can only judge that by reading the rest of the text. Smith and Watson (2001) write that memory is “invoked by the senses, encoded in objects or events with
And yet…here is where the contradictions in the nature of non-fiction writing begin to splinter into ethical questions. One of my personal writing heroes, a writer whose work I follow and whose ideas I am inspired by, takes an explicit and rather forbidding position on this same question. Ursula K. LeGuin (2004) writes, in her new collection of essays:

The memoirist’s response seems to me to be exactly that of the ethnographer: not to pretend to objectivity but also not to pretend to be able to speak for anybody but oneself. To assign oneself the power to tell us what another person thought or felt is, to my mind, co-optation of a voice: an act of extreme disrespect. The reader who accepts that voice colludes in the disrespect. (p. 134)

Here then is one of the central locations for the contrapositionality of text, narrative and meaning within memoir, where the structural and strategic demands of the text and the need for the narrative to adhere to some kind of “factual” (the word factual itself a difficult and contested artifact) stance counter one another, each making specific and contradictory demands of the writer. Shari Benstock (1988) writes that “autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream; what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction covers over the premises of its construction” (p. 11).

Thus one of the primary locations for an intricate and ongoing ethical decision making process on the part of the writer resides within this initial (re)construction of memory as it resides within the text and the tension that is created within these
oppositional spaces of fragmented memory and text that is deliberately constructed to be an integrated whole. This is an initial and contradictory position that must be negotiated by the writer, where the choice of language, the order of events, specific images, and other structural strategies will ultimately determine the shape of the text and its possible impact on the reader. Thus the writer reconstructs the text as a performative space where the reader can enter into the scenes and memories as they are re-constructed. Angel Lourerio (2000) writes that this act of writing performatively can be seen as “the place where the writer constructs the scene of memory and events so they can be entered into by the reader” (p.1). Memoir writing in particular reflects the “contemporary theory of autobiography as a performative act, as the creation or re-creation of the self at the time of writing” (p.1).

But as noted by Eakin (1996) autobiographers also can’t help but stray into the territory of biography, since autobiography is always “relational” (p. 248). Sisela Bok (1984) writes that “the lives of others are centrally implicated in the telling of any life story” (p. 157), and so this performative act involves performing other people as well.

Consequently, this relational act has further consequences, both for the writer and for the story. As the writer creates her memoir, she is able to understand her writing acts as “performative of a subjectivity that will give her more agency in the world” (Buss, 2002, p. 186). The writer comes to realize her sense of self as a consequence of its “matrix in the other—the other of history, family, career, all of life’s relevant relational contexts” (p.186).

So the memoirist’s task is not only to “lay bare the intimate life of the memoirist, but also lay bare the private lives of the memoirist’s family, spouses, lovers and friends”
(Ellerby, 2001, p. 176). It is within both this performative act of re-creating the lives of the writer and her relationships, as well as the aesthetic choices of language, image, metaphor, narrative structure, and other strategic devices that the writer must make an ongoing series of ethical choices. Thus, not only can writing the memoir be an illuminating experience of coming to understanding of a personal narrative, but the writer’s examination of the basis for the choices she makes on an ongoing basis throughout the writing form another profound layer of depth of meaning within the memoir itself.

When I initially began writing a memoir, I resisted the notion that I needed to consider the effect of telling my story on my family. I didn’t want to think about it because I wanted to concentrate my attention on the actual process of creating the book and I feared the distraction that worrying about consequence could become. I did know before I began that the story I wanted to tell would involve members of my family and my community. My story would, I hoped, be one primarily about my relationship with a particular place but since I have shared this same piece of land for fifty years with my family, they would obviously be part of this story.

After I got fully into writing the memoir, I decided to tell my siblings and my children only that I was writing a book about our farm. I also told this to my father but I wasn’t sure what else to tell him. I knew my father would be one of the central characters in my narrative. However, he is in his eighties, doesn’t read much, and I was fairly sure he wouldn’t be interested in understanding the relational complexity of my life. My father is a man who was born in the Depression era in Canada, and worked incredibly hard all his as a farmer and a labourer. He is very much a man of his generation, with traditional
values, and I didn’t feel that I had the right to ask that he, in some way, come to terms with my story. I was fairly sure, in fact, that he wouldn’t be interested. I also realized that I felt protective of him, of his feelings, even though much of my story concerns the long and exhausting emotional struggle I had had trying to understand and deal with his impact on my life. Other writers have told me they have waited until after their parent’s death to write their memoirs. I didn’t feel like I had this choice because, in part, I wanted access to my father’s memories of his life. So I was immediately ethically conflicted; I was making decisions that excluded my father even as I was making him a central character in my book, and using his life as material. And yet I also felt I was doing this for a good reason, that I was protecting him from emotional disturbance. But I was not at all sure that this was a ‘right’ or ethical decision.

I was also aware that I felt some responsibility to be protective of my brother, his wife and their son, all of whom who still live and in the community in which my siblings and I grew up. I knew that I didn’t want them to feel like they would have to answer to the community for something I wrote.

But I also felt strongly that I had an important story to tell, that it has implications for many people concerned with notions of home, place, land, environmental issues, family heritage and culture. I believe that our world is at a crisis juncture environmentally and I wanted to add my voice, in whatever way I could, to a positive identification of stories of land and place.

As I worked on the book, I kept thinking about the ethical issues involved and how to best make decisions on what to include in the book. I didn’t think or feel as I began that I had a thought-out ethical decision-making process.
When I went through the process of the Behavioural Ethics Research Board (BREB) application at the University of British Columbia, I found that their guidelines provided little guidance for the work I wanted to do and I began to look for information on how to make ethical decisions about autobiographical writing. I found the health care model for ethics a difficult fit for autobiographical work. *The Handbook on Qualitative Research* (2005) outlines a number of specific concerns with institutional research boards (IRB’s) in universities generally in dealing with qualitative research methods. The authors cite reservations by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) from 2001. Some of these reservations include “a failure by IRB’s to be aware of new interpretive and qualitative developments in the social sciences, including participant observation, ethnography, autoethnography, and oral history research” (p. 38).

Sociologist Carolyn Ellis (2005) delineates three different types of ethical decision making for university researchers, procedural, “the kind mandated by IRB committees to ensure procedures adequately deal with informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm” (Ellis, in press, p. 3), situational ethics,” the kind that deal with the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field” (p. 3), and “a third dimension, relational ethics, a kind closely related to an ethics of care” ( p. 3).

Ellis defines the central issues of relational ethics in this way:

As part of relational ethics, we seek to deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our research participants over time. If our participants become our friends, what are our ethical responsibilities toward them? What are our ethical responsibilities toward intimate others who are implicated in the
stories we write about ourselves? How can we act in a humane, nonexploitative way, while at the same time being mindful of our role as researchers? (Ellis, in press.)

Narrative inquiry is an emergent process in which the process is integrally related to the product and there are bound to be surprises all along the way. Writing in qualitative research “must therefore reflect the process of the research – the character of the original conceptual framework as well as the evolving one (Ely, Vinz and Downing, 1997, p. 52). The stance of the researcher, his or her positionality, as well as intention all affects the work (Ely et al 1997, p. 38).

Issues such as informed consent and confidentiality that are central to the IRB process become perplexing, contradictory and complex in autobiographical inquiry. For example, I was required by the university to have each member of my family who was named in the memoir sign a letter of consent, and I agreed to do so. However, the language and tone of this letter of consent was not language or a tone that I would ever normally use with my family. The language was formal and academic and, I considered, not very accessible to them.

In addition, although I was required to inform my family that their participation would be voluntary, how voluntary could my writing about members of my family actually be? Obviously, if they denied me permission, that would affect our relationship? Was it, in fact, fair of me to ask them to make this choice?

In addition, I think it is important to question the idea of who is entitled to narrate the experiences that occur within a family. Can anyone own a shared experience? Where does my experience and their experience begin and end? In a shared experience, how is it
possible to withhold consent? In fact, it is worth asking the question of whether informed consent can really be given in autobiographical research. What about possible situations where writers are dealing with issues of abuse, of power imbalance, of trauma and testimony?

I believe that the concept of informed consent needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis with a methodology such as autobiographical inquiry. Informed consent is a particularly difficult concept if the researcher is required to obtain consent before he or she begins writing. Since the process of the writing is, in and of itself so important to the actual process, this seems an oddly backward and limiting procedure. What are the participants actually consenting to? And of course, what then happens if consent is refused? Is there a possibility of important research topics being limited, silenced, or refused because of the issue of informed consent?

The issue of confidentiality is equally problematic. Can there be confidentiality within a family, or a small community, or among people who have previously been involved in an experience together? Under these circumstances, what does confidentiality mean? As we shall see later, in discussing legal issues, there is no inherent right to privacy of a shared experience. No one owns experience but it is the researcher’s task to draw forth and construct meaning from narrative experience through writing.

In the process of writing my memoir, as I became more and more cognizant of these issues, I therefore also began to examine my own values and how I make decisions about my interrelationships in the world. Writing the book brought into focus an examination of my own moral and ethical values. For example, I am a person with a family, with children and grandchildren. I also have a number of deep and valuable
friendships that have existed as powerful, sustaining and important relationships in my life for over thirty years. I tried to teach my children and embody within my all my relationships, values of kindness, generosity, honesty, and integrity. These have always been guideposts in my life, and are values I learned from my parents and from my reading.

The word “ethics” is derived from the Greek word êthikos with the root êthos, which means manners and customs. “Moral” is derived from the Latin word moralis, which also means manners and customs. Hence, though there are shades of difference, the terms ethics and moral often tend to be used as synonyms. In my personal life, I have tried to ensure, not always successfully, that my morals, my ethics and my behaviour are integrated.

When I examined my process of making decisions about writing the memoir closely, I realized that I felt responsibility in three somewhat conflicted directions. I identified these triangular tensions as, first, the need to come into a space of what I identified as narrative clarity. I felt I needed to fully explore my own history, my own memories and my personal narrative so as to get at the underlying issues and ideas– what Hampl identifies as the story beneath the story. Second, I felt the weight of my need as a professional writer to strategically craft a memoir using techniques of narrative tension, images, sensory details, and dialogue that would keep readers interested in continuing to read my story, as well as give them a sense of connection to my story. I also clearly wanted to write a memoir that would be recognized by my literary peers as having some merit. And third, I felt the weight of my sense of responsibility towards, as well as my love and care for, my family and friends. Part of my spiritual values includes what the
Dalai Lama terms loving-kindness, I believe in being kind, caring and respectful as far as I can do that, towards all other beings. I didn’t want anyone to feel I had been careless about his or her sensibilities in writing my memoir. I felt that these three tensions contained contradictory and complex (and perhaps irresolvable) ethical spaces.

When I thought about them further, I realized I needed to understand more clearly aspects of this triangulated responsibility. I had many questions about my writing process when I began writing my memoir. What standards, for example, in terms of the aesthetically ‘good,’ was I applying to my text? What, in fact, did the term ‘aesthetically good’ mean to me? Whose standards was I applying?

In addition, who was I writing for? Who would be my audience? How would I stay as faithful to memory as possible, and also illumine the story behind the story?

I needed to understand the nature of story within memoir. That is, I needed to explore the intermingling of fact, fiction, truth, multiplicity of perspectives, conflicts of interests, absence, revealing and withholding story, that is an essential feature of memoir writing. I knew that I could only achieve a genuine deep understanding of these issues within the actual writing itself. I also needed to separate ethical dilemmas involved in actual writing strategies from those ethical dilemmas that might come about as a result of the content of the memoir.

The strategies involved in creating a memoir text share many aspects with fiction. As Patricia Hampl (1999) says, the writer hopes that her memoir will include “both the inherent power of the real and the deep resonance of the literary” (p. 205). Did I believe that the “real” exists? What did I understand “resonance of the literary” to mean? And of course, “real” is a word with a multiplicity of resonances. Hampl (1999) continues:
The truth memoir has to offer is not neatly opposite from fiction’s truth. Its methods and habits are different and it is perhaps a more perverse genre than the novel: it seems to be about an individual self but it is revealed as a minion of memory which belongs not only to the personal world but to the public realm. As such, the greatest memoirs tend to be allergic to mere confession and mistrustful of revenge, though these are two of the genre’s natural impulses (p. 205).

What would it mean, as a writer to both “narrate facts and to search for truth, blending the empirical eye of the reporter with the moral vision” (1996, p. 57), which is how Philip Gerard problematizes this statement. In the course of writing my memoir, it became clear to me that not only did I need to clarify many questions about the actual process of writing, in addition, I would need to examine my own biases, motivation, agenda, and ambition.

Was this memoir about justifying or rationalizing mistakes in my life? Could I avoid a tone of self-pity or self-aggrandizement? Would I even know if this tone crept in?

My children have often accused me of distorting and exaggerating stories. It is, in fact, a family joke. My reply has always been, “Why tell a story if you can’t make it a good story?” Would my children think this memoir was exaggeration and distortion on a grand scale? And if so, had I in fact created a memoir of exaggeration to avoid the vulnerability and exposure of intimacy?

In terms of writing strategies, memoir writing uses some of the same techniques of fiction, including creation of a narrative arc, character development, scene-setting, action sequences, dialogue and interior monologue. I felt compelled to try to create a narrative that would sound ‘true’ to the reader, but would have the same narrative
tension as fiction. Would this pull to create a somewhat artificial story then create the narrative tension I sought? Since no one’s life falls naturally into a narrative pattern, this would involve much selection and construction, and in particular, the selection of necessary particular scenes, of particularly illuminating moments in the story. Within this selection and construction, how close to the undefined border area between fiction and non-fiction did I want to proceed? How ethical was it to use these techniques if they would possibly result in a kind of ‘fictionalizing’ of my story. Most memoirists I had read seemed very divided and uneasy about this question. All of these questions about strategy and structure resonated within me as I began to write.

But I also had many questions about the ethical content of my memoir. Memoir writers necessarily include in their story people with whom they have been in a close relationship, family friends, and members of particular communities or locations. The people included as characters within a memoir then have an oddly divided relationship with the writer; they are now characters in a story who share their names and characteristics, but they are also still real people with whom the writer is or has been in some kind of relationship, whether friendly and pleasant, or hostile and abusive. The memoir writer thus finds herself with a particular relationship and responsibility to the people who she is using to create her story.

Consequently, the reader as well is also brought into relationship with others who may not be at all so willing to have their personal lives shared with a public audience. Memoir, involves writing about a sense of self that has been, in large part, created through relationships with others; in writing her own story, the writer’s subject is a self that has been created through a process of living with others.
Thus, a memoir involves "a human subject whose autonomy is compellingly intertwined with relationships, and community" (Buss, 2002, p. 187).

In writing a memoir, part of the writer’s job is to explore those influences, from family, teachers, friends, community, culture and ethnic ties, which have played a part in creating him or her to be who they are. And part of this task is to decide how to speak of such relationships, and in particular, what stance or attitude the writer takes towards these people. The process of writing memoir involves both examining and re-creating “a human subject that does not seek to disentangle herself from those compelling ties but builds autonomy based on them” (Buss, 2002, p. 187).

For example, I wanted to write about my struggle to become a writer, my struggle to reconcile my roles as a daughter, mother, rural person, working class person, political activist, and writer. This meant writing about my grandparents, my parents, my children and my siblings. I wanted to explore some the complexities of the multi-faceted, often contradictory experiences I had had in my life, as a farmer, a rural person, a single parent mother, a feminist, an environmentalist, a peace activist, a writer, and now, an aspiring academic. I wanted to try to do this without romanticizing or exaggerating some of the struggles I had faced.

I found some comfort in the fact that so many other memoir writers had faced these same ethical dilemmas and survived them. But I was intrigued by how few writers I knew had discussed this publicly, and I wasn’t sure of the reasons for their silence. It seemed to me to be a space of inquiry rich with questions and possibilities for inquiry. The more I asked questions of my writing, and the more I became involved in the process of actually writing a memoir, the more interesting, complex and intricate the process
became.

Thus, as I worked on the memoir, it became evident to me, that writing autobiographically, in particular, calls into account the writer's own ethical and moral sense and that in writing memoir, I would have to come to some decisions about my own ethical and moral stance as regards my material. There were several specific areas that I found difficult. One was, of course, dealing with my father and mother. Another problematic area was a previous marriage with a man with whom I am still on good terms and who still lives in the community where we both grew up. He is a very private person and my children consider him a wonderful father. Would he, or they, be disturbed by my writing about our marriage?

And what about people in my small town with whom I have had conflicts in the past but am now also on good terms. How could I write honestly about them?

As Paul John Eakin (2004) says, there are two central ethical questions about memoir: what is the “good” of such writing, and, conversely, whom might it harm? (p. 1) Such a question is, of course, a basic ethical question one could ask of any behaviour. But this question adds a moral dimension to writing. The writer is forced to consider the “moral consequences” of the act of writing, (p. 2) and to make a considered effort to decide "what is right and fair" (p. 2) for him or her to write about someone else.

The writer’s motives, intentions and judgments all become suspect within this process. As Ellerby (2001) says “Serious memoirists must consider not only what to tell, but also why they are telling it” (p. 187).

These are not only questions that the writer must ask of herself, but they are also questions that the reader subsequently will likely be drawn to ask of the text. As Eakin
(2004) points out, readers are drawn to memoir in part because they find there a reflection of their own emotional, psychological, and ethical struggles, as well as a kind of literary voyeurism, desire to eavesdrop, or to peek into bedroom windows.

In part these questions also arise out of one of the primary complexities of memoir writing, that in writing about herself, the memoirist must necessarily arrogate to herself the right to speak publicly about material that may have been previously held privately within the family or the community, and it is this outing of previously private material into a public space where some of the most difficult and perplexing ethical dilemmas arise.

Judith Barrington (2002) writes, “As soon as I began to write about my own life, I understood that to speak honestly about family and community was to step way out of line, to risk accusations of betrayal, and to shoulder the burden of being the one who blows the whistle on the myths that families and communities create to protect themselves from painful truths” (p. 12).

I felt much the same. I felt as if I were breaking some unknown set of rules. Our family has always had an ethos of privacy – my parents were not rigidly anti-social but they were certainly private. Part of what had drawn them together was their mutual dislike of society, and after they married, they had chosen to live a quite isolated life on the farm where they had limited contact with other people. In addition, my mother had often told me how much she disliked what she saw as the pretentiousness of society. My siblings and I had grown up in what was, in effect, our own small private kingdom, ruled by my father; as children, we had developed stories of how we looked on outsiders, summer people, or city people, with active dislike. As a family, we told stories to each
other about how ignorant town people were of the woods, of animals, and of rural life; of how they partied until late and then slept in the morning while we all got up at 5 am to pick fruit. Our family values of thrift, hard work and survival were seen by all of us as antithetical to the town people’s values of making and spending too much money.

In addition, my relationship with the nearby small town has always been difficult. My high school years had been painful; in fact, I remembered my time in high school as a confusing, lonely and angry time. It is a small, very conservative, agricultural community, and after I grew up, over the years, I had been very public as a feminist, a peace activist, and an environmental activist. There were people in the town with whom I was still angry, people who had refused me work, people who I perceived had in other ways hurt me and my children, but there were also many people I liked and admired.

Nancy Mairs is a memoirist whose work I very much admire, in part because she has often faced the issue of writing very personal material. Her stories are appealing because she grounds them in common human experiences. As she points out, “My story, though intensely personal, is not at all private. Beneath its idiosyncrasies lie vast strata of commonality and communality” (1994, p. 473).

As I began writing, I asked myself in what ways did my story share those same strata of commonality and communality. If it did, did that justify the outing of my family’s personal stories into a public realm? I realized in questioning this, that part of my drive to write a memoir, and part of my ethical justification for this process, was precisely that I shared as belief with Mairs that my personal story would resonate with many other people. In fact, part of my personal challenge in writing the memoir was to find this commonality with a wide diversity of people, something that went directly
against our family culture but that was an important part of my own values.

So again it came back to a personal inquiry. What aspects of my own story did I most value? Did I believe that in telling it that readers would be able identify themselves within those strata of commonality and communality? And did I believe that this larger value would overcome and outweigh any possible sense of betrayal on the part of my family? Why did I feel so drawn to write this particular narrative? How would it serve me? And conversely what did I feel I could offer to readers that would make this a compelling story for them? Was it possible in the telling of my story, it would release my children to narrate their own or to come to new understandings of who they are and who their family is. Perhaps such a memoir would be a gift of reciprocity, a sharing of meaning-making between writer and those who are being written into new understanding/recognitions?

So what indeed was my responsibility to the people who I was using to create my story? Autobiographical writing, or memoir, involves understanding a selfhood that is in large part, created through relationships with others; in writing her own story, the writer’s subject is a self that has been created through a process of living. In writing my memoir, I would have to choose how to include these people who are part of both my past and present; my relationships with my family and with the local community had changed through time. Was it worth it to bring up old angers, old difficulties? Is that what I was trying to do?

It also seemed to me that what a writer might decide is right and fair, to use Eakin’s term, could be very different than what members of their family thought was right and fair. Obviously, the possibility existed that the writer’s judgment was not only
self-serving and subjective; it also probably involved very conflicted and subjective boundaries of privacy, morality, and even a sense of ownership of stories. What is right and fair would always be suspect to the desires and goals of the writer.

So where, I wondered, was a place of clarity from which to truly understand my own moral/ethical stance within a multitude of contradictory desires and responsibilities? Did I personally have such a stance or could I at least establish such a stance for myself? Would doing so be a useful exercise by which to illuminate the multilayered, complex and complicit process of memoir writing?

Upon self-reflection, I realized that I did indeed have such a stance, that in fact I have quite rigorously pursued decision-making around values and clarity in terms of my relations with other people. I had at various times read broadly in the areas of Christian theology, Buddhist teachings, First Nations spirituality, and tried to relate teachings from these spiritual practices in my own life. I realized I have come to be guided by two primary values, honesty and compassion, and have worked to find a balance between these two. In addition, I believe in the First Nations idea of respect for others, that all beings, human and non-human are worthy and deserving of respect. Such a stance, I thought, could be a beginning, a place from which to examine the many other ethical complexities within memoir writing.

As I worked on my memoir, I began to continually consider both how to handle certain kinds of material and how it would be read and received. There was my family to think about, and people I still knew and were friends with from high school, plus the fact that I still live part of my life in the same community in which I had grown up. I didn’t have the luxury of time having created distance between myself and the people I was
writing about, who were also ‘characters’ in my memoir. These were people with whom I am still in relationship. And in particular, once again, there was the portrayal of my parents whose long and difficult relationship was a centrepiece of my story. I knew that my readers would probably include both the general public as well as many people who knew me and with whom I have had some kind of relationship over the years.

One of the thematic issues of my memoir is that of becoming a writer. I wrote in the memoir:

*My ability to use language and re-tell my story as separate from and distinct from my father’s story of who I was or should be, changed my status, changed my sense of self, and gradually alienated my world from that of my father. In particular, this played out in two particular and related areas, in the differences between how we related to land, and also, in our deep and angry differences about how I should behave as a woman.* (Armstrong, 2006, in press)

But this same ability that I had spent so long developing now meant I could tell stories about times in my earlier life when I had felt hurt, or angry or mistreated. Certainly there had been times in my life, such as high school, when I had felt very lonely and ignored. I didn't realize then that my schoolmates hated me because their elementary school principal had taunted them by telling them I was smarter than them. I only found that out thirty years later.

And, of course, many people hadn't necessarily meant to treat me meanly—we were all trapped by being politically, culturally and socially, creatures of our time. And of course, we are no longer at all the same people we had been in high school. Deliberately and carefully, I changed the names of a few of my high school enemies and disguised
their story just enough that I was reasonably satisfied that it was true to what had happened but softened in its impact.

I determined for myself that my ethical choice in writing about high school was in the respectful attitude and stance I took towards these re-created characters; I could look at the broader implications of how we had been formed to be the people we were then and the consequences this had, not just for me, but for my schoolmates and teachers as well. I could make the best attempt I thought possible to be both honest and kind, and to balance the tripartite responsibilities and demands outlined earlier.

And in fact, in writing about what I had thought had been torturous experiences in high school has turned out to have a positive and even illuminating aspect.

For example, I wrote about high school:

*There is no worse experience on earth than being alone at noon hour in high school where everyone else is in a clump, a gaggle, where looks and giggles follow you down the hall, and where loneliness is a yellow poisonous fog, a panic in which you are forced to dwell.*

At first I hid in the library where I could pretend to be studying and where no one else ever went voluntarily. There were a lot of books in the library, more than I’d ever seen before. I began to pull them down off the shelves almost at random, take them back to a table, and read. Then I began to take them out. I read books that no one had ever taken out of the library.

*I read travel books and books by strange philosophers and novels and stories. I didn’t pay much attention to the writers. As far as I knew, writers were people who had once lived far away, usually in England and were now long dead.*

As I cowered in the library, I made another discovery. *There was a whole shelf of poetry books that some well-intentioned librarian had bought years before. I began to look at them and then I began to read. Then I took several of them home.*
From then on, in all my classes, I sat at the back of the room with a book on my lap. My teachers, either out of charity or incompetence rarely bothered me. Algebra made such little sense to me I might as well have been looking at Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Instead, I was reading Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg. In Math and Science, I was deaf to the teacher, thrilling instead with the discovery that words could make such amazing music. Poetry ran into my veins like wine. It resounded in my head like drums and bugles. I went around with Fern Hill banging in my head for weeks, thinking I was crazy, thinking I was the only one who had ever felt this way. (Armstrong, 2006, in press)

I realized that at this stage in the writing, I was beginning to understand on a practical level rather than a theoretical level, what critics such as Helen Buss had meant when she wrote of memoir writing as “performative” (p. 186). Buss writes that memoir writing “requires the growth of personal autonomy through the acts of reflective/reflexive writing. A part of that autonomy is the writer’s realization of herself as a consequence of its matrix in the other—the other of history, family, career, all of life’s relevant relational contexts” (p. 186). In writing about such a difficult period in my life, I examined and came to some understanding of the forces that had shaped me then and which are still influential in my life, the drive to write, to read philosophy, to seek solitude as comfort. I also came to understand that however painful high school had been, it had also been pivotal and necessary in terms of shaping me to be who I have become. When I was done with that section of the book, I felt a sense of lightness and freedom, as if I were done with some task both painful and necessary.

The Reader’s Response:
The complexities of the ethics are contradictory and perhaps in some ways impossible to completely unravel. As Eakin writes, the "confessional drive behind life writing that draws us to it...our desire to penetrate the mystery of another person, may also constitute its primary ethical flaw" (Eakin, 2004, p. 185).

Suzanne Egan and Gabriele Helms (2002) write:

We live in an auto/biographical age that uses the personal narrative as a lens onto history and the contemporary world. In every medium, cultures are permeated and increasingly transformed by auto/biographical narratives, productions, and performances of identity. (p.5)

Given this profound current interest in memoir, a useful exercise at this point might be to examine some of the generalized assumptions by readers, about non-fiction by in general and memoir in particular, because it is these very assumptions made by the readers that create another particular framework for the ethical questions and ideas that are involved in writing memoir.

I have discussed in a previous chapter of the dissertation, how memoir as a genre within the wider genre of autobiography makes particular demands on its readers. I also discussed some of the impulses that have motivated the growth and changes within the genre of memoir particularly within the last thirty years.

But it seems to me that the possibility still exists for readers and academics to place a somewhat naïve trust in the overall genre loosely defined as non-fiction. The reflexive bond of reciprocity, between writer and reader, but also between reader and writer, is a constantly shifting and elusive territory. In fact, I have sat in classes and
lectures within the university, where, to my discomfort, the terms narrative and truth were used loosely and somewhat interchangeably.

To its readers, memoir writing offers, both implicitly and often explicitly, certain promises and because of these promises, memoir readers tend to make certain assumptions about the genre. It is generally assumed by readers, (sometimes purely because the people marketing the book to the reader say so), that the memoir is made up of something called non-fiction, and because of this, it offers a reasonably close replica of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ to its readers, both words that tend to be featured in the cover copy. It will generally say, somewhere on the cover of the book, that the book is non-fiction.

It also seems to be generally assumed by readers that when a writer does make the claim that he or she is writing something called non-fiction, then the material in their book is not made up from the writer's imagining but is at least based largely or as much as the writer can honestly manage, on what the writer perceives as ‘true’ or ‘real’ events. Of course, all of these terms are contested territory; whether fiction is wholly imagined, and to what extent and how autobiography or memoir can reflect some kind of reality are grounds for interesting discussion and philosophical debate.

Lee Gutkind (2005), who specializes in writing and editing what he terms ‘creative non-fiction,’ a field in which he includes memoir, (p. xxvi) writes that “…the bigger mystery is…the set of parameters that govern or define creative non-fiction – the concepts writers must consider while laboring in or struggling with what we call the literature of reality, beginning with the difference between fiction and non-fiction” (p. xxi).

Paul Lauritzen (1997) points to a larger issue when he writes:
…if experiential narratives are to inform practical deliberation, then we need to raise serious questions about the reliability and credibility of experiential narratives and their narrators. Did the events really happen? Is the narrator reliable? Are there competing narratives to which we must listen? These are the kinds of questions that we must answer if we are to draw on experiential narratives when deliberating morally. (cited in Egan, 1999, p. 37)

Thus the writer would seem to have some responsibility to the reader in that the reader believes she is reading something composed from what are commonly termed ‘real’ events that have happened to the writer. Within this assumption, the reader grants a bond of trust to the writer. The reader trusts that the writer has indeed based her story on something that the reader assumes approximates as something akin to what happened in the writer’s life. When the reader trusts the writer, she grants to the writer a willingness to enter into the writer’s life, to become, for a space of time, a person who is, in a sense, living for a space inside someone else’s life as life as the writer has reconstructed it. Thus the reader also constructs the writer. Reader and writer meet within the artifact of text. A suspension of disbelief somewhat akin to what happens in theatre happens in the text; the reader enters into the life of the text as created by the writer, with the added emotive contextual element that she or he believes they are entering into a life or lives as they have been lived.

The reader understands, when he or she picks up a book labeled autobiography or memoir, that this book reflects some events that describe an experience which as far as possible, reflects a known reality, and they will trust the author's word that this is so, and equally, will feel betrayed if they find out that this isn’t so, particularly if the book
involves some deeply emotional or historically profound event.

In other words, readers are dependent, within their reading, within their initial decision to read, and within their assessment and enjoyment of the book as well as what learning, experience and understanding they choose to take away from it, on the trust they place upon their sense of the writer's integrity, that is, their sense that the author has done his or her best to re-create a narrative based on the author's re-creation of her understanding of what really happened. Memoir makes specific demands on its readers, a willingness to enter into belief and trust and as Paul John Eakin (2004) says, this trust forms a “moral imperative” (p. 3), one that life writers fail if they don’t “tell the truth” (p. 3).

This can be often a very positive relationship, allowing a reader to enter into, as it were, another’s story as if it were his or her own, to be given a powerful and moving glimpse inside another person’s life, and thus to gain experiential knowledge that would not be available to them otherwise. “For memoir to be successful, the form needs readers who enter a text with an attitude...that does not seek to appropriate, judge or colonize but that mandates that readers risk their own vulnerabilities in reading the memoir text” (Buss, 2002, p. 189).

Eakin (2004) also identifies the ethical ground of autobiographical writing as a crucially important ethical exploration for the reader. Autobiography can model for the reader a process of “self-reflection and self-critical assessment” (p. 5), or it can model the reading of someone’s life as a process of “moral inquiry” (p. 5).

Ellerby (2001) adds, “Because they are intimately reflective of our deepest values, memoirs provide dynamic locations for readers to enter the ethical conversations of the
day” (p. 130). The memoir invites the writer and the reader to “compose and clarify ethical positions, encouraging and deepening our sense of ourselves as ethical agents…Memoirs are grounded in lived specificity; ethics serve as their thematic soul” (Ellerby, 2001, p. 130). However, because ethics are not “concretized strictures but as a process of interpretation agreed upon through ongoing fluid discursive power struggles within our cultures” (p. 131), reading memoir can then serve as a space of clarifying and negotiating personal ethics.

Or, as Eakin (2004) puts it in his introduction to The Ethics of Life Writing, that while “an ethics of life writing is properly concerned with checking the potential for harm,” it also has served over time as an enormous and influential literature of the “the examined and exemplary life” (p. 4). He adds, “if identity and morality are intimately and inextricably connected in this way, then ethics is not merely one possible perspective on lifewriting, it constitutes it as a practice” (p. 4).

LeGuin (2004), as well, explores this paradoxical territory:

Anything written contains an implicit contract, which can be honoured or broken in the writing, or in the reading, or in the presentation by the publisher. The first and most tenuous and intangible contract is between the writer and his or her conscience, and goes something like this: In this piece I will try to tell my story truly using the means I find appropriate to the form, whether fiction or nonfiction. (p. 140)

I worked throughout the writing of the memoir to find these appropriate means, to discover or uncover the strategies I felt functioned well to communicate the story, without, I believed, fictionalizing, or distorting what I believed had happened to me, as
well as trying to find that difficult balance between narrative structure and being ‘true’ to the story that is the core of good memoir.

LeGuin (2004) continues:

There there’s a more verifiable agreement between the writer and the reader, the terms of which vary immensely, depending in the first place on the sophistication of both... But an attitude of distrust towards non-fiction may well be the result of experience. One has been disappointed so often. For though a whole swarm of facts in a novel doesn’t in the least invalidate the invention as a whole, every fictive or even inaccurate element in a narrative that presents itself as factual puts the whole thing at risk. To pass a single invention off as a fact is to damage the credibility of the rest of the narrative. To keep doing so is to disauthenticate it entirely. (p. 140)

I felt LeGuin was throwing out a challenge here to the whole field of memoir and autobiographical writing, a challenge about which there still seems to be dissension among non-fiction writers. For example, there was an exchange on the Creative non-fiction writer’s list serve in the fall of 2005 on the issues of ‘composite characters.’ Some writers had used composite characters or had blurred or disguised characters in situations where they felt naming people or describing them too well might endanger their lives.

Helen Buss summed up the tangling of ethics and aesthetics when she wrote:

The non-fiction writer's art is integrally involved with ethical decisions, whereas the fiction writer's art is not necessarily so. Fiction writers may well have ethical standards, but it is not a condition of their writing. For non-fiction writers these decisions are constant and ongoing. My own writing on the subject of memoir has
convinced me that ethics and aesthetics are beautifully intertwined for non fiction writers, so that a great deal of the art of what we do is working out the ethics of what we do. Traditional aesthetics wants to be separate from any ethical matters, as if writing was above anything as messy as who you hurt, but those of us who have written memoirs and other non fiction forms know that we cannot accept a division between how we write and why we write. And that is part of the challenge and the achievement of the art of creative non-fiction (personal communication, email, Nov 21, 2005).

LeGuin (2004) says that:

Excellence in nonfiction lies in the writer’s skills in observing, organizing, narrating and interpreting facts—skill, entirely depend on imagination, used not to invent, but to connect and illuminate observation. Writers of nonfictional narrative who ’create’ fact, introduce inventions, for the sake of aesthetic convenience, wishful thinking spiritual solace, psychic healing, vengeance, profit, or anything else, aren’t using the imagination but betraying it. (p. 140)

I am quite sure that discussions of ethics in memoir, autobiography and non-fiction will continue for as long as writers are engaging in this form. What I believe is important is that the discussion continue, that it be open and questioning, and that writers themselves remain conscious of the ethical and moral dilemmas they take on when they engage in autobiographical writing.

**Legal Issues:**
Because of this relational complexity, there are really multiple levels of ethical problematizing within memoir, ethical, moral, but also, possibly, legal. Philip Gerard (1996) calls the field of writing an encounter between the “priest, the lawyer and the creator” on the “playing field of the imagination” (p. 194).

In fact, legal problems rarely arise, partly because any publisher would hesitate to publish material that might seem actionable and would unquestionably seek legal advice before doing so. In addition, the legality of libel resides in two issues, whether the material can be examined and determined by a court to be legally true, and whether it has done damage, personal or financial, to the person being written about, all of which must be determined by the court.

According to one on-line law reference, libel law or defamation law “is a tricky and slippery field of law, based on statutes, English common law and many defenses.” (Duhaime, 1996, Canadian defamation law). Defamatory material is “presumed to be false and malicious” (Duhaime, 1996). The remarks must be “harmful and must be a direct attack on an actual reputation” (Duhaime, 1996). The defamatory remark must be “clearly aimed at the plaintiff” (Duhaime, 1996). In general, inflammatory remarks “aimed at a large audience would not qualify as the remarks must be clearly pointed at a specific person” (Duhaime, 1996). The primary defense against libel is that the material is basically accurate, that is, as accurate as can be proved in a court of law, although there are many other exceptions in the law as well and again, such accuracy is a matter for the legal system to determine. However, within the intensely personal nature of memoir
writing, the defense of accuracy often means trying to determine one person’s perspective in a situation as opposed to another.

Without material being libelous, the only other legal statutes that might seem to apply are those of privacy. Theorists of privacy seem to agree that "space or social distance” (Eakin, 2004, p. 161), is a precondition for privacy so that “ethical problems will arise…when space is transgressed, when privacy is abridged, with the result that the integrity of the person is breached or violated” (Eakin, 2004, p. 161).

An 1890 article, *The Right to Privacy* by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, states that "the extent to which integrity of person rather than security of property is at stake in a given situation would provide the basis for assessing the comparative gravity of an ethical violation” (quoted in Eakin, 2004, p. 161).

When it comes to tests of the legality of life stories, the law tends to adopt a “commodified” notion of personality gravitating to questions of ownership and copyright (Eakin, 2004, p. 167), and “life writing that constitutes a violation of privacy has the potential to harm the very self of the other” (p. 168).

But the status of the notion privacy is fraught with contradictions. “Inviolate privacy may be protected in the courts but it is routinely violated in the practice of life writing…witness the scale and scope today of biographers, autobiographers, and their readers” (Eakin, 2004, p. 182).

Janet Malcolm, a famous biographer has asserted that “we do not own the fact of our lives” (quoted in Eakin, 2004, p. 172), so that “while we may have a right to privacy, we do not have a right to relational privacy and where we have been in relationship with other people, their version of what they think about that relationship is theirs, and if they
choose to make it public, then they seem to have a public and legal right to do so” (p. 172).

Consequently, although writers sometimes worry about legal issues, this would seem at the moment to not be a huge area of concern for memoirists.

It is fairly certain however, that ethical issues will continue to be a concern for researchers using autobiography, memoir, lifewriting and ethnography in academic research. As mentioned earlier, one issue, for example, is that memoir or autobiographical writers may have a sense of intention about their work before they begin but since the writing itself is a form of exploration, there is no way they can be sure of the results. In my case, most of my ethical dilemmas arose during the process of writing my memoir. Again, these dilemmas were both writing-strategy and content based and as Buss had advised in her email, I needed to figure out how to solve these problems within the aesthetics of memoir writing.

In addition, although memoir and autobiography remain primarily literary genres of writing, they are certainly applicable as a form of inquiry. As more students and researchers use autobiography, memoir and autoethnography as methods of inquiry, universities will need to continue to consider the ethical complexities of this kind of writing on an ongoing basis. The form of writing is intensely subjective and consequently, viewing the other people also being written about as research subject objectifies them in a way that is antithetical to the notion of autobiographical inquiry.

**Writing Strategies and Ethics:**
An issue pertaining both to the notion of privacy as well as to the notion of aesthetics has to do with the strategic requirements of narrative writing. There are strategic narrative devices, dialogue, for example, that involve the writer making assumptions about what it is that other people might have said.

A definition of memoir pulled from a writer’s site on the internet states that:

... a memoir is a piece of autobiographical writing, usually shorter in nature than a comprehensive autobiography. The memoir, especially as it is being used in publishing today, often tries to capture certain highlights or meaningful moments in one's past, often including a contemplation of the meaning of that event at the time of the writing of the memoir. The memoir may be more emotional and concerned with capturing particular scenes, or a series of events, rather than documenting every fact of a person's life.


Sidonie and Watson (1996) point out that, “life narratives are always symbolic interactions in the world. They are culturally and historically specific. They are rhetorical in the broadest sense of the word. That is, they are addressed to an audience/reader; they are engaged in an argument about identity, and they are inevitably fractured by the play of meaning” (p. 500).

Thus, because, as mentioned earlier, the writer in effect is performing a story in which he or she is the main character, and in which other people are also characters, they
are narratively storied and this writing strategy is deemed necessary for the memoir to succeed as narrative. So again the writer is making a decision to represent other people as characters within a story, and to make these figurative characters represent some kind of non-fiction ‘truth.’

Eakin (2004) writes:

The writer’s public representation of the self and voice of the other acquires a special power. How that power is exercised becomes the central problem of the ethics of life writing for there is not getting around the fact that ventriloquism, making the other talk, is by definition a central rhetorical definition of these narratives (p. 181).

In my own memoir, I chose to reconstruct dialogue that I imagined people speaking. That is, I put words in the mouths of my characters. I tried, of course, to use words that I assumed the writer might have said. Nor was this dialogue intended to be representative of the person. It was more a narrative device to present a scene, in the writing, as active and present.

But the writer, because she has a voice, and because this voice is made public, thus has power over the people who she represents in her work. She can decide to put words in their mouth, or to use certain images to describe them and she should be aware of both her complicity and her ethical responsibility in doing this. It is the writer’s version of events that becomes, when it is published, the public record, and because books last through time, the writer’s version of events has the possibility of becoming historically definitive.

But this necessarily puts her in a morally precarious position. Any situation where
one has power or assumes power carries with it moral and ethical obligations of great care.

As agents, proxies, or collaborators, life writers… are chosen or they nominate themselves on the basis of emotional intimacy or relational proximity…their intimate relationship to their subjects—may reflect their trustworthiness, but when it does not, it places those subjects at high risk of betrayal. Thus, intimacy itself entails a degree of vulnerability. (Couser, 2004, p. 17)

For example, I found myself grappling with feelings of betrayal when I was writing about my mother and father’s difficult marriage. In May, 2005, my siblings and many friends and I all celebrated with them their sixtieth wedding anniversary. And yet their marriage was often problematic, marked by prolonged fighting, threats of leaving, even threats (by both of them) of suicide.

When I wrote the following passage, I knew I was revealing a memory that I shared only with my mother. It was not something we had ever talked about again and I knew, even as I wrote it, that my mother would consider my writing this a betrayal.

My parents had been arguing all though lunch. My mother wanted to order new linoleum from the Sears catalogue, and father said no, it was a waste of money.

After lunch, she left the dishes sitting and went into the living room. Then she went downstairs to the basement and then came back up with a claw hammer. She shoved the old worn couch away from the wall and attacked the linoleum with the claw hammer, pulling it up in chunks and fragments.

“Come and help me,” she screamed. Her voice went up and up like a machine revving up. Her hair was hanging in her eyes and her and face was red. I stood in the doorway.

“Hurry up,” she said. “You have to help.” This was not my mother, this
harsh screaming stranger. Who was it that had let the dishes stand and was now pounding at the linoleum? I rather liked the blue linoleum. It had a border of flowers around the edge but now it was coming up in long ragged strips. I grabbed hold of a strip and pulled. It came away with a satisfying tear, leaving patches of glue and grey underlay on the floor. There were rough boards under the linoleum. I knelt beside my mother and pried at the edges of the linoleum with my fingernails. My mother leaned back on her heels, and wiped her hair out of her eyes.

“Should I leave your father?” she said.

I stared at her.

“Where could we go?” she said. “I used to be a hairdresser. I could do that again. Or I could work in a store.”

I thought hard and fast. I knew my mother was always unhappy but the thought of her actually leaving was inconceivable. I thought about the farm, my parent’s fighting, and the endless angry voices at night until I fell asleep. I thought about being away from my father. I thought about leaving the farm and going away into a world I knew nothing about.

“No,” I said finally. “I don’t think you should go.”

“I could manage,” she said. “I used to work in a store. Or I could get a job as a hairdresser.” She was crying now. “We never have any money. I haven’t bought any new clothes since we got married.”

“But we have the farm. And the animals. And our house.”

What would happen to the chickens, I thought, without me to feed them?

“It will get better,” I said earnestly. “I’ll help you.”

We went back to tearing up the linoleum and carrying it out onto the front lawn. When my father came in at four for tea, the linoleum was gone, lying in a pile of strips outside on the lawn, and the dishes were done. For once my father was speechless.

I never heard anything more about the linoleum. A few weeks later I came home from school and my father was running a rented sander up the down the rough boards in the living room. He painted them with varnish after they were
My mother ordered a rug from Sears catalogue and every few weeks, she would roll up the rug, coat the boards with hard wax, put the opera, Aida, on the stereo, and give up pairs of our father’s work socks to pull on over our shoes. Then we would slide up and down the wax until it was smoothed and buffed and shiny and slick as ice. (Armstrong, 2006, in press).

I chose to tell this passage because of the impact it had on me then and in the rest of my life. I always felt both responsible and guilty for my mother staying in her marriage, and I always felt that I had to somehow make that up to her. I tried endlessly, in many ways, to do this and I always felt that I had failed her.

Essentially then, the ethical and moral problems of memoir writing are primarily relational but these relations are multiple – with the text, with the experience, with the reader, and with those who have previously shared and co-created the experience. Similar relational, ethical and moral dilemmas exist that are created within any human relationship, issues of trust, respect, obligation, care, authenticity, and disclosure are the grounds of ethical problematizing with the memoir genre.

Such issues are also reciprocal between reader and writer since within the text, reader and writer make some kind of connection, and understanding; if this works well, this tenuous and restricted relationship can also contain elements of understanding, even friendship.

But going back to the idea of a relational model of the ethics of memoir writing – in a friendship, or in a reciprocal relationship, talking about others, or putting words in someone else’s mouth, is often degraded by the term gossip, unless it is done extremely carefully. Gossip is an odd term; etymologically it come from the roots of the word, god,
and *sipp*, meaning self, so that it originally meant the spiritual aspect of a relationship.

But memoir writing, writing about self and others, because it is a triangulated relationship, with the power of the text as the third space within what would normally, in a friendship, be a dual space, contains a power that forces relationships within memoir writing into a sharply difficult mode; after all, thinking about this, my daughter’s question begins to ring truer than is comfortable for me. In a sense, other people are, after all, ‘material’, to me, although, I say defensively, not ‘just’ material. They are people I love and care for, as well as people I write about. They are my venue for meaning-making, for understanding, for inquiry into a broad and complex array of issues.

As Claudia Mills puts it, “the issue becomes that of deriving some professional benefit for oneself after the fact of entering into the relationship for other reasons, on other grounds” (cited in Eakin, 2004, p. 103).

Of course, talking about relationships with other people is an accepted part of being in a relationship; women talk with other women about their marriages, their children, their parents; and men do much the same. It is an accepted and standard social practice. But there are boundaries and trespasses that are imposed by a myriad of social conventions and culturation.

But a memoir is much more than talking about a relationship; it is an extended examination, within the public gaze, of various aspects of the writer’s relationships, not just personal relationships, but relationships with place, with non-human beings, or even with a spiritual power. In order for the memoir to work, in order for this necessary relationship of trust to be established with the reader, the memoirist must be prepared and in fact, committed, to the opening up of his or her relationships in a deep and profound
way. Memoir writers are urged to write about “problems, conflict, the dark night of the soul” (Mills cited in Eakin, 2004, p. 105). In fact, going back to the notion of the ‘good’ that memoir can serve, it is this opening up of the complexities of life that serves as the rationale for the use of memoir. “I open the past in order to serve the future because…our capacity to move forward as developing beings rests on a healthy relationship with the past” (Hampl, 1999, p. 33).

It is this opening of the dark and difficult places that is a particular ethical challenge. The most private issues, the most fearful emotions and the most profound awareness tend to live side by side. I found writing about the difficult places in my life, writing about the most intimate relationships incredibly difficult. My natural tendency, which I’m sure I share with a lot of human beings, is to sidestep, obfuscate, delete or avoid disclosing intimate details unless I am with someone I deeply trust. And yet the stories of an abusive marriage, of early pregnancy, of being a single parent welfare mother, of going to school with no money, of endlessly trying to balance motherhood with writing, of depression and black grief-stricken places in my life were the balance to the freedom, the love and the safety I found and also clung to, in my relationship with the farm and the Kootenays. It was only on the third re-write, and with the urging of friends who were acting as editors, that I began to disclose more details of this part of my life. The first rough draft had a tendency to skip large portions of these parts of my life. This passage finally made it in on the third rewrite of the memoir.

But not quite. I was pregnant again. A month later I left my children with my mother yet again and got on a bus and went to Vancouver. It took a week. First I had to go before a three-man board of doctors and swear that having another child would endanger my mental health. Then I had the abortion. I
wanted this child. I wanted all my children. But I had run into a wall I couldn’t get past. I had so little left in me, so little strength, energy and what I had, I wanted for my other children. And so, I let this unknown person go.

I took the bus home. I sat up, wide-awake for the twelve-hour trip. The sun was coming up as we came over the Selkirk Mountains, over the Kootenay Pass, and down into the valley. The sun stained the snowy mountains orange and pink and salmon. The trees were black beside the road. I leaned my head against the cold window. All I wanted was to be home, taking care of my children and keeping them safe, but I knew I had to do more than that. I had to somehow, make a new life, both for myself and for them. (Armstrong, 2006, in press)

A question that would seem necessary for the writer to ask his or herself would be, to what extent then, do the writer’s reasons for writing a memoir, as well as the construction and existence of the memoir serve the idea of ‘the good’? Indeed, what is meant by such a term? And how does this notion of ‘good’ need to be weighed against the privacy of the people the writer cares about? How does the writer understand the limits of that privacy, in fact, the meaning of the term privacy? At what point, do other people’s selves and lives become a writer’s business? In the case of a parent, a child, a sibling, an intimate—it is difficult not only to “determine the boundaries of the other’s privacy but indeed to delimit the very otherness of the other’s identity” (Eakin, 2004, p. 176).

Philosopher G.E. Moore, a noted ethicist, states that in fact the term “good” is essentially indefinable (Moore in Carson and Moser, 1997, p. 26). He points out that the question of what is good is often asked in very abstract terms. My friend, Dr. Claire Woodbury, a theologian, a minister and a professor of theology at the University of Alberta, laughed when I asked him to define what is meant by ‘the good’ and then gently
pointed out that the term *good* is always relative to a personal viewpoint,

David Parker makes the claim that “self life-writing cannot but reflect the self’s orientation, or patterns of orientation in moral space” (cited in Eakin, 2004, p. 61). He sees autobiographical writing as essentially an attempt to answer questions, “both implicit and explicit, about what we think is right and valuable, about where we stand and the overall direction and meaning of our lives” (p. 61).

Claudia Mills points out that writers “do not seek out difficult, stormy, heart wrenching relationships in order to write about them. We find ourselves in them and write our way of their pain and perplexity” (cited in Eakin, 2004, p. 103). She adds that the issue becomes that of deriving some professional benefit for oneself “after the fact of entering the relation for other reasons, on other grounds” (p. 103).

But of course, this is what writers do, what they would see as their vocation as well as their profession. “To be a writer is to be committed to telling the truth…” says Mills (Mills cited in Eakin, 2004, p. 105). She adds “Thus to be a friend is to stand to another in a relationship of trust, for the sake of one’s friend; to be a writer is to stand ready to violate that trust for the sake of one’s story” (p. 105).

It is obvious that the memoir writer has much to weigh and balance in the course of writing her story. Do most of the choices, in the end come down to her own understanding of her own moral and ethical beliefs?

At this point, I can only attempt to answer this question in terms of the often perplexed decision making process I went through as I wrote my memoir. In the beginning, I simply didn’t realize how much of an ethical dilemma I would find myself in during the course of writing the memoir because I didn’t know what demands the
narrative itself would make on me. I wasn’t sure into what memories and images the course of writing would compel me, and how I would structure those particular images and memories when I got to them.

I found multiple layers of both questions, as well as some resolution to my questions through the actual course of writing. Ultimately, I made my decisions about what to include on the basis of what I felt was needed, from me, by the story. In that sense, it is true that my family and friends became material – but they were and are “material” only in the sense that I used our mutual relationships as a source for creating meaning and understanding for myself, and thus, I hoped, if I did my job well, for other people as well.

Whether my decisions were the right ones or not is in some sense a meaningless question. The final product, the written memoir, must finally stand on its own and speak for itself independently of the writer and the writer’s decisions. The process disappears and only the product has a public presence.

**Ethical Challenges**

As one of my personal values, I believe deeply in the importance of story, in the importance of sharing stories. I wrote my memoir for a number of reasons. I was most compelled by my sense of love and relationship with a piece of land, a geographical region, and the things I learned there when I was growing up. I wanted to explore this relationship and along with that, questions of the greater issue of how human beings relate to their homes and places they love. I also wanted to explore what I have seen as a
great transition in my life and the lives of many other Canadians, as Canadian culture has moved in a very short period of history from a primarily rural culture to a primarily urban one. My stories of self-sufficient farming and pioneering in what was seen, fifty years ago, as wilderness, are now far from the reality that is being lived by my grandchildren. I also wanted to tell the stories of my parents, stories which felt to me to be both tragic and tender. They were and are kind caring humble people who lived heartbreakingly difficult lives. I also wanted to explore in my own life all the transitions I have been through and survived, wild child, farmer, abused wife, single parent welfare mother, feminist organizer, writer.

After I finished the manuscript, I realized I had personally benefited from the writing because I had a much clearer understanding of relationships in my own life. I believed I now had a much clearer understanding of why and how things had happened, what had motivated me and other people in my life. I was particularly pleased because I felt I had managed to write about the issues of land, home and sense of connection to place in a coherent and thoughtful way and that this was a story I had been wanting to tell for many years. I was pleased, as well, because I believed I had contributed to a genre of writing that I take great pleasure in reading.

Being a writer is a vocation I took on unwittingly as a child, but have stayed with as a calling. Jerome Bruner (1990) has identified storytelling as fundamental to the way that humans interact; he believes that storytelling is implicit to the creation of human culture. The process of creating and telling stories appears to be fundamental to our understanding of not only what it is to be human, but how it is we are human. Bruner writes:
The narrative gift is as distinctively human as our upright posture and our opposable thumb and forefinger. It seems to be our ‘natural’ way of using language for characterizing those ever-present deviations from the expected state of things that characterizes living in a human culture. None of us knows the just-so evolutionary story of its rise and survival. But what we do that know is that it is irresistible as our way of making sense of human interaction…it is through narrative that we create and recreate selfhood; that self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity. There is now evidence that without the capacity to make stories about ourselves there would be no such thing as selfhood. (cited in Fivush and Haden, 2003, p. 222)

Claudia Mills identifies telling of stories as a morally necessary act; Dorothy Allison writes “that to go on living, I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world” (Allison, 1995, p. 71). But Allison also says “the story I do not tell is the only one that is a lie” (Allison 1995, p. 71). I encountered this statement as a thought-provoking challenge. Dorothy Allison is a writer I have long admired. She is a white, southern, working-class writer who has written about her family with great honesty and great tenderness. She has managed to write about abuse, alcoholism, and her coming out as a lesbian without, or so she tells us, alienating herself from her family.

But I had made a clear decision that there were some stories I wouldn’t tell because the risk of hurting my family was greater than my need to tell some material.” My calculation as a writer was that this omission would not hurt my book. In the end, I made this judgment based on my personal values, and my experience as a writer.
Ultimately my loyalty was to my family and not to the artifact of the book. I am fully cognizant that other writers in my place might make a very different choice. Here then is one of the stories I didn’t tell; told here for a selected and somewhat more private audience than I expect the memoir itself to have.

Here is a final story that illustrates some of the complexity of choices I had to make in writing my memoir. In the first draft, I included this excerpt.

My father and I have what could be termed a difficult relationship. He is a farmer, of Scots descent, and even though I know him so well, he can still manage to disconcert me. For example, on one of my trips home to our farm, I got up one morning and my father offered me two pieces of fruit for breakfast, an orange and a grapefruit. I had heard him come in—he still gets up at 5 am and goes out to his cows, though he no longer has to milk. I said, “Where did you get it?”

“Your brother brought it out for the pigs, but it’s only a bit rotten, you cut that part off, it’s still good.”

“I don’t eat pig food.”

“It’s got a hide on it,” he said. "What’s the matter with you?”

The land my father and I still share, (although he lives there and I no longer do) is layered and slick with stories, like varnish, like glue. There are no new beginnings here but neither are there endings. We have written the script of our family, our history, on this land in human hieroglyphics, in buildings, fences and stories.

Words between my father and I have often been like barbed wire springing back on itself. My father knows his version of being a man. He loved my mother even while he ranted and raged at her; he fought to subdue the land we lived on; he sprayed and bulldozed and dug and drained and cut down trees and blew up boulders; he made things grow by the strength of his unrelenting will and we, his children once ate his food and sat at his table and worked his land with him. Now in my every gesture, in my every act, by reading, by writing, by speaking, by leaving, I
make him less of a man. He has rarely given me anything and now he was proud of this free food he was holding out to me.

What could I do with such a gift?

I was sitting in a class on women’s autobiography. We were talking about gifts – I told them about my father’s gift – a young woman across the circle, gagged.

“He’s demented,” she said.

“No, he’s not.”

“But he has to be.” (Armstrong, 2006, in press)

No, he doesn’t have to be. My father is sane. My task is to tell a story in which my father is sane, and in which his gift would make sense to my readers. In order to do this, I had to examine my own understanding, its sources, its basis in my experience, both with my father and away from him.

In the final version of my memoir, I left out this anecdotal piece out for a number of reasons; primarily because I felt it was liable to misinterpretation, and I doubted my own ability to tell this story in such a way that people could see that from my father’s point of view, his actions were both rational and sensible and that on some level, as his daughter, the daughter of poverty, I agree with him.

I tell this story here to make a point about ethical complexities, and because “here” is a gradient of privacy, a public realm to which my father and most of the people he knows will have no interest in entering.

Ethical decisions are also made in relation to vulnerability, exposure, and audience. The writer’s sense of personal vulnerability to the consequences of his or her
work will influence the writing but writers come to terms with these vulnerabilities and sense of audience in very different ways.

At the AWP conference in Vancouver in 2005, in the panel discussions on non-fiction, I perceived a note of somewhat bitter acceptance among statements made by non-fiction writers and memoirists, such as: “Perhaps a certain degree of betrayal is essential to the memoir…Of course we are betraying people,” (Joe Mackle, personal communication, April 2, 2005), or Philip Lopate stating, “Deciding what to tell is a question of calculation rather than morality…it’s not who but how you hurt them…the very fact that you have taken the measure of another human being is potentially insulting” (personal communication, April 2, 2005).

Again, the ethical contradictions here are inescapable. If the possibility of both betrayal and insult in writing memoir is inescapable, so is the possibility of making meaning out of experience. What I would call for is that writers of memoir, Creative Writing teachers, academic researchers and anyone else involved in writing or using autobiographical inquiry, must be cognizant of both the burden and the power of non-fiction autobiographical stories, both of the possible consequences of using autobiography as a pedagogical tool for teaching writing at various levels, and of the possible emotional consequences for the writer. And yet, I continue to believe that in the end, the best memoirs are written to enable the writer, and consequently the reader, to get to a place of new understanding and of compassion, as a result of the depth and layers of understanding that are at the heart of memoir writing.

It is likely that memoir writers will always be troubled by the ethical implications of their writing and so they should be; such troubling is an inescapable and inextricable
part of the act of writing. As Judith Barrington (2002) says, “I have to drum up a certain
defiance when I’m writing. I have to remind myself I am not doing something
embarrassing or disloyal. Time and time again, I battle my family’s prohibition on
intimacy” (p. 136).

In writing my memoir, I struggled to keep a sense of my own voice and my own
story, and to try, in fact, (although of course I failed) to not be conscious of my family or
my friends looking metaphorically over my shoulder. Writing is a private act with a
public audience; the writer must write to suit herself and then live in the hope that in so
doing, she has also suited the needs and tastes and desires of her readers.

But ethical judgment is also finally the job of the reader; good readers will also
always make ethical judgments of their reading of a memoir. In this way, the reciprocity
of writing resembles the reciprocity of a good friendship; thoughts, feelings, and stories
going back and forth and building understanding and emotional connection. But the
ethical dilemmas, contradictions, perplexities and moral quandaries within memoir
writing are also not easily resolvable or concretized into guidelines or codes.

*The Handbook on Qualitative Inquiry* (2005) calls for “a feminist communitarian
ethic that calls for…collaborative, trusting, nonoppressive relationships between the
researcher and those studied. Such an ethic presumes that investigators are committed to
stressing personal accountability, caring, the value of individual expressiveness, the
capacity for empathy, and the sharing of emotionality” (p. 40).

Incidents referred to in a previous chapter, such as the James Frey book, *A Million
Little Pieces*, and the writer, Nasdijj, posing as a First Nations writer, highlight the urgent
present need to question and interrogate the moral and ethical parameters of memoir.
However, although one can, and should question the ethical and moral stance of a memoir, it is as difficult to generalize ethical guidelines for memoir writing as it is for human relationships. But the same values of integrity, respect, honesty, care, compassion and apply. Each case needs to be taken on its own merits, has to be considered in context, and with respect to the rights, feelings and wishes of those involved, in much the same way that questions about personal relationships are considered. However, there will also always be hard issues, choices and consequences for the writer in terms of having to choose to ignore the decisions and wishes of others, in order to respect the integrity of the experience being written about and in order to respect the aesthetic and writing strategy needs of her text. The triangulated stresses of memoir writing will never be easily resolvable. Memoir writing will in fact, always be a risky business for the writer, for the people involved with the writers, and for the reader who places her trust in the writer’s integrity, choices and skill as a narrator.

In order to write about family, about relationships, in order to make the stories, memories and relationships that had previously been held within my family public, it was necessary for me to be sure that my book was a story that I believed would add to the ongoing discourse about issues which I believe are important. The book had to have a much broader theme than just telling my story. It had to connect to deep thematic issues of family, community, relationship to place, gender, and class. I wrote a memoir because, like all writers, I believed I had something to say. But ultimately, time, and my readers, will be the judge of that.

When I finished the memoir, I decided, after some careful thought, and some definite trepidation, to offer the manuscript, in a rough form, to members of my family to
read and comment on. I know from previous experiences with friends that asking them to critique my writing can be very intimidating. A close friend once told me that being asked to comment on my writing had terrified her and she felt trapped by request. She felt she couldn’t really offer a comment nor could she comfortably keep silent. So I was conscious that this request was a paradoxical and complicated one for my family and for me. But after contemplating the ethics of writing memoir, I made the decision that I didn’t want to surprise or blindside my family. I also decided I was proud of my text and I thought some members of my family might actually enjoy reading it. I also decided, in fact, after much thought that they had a right to read what I was writing and I informed them that if there was anything they strenuously objected to in the book, I would take it out. I am, however, still not sure how I would have genuinely reacted if one of my family had objected to material I felt was integral to the story. I wanted to give them the right to read the story but I didn’t want to give them permission to silence or restrict my right to my own story.

But overall, despite these multiple conflicting feelings, I felt good about this decision. It accorded with my own sense of my values and my integrity. I tried to make clear to them the parameters of this book –that it was primarily about me and my experience and I wasn’t trying to tell their story, the story of our family or the whole story of our shared community. My brothers both told me they liked the book and were glad I had written it. My sister so far has chosen not to comment. My father has read parts of it and has been inspired to tell me more stories of his childhood. My children have also read it and have been enthusiastic and complimentary.

Writing such a memoir is not just an interesting test of a writer’s ability; it is also
an interesting test of a writer’s ability to actually resolve and make meaning out of his or her personal stories. After I finished the memoir, I experienced a quiet sense of satisfaction. I believed I had accomplished, fairly and well the task I had set out to do. I also realized there was a great deal of material I had left out which would probably make another book and in fact, that will likely be my next writing project. But I felt as if I had accomplished the tasks I had set myself without being unfair or disrespectful in terms of my relationship with my family and community or my readers.

But of course, I had no way, until I had readers, of knowing what I had accomplished. It is perfectly possible to have a sense of accomplishment about a piece of writing that reviewers or critics might see as not having been well-written in whatever terms they are seeing the book. As an editor and a writing teacher, I am well aware of the many pitfalls that await any writer, and the fact that even highly skilled writers sometimes produce texts that don’t ultimately ‘work.’

In the course of writing my memoir, I exchanged manuscripts with another writer-editor-friend. When we met to discuss our work, both of us had similar comments to make to the other; you need to be more open, we said to each other, and laughed, knowing that the joke was on us, that, ironically, both of us are somewhat secretive, shy people who have chosen to write in a medium that was forcing us to be as open and honest as possible. Although I had left out some stories, I had also forced myself to tell stories of my experience, such as kidnapping my own children back from their father in the US, and my subsequent abortion, that I would rather have kept private, but I knew they were essential to the integrity of the story.

To me this is the ultimate challenge of memoir writing; that it has called me to
work with the most clarity that I am capable of, not just as a writer, but as a person interested in ideas, a person interested in the ideas incorporated within and expressed by stories, interested in how those stories connect to the larger tapestry of culture and society, and above all, interested in seeing in whether such stories can have a benevolent and positive effect on the world in which I dwell, as well as a person interested in caring for and maintaining relationships of integrity.

**Going Forward**

Memoir is a particularly vivid, literary, constructed and ethically and morally complex genre within the broader fields of life-writing and autobiographical narrative. Memoir not only tells an autobiographical story, it is also a reflective, thoughtful form that requires the writer of the form to reach beneath and beyond her own story in order to discover, analyze, understand, and communicate a meaning beyond the events in the story, a meaning that is inter-subjective and reflexive. Thus memoir is a particularly attractive form of autobiographical writing for the reader, since it combines the literary attractions of a novel with the seductive idea that since memoir is about the ‘real,’ something can therefore be learned from it. However, because of this possible assumption, the reader is open to being tricked or fooled by a writer who fabricates parts of his or her experience for whatever reason.

Memoir is a selected and chosen version of part of a life history and experiences that employs a non-fiction literary form to present an integrated and coherent account of that piece of the writer’s life. Thus memoir can be both testimonial and documentary. In
fact, the genre of testimonial memoir has become an important sub-genre of memoir with its own ethical complexities and I have chosen to not deal with it in this dissertation because I didn’t think my own memoir fit in that category.

Memoir is a site where meaning is confronted and interrogated. The memoir poses questions to the writer as well as the reader, of ethics, meaning and values. It delineates the writer or narrator’s understanding of his or her own relationality and the complex emotional interweaving inherent in that relationality. The memoirist’s act is to story her own memories and their attendant relational complexities and to do that storying with craft, with imagination, with skill, and with understanding. What results is a product, an artifact of memory, a narrative that is shaped by the chosen memories, and the emotional stance of the writer towards those memories as well as by what the writer believes are her responsibilities towards the expectations of her readers.

The re-constituting and re-constructing of selected and re-imagined memories into memoir can thus be understood as a culturally, socially and historically mediated expression of the temporal medium of experience, in particular of social, cultural and historical commitments and identifications. Autobiographical memory and the writing of those memories comprises contextually situated assertions of experience and understanding by the writer and gives her the space to create and assert understanding and clarity about the significance and meaning of her past experiences. It also requires her to examine her own moral and ethical attitudes towards her material, her experiences, and her relationships.

The memoirist’s story is a culturally constituted artifact that holds within its form multifaceted relational and intimate memories that have been co-created with other
people, but also with geography, location, nature, animals, machines, artifacts, etc. Stories are born and live within a particular culture, a particular temporal period, a particular time in history. Thus stories are also shaped by what the cultural norms of what constitutes a tellable story, or an acceptable story, or an intelligible story. They can echo gender, class, race and other distinctions within a society but they can also challenge such norms and distinctions and in so doing, create vital change within a society.

In creating her memoir, the writer faces complexities of form, genre, as well as content. In particular, the ethics of writing memoir and autobiography are complex and multifaceted. The memoirist necessarily, brings material that may have been held in a family or community space, or even within private and personal memory, into a publicly available space. This can result in feelings of hurt, betrayal or anger among people who may feel they have been used to the writer’s advantage, as they are re-created to become material or characters within a narrative.

The memoirist faces a triangulated sense of responsibility and must choose how to balance her responsibilities; to the created artifact that is her work; to her family and other people with whom she is in relationship who are also the subject material of her work; and to the reader who enters into the narrative and who then trusts the writer’s integrity to both tell, as closely as possible, the writer’s story, and to also story this narrative into an inviting, imagic, and novelistic narrative that offers the gift of resonance, recognition, meaning-making, plus ethical coherence, awareness and growth.

As a writer/practitioner and as a writing teacher, I find I often have a somewhat different perspective than that of literary critics or scholars using various forms of narrative in their research. One of the older apocryphal sayings used in teaching writing
is that students should ‘write what they know.’ Writing teachers, myself included, often urge students to write stories about their lives, about their personal experiences and about their families. But any writing teacher, at whatever level, should also be aware that in fact, this is not a simple thing to ask of students, that there are issues of privacy, ethics, relationality and personal values that will certainly arise in such an assignment.

As a researcher, I have noticed in particular that I tend to see my story or any story as an ongoing work in progress, and that I separate the created artifact, whether that be an essay, a non-fiction story, or a much longer work like the memoir, from the much broader stream of my whole life story from which it is excerpted. In this way, I disagree with Annie Dillard, who warns that the “artifact” can in fact replace the “story” (cited in Zinnser, 1995, p. 55). Indeed, the artifact, or the written story, does, in some sense, become frozen into a particular form, derived from a particular time, place, and approach by the writer. But such a form is only a fragment, derived, abstracted, and constructed from bits of the much larger story, the multifaceted, multi-voiced and multi-peopled constantly-changing tapestry that is my storied perception of the wholeness of my life.

Any story can be told many times and each time, the story will change. In my experience, as a writer, I can also tell the same story from a multitude of stances and attitudes and each story will reflect some facet of what I believe is necessary to be told about my story.

As Dan McAdams (2001) writes:

Stories live to be told to others. Life stories therefore are continually made and remade in social relationships and in the overall social context provided by culture. As psychosocial constructions, life stories reflected the values, norms and power differentials inherent in societies, wherein they have their constitutive
meanings. The construction of coherent life stories is an especially challenging
problem for adults living in contemporary modern (and postmodern) societies,
wherein selves are views as reflexive projects imbued with complexity and depth,
ever changing and yet demanding a coherent framing. (p. 118)

The growing demand for memoir by readers and the growing number of memoir
writers perhaps reflects this demand for a coherent framing of the meaning of the stories
and lives we see around us, the multi-layered and increasingly complex realities so many
people live within as the our societies continue to progress, change, transform and
become technologically more demanding.

Autobiographical inquiry offers a valuable tool for the researcher to understand
and make clear and open to the reader the complexities of what background he or she is
bringing to their work, that the writer “make explicit … his or her stance, pertinent
history, and relevant strengths and limitations” (Ely et al., 1997, p. 354). There are no
clear guidelines to this disclosure (Ely et al., 1997, p. 357), and the researcher should also
make explicit how what they are disclosing is relevant and necessary for the research.
Not all personal issues will be relevant to the reader but some are necessary.

An author’s forthrightness help to estimates the trustworthiness of the account, to
understand the experience and empathy of the research and perhaps to learn from
the researcher’s blind spots and blunders as well as enabling biases and successes,
how to approach the Other with genuine respect and sensitivity. (Ely et al., 1997
p. 358)

As a researcher, I have discovered the multilayered complexity that is involved in
any piece of autobiographical writing. I have untangled, unpacked and examined many of
these complexities and have identified others that I will challenge in my future research, such as the role of testimonial memoir in political work. I know that I will also continue to research the role of place, land, home, geography and historical memory in personal memoir. I have learned many aspects of the role of autobiographical writing within research but I believe this particular research needs to continue as well.

In my own work, the challenge of writing memoir, essays and non-fiction based on my own life continues to be an alluring, provocative, challenging and rewarding space of writing and reflection. Writing a memoir meant that I was stopped many times by barriers of silence, shame, embarrassment, non-remembering, confusion, and reluctance. Each time I found one of these barriers or silences within myself, I had to consider what it was that was stopping me from writing; I had to deconstruct and detangle my own reluctance, my memories and how I now viewed my previous experiences in life from where I am now.

I realized that I had often sat in severe harsh judgment on my own life; I had been often overwhelmed by a sense of depression and failure. Now I could see my own life in much the same way I saw my friends’ lives, as a journey that had been full of pitfalls, learning, success, failure, but also a life that had patterns in it that I could now discern more clearly. As Philip Lopate (2001) suggests, I had turned myself into a character, but I was a character I could live with. I was very surprised to discover, when I was done, that writing the memoir had in some way I am still pondering, freed me from the weight of trying to understand and judge my own life, freed me to continue to write, to tell stories, and to continue a journey of discovery that began as soon as I learned to read and write.
When friends asked me about my doctoral experience, I began, somewhat to my own surprise and alarm, to use words like transformative and affirming. I realized that two important things had occurred in this journey; I had tackled an area of inquiry, knowledge, and understanding in which I was emotionally engaged on many levels and I had written a story that I had wanted to write most of my life. Through this process of engagement, on both an intellectual and emotional level, I finally found affirmation for both of the important sides of my life. I learned that I could walk between the forest and the university, between the world of nature and the world of books, that I no longer had to choose and that in both the story of academia and the story of my life on the land, I could finally bring with me all that I had learned and all that I am.
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Appendix One: Photo Album:

My mother in Vancouver, with two friends. She was working in the Boeing Aircraft factory, and taking singing lessons.

My father at twenty. This is his school picture during the year he spent at the Olds Agricultural Institute.
The farmhouse built by Pierre Longueval, bought by my grandfather, William Armstrong, in 1938.

My mother with myself and Alan Wilson as babies on the Mannerino Farm.
My father and I at the Mannerino farm

The author in the mining camp of Riondel, at the bunkhouse

An evening in summer at the Riondel beach, Dad, Phil, myself and Bill
My brother Phil and I on the O’Neil horses, Gypsy and Lady.

For years, most of our income came from selling fruit to tourists. This was our first attempt, the summer we moved to the farm.
My mother with Robin, Bill and myself sitting on the Rumbley tractor.

My mother with her German shepherd dog, Farah.
My mother in her new log house, finally finished in 1991.

The old farmhouse
Kootenay Lake and the Selkirk Mountains.
The view from the my father’s house