

THE EARTH REMEMBERS EVERYTHING

by

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The Earth Remembers Everything

A Narrative of Place

In 2004, I travelled to Auschwitz and Birkenau to witness the site of a massacre. Though I did not comprehend its impact on a visceral level then, the experience sifted through and emerged in my writing as a profound connection to place. In addition to Auschwitz, I have been to massacre sites in Asia, the central interior and northwest coast of British Columbia. My thesis is a creative recounting of these experiences. I chose the genre of creative non-fiction, as it allows me to use my poetic prose voice to describe my lived experience, and intersperse it with historical information. I am drawn to places of disruption and deep emotion, and in finding narrative that explores these wounded places. In my thesis I hope to show the links between all these places, starting with my presence in all of them. Though I do not own the stories of any of these places, I do own my experience of these places. This is a record of my experience.

Edward S Casey contends that we hold memories in the body, which is the centre of our phenomenological experience of the world. I argue that just as our bodies hold our memories and experiences, the earth too holds memories. When we go to a site where there has been great feeling, we participate in that experience through the memories the earth holds. Just as we are changed by a place, we in turn change a place by our presence; our own thoughts and energies are mixed in with the undercurrent of energy that is already there.

The hybrid thesis has given me the freedom to pursue my interests in imagination, memory and place. It has enabled me to see my own creative work and life experience

through the lens of philosophers such as Casey, Jeff Malpas, Yi-Fu Tuan and Simon Schama.

Seeing my words woven with theirs has made me reflect more fully on the power of place, and my own place in the world.

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Place is prior to all things.

Aristotle

To follow Aristotle's view, *The Earth Remembers Everything* is a phenomenological experience of place. I hope to show in my work how this experience can transcend boundaries and barriers, whether they are personal, cultural or political, to create a deep personal experience. My view is that the profound is possible, and because of this, changes in perception, views and emotions surrounding experience of place are possible as well. My thesis is based on my own experience, with the intention to seek connections, to show how we are all implicated, indeed involved, in the subtle, sometimes shocking but always changing experience of place.

I acknowledge that it has been a great privilege to travel and to write about these places, and that my work engages in historical complexity, including colonialism, capitalism, racism, and appropriation issues. I could not tell my story without encroaching on these areas and I trust that the deep respect and compassion I felt at all of these massacre sites comes through in my work. I recognize that there are other views and stories of these places that have deep significance, not only personally, but to families, communities and entire cultures. I reiterate that the underlying theme of my thesis is to express essence, not only of the experience of place, but of the self in place. Nothing can erase the past or the wounds incurred by it but it is my hope that a profound sense of place can make room for connection and healing.

My thesis is a creative non-fictional account but it can also be seen as travel writing. Though I went to these sites as a tourist, my intention was not to appropriate in any way a story that was not mine to tell. I wanted to be open to the experience. In my view, that is the responsibility of a traveller – to learn something about a culture as well as oneself. This is the

attitude in which I approached my work. My interest in massacres sites is not only as sites of trauma but places of historical significance, where I could be affected by an experience larger than myself, and to possibly be opened up, changed and able to learn more about my presence in the world than if I had never gone to these places. As a writer, my hope is that this thesis be read with the same openness to experience as it was written.

In the fall of 1996, I went to Haida Gwaii and picked chanterelle mushrooms on Moresby Island. I camped on abandoned logging roads, spent every day walking in the forest, and most evenings around campfires with the other pickers, many of them travellers. This is when I first heard the story of Mosquito Lake. People who camped there had terrible nightmares; they saw family members attacking and betraying each other. Their experiences were truly horrific, and no one could stay there for long. Though it was a beautiful lake, the horror the land contained made it what Kenneth Foote calls an “obliterated site” – a place that is not returned to ‘normal’ use after a traumatic event. An obliterated site is stigmatized by the dark side of nature, surrounded by an aura of shame and silence (24).

My experience on the islands had a great impact on my imagination. Years later, while I was living in Japan, I began a story about a haunted section of forest I picked in, called Mile 13. This story became “Green Chain,” which was published in *Prairie Fire* in 2007. When I started graduate school, my imagination again turned to Haida Gwaii, and I wrote “Mosquito Lake,” a poem about the mushroom pickers’ nightmares at the lake, which was published in *CV2* in the fall of 2011.

In the spring of 2011, after fifteen years away, I returned to Haida Gwaii with the intention of revisiting Mosquito Lake, as the legend of the place stayed with me. It has become the genesis for my project, as it was then that I began linking the affects of human trauma with the landscape, and how these emotions affect those who come in contact with the place. It is also when I began connecting narrative to place, and I saw massacre, or obliterated sites, as a pause or a cease in conversation; the kind of emotional tension that belies silence. In writing about Mosquito Lake, I realized that I had visited

massacre sites in almost every country I had travelled to. Some of them were obvious tourist sites, but I knew people who refused to go to these places, due to their gruesome past. What drew me to these places? I decided to write about my experience as a way to uncover the answer to this question.

My creative thesis is an account of massacre sites that I have visited internationally and in the Pacific Northwest Coast and Central Interior of British Columbia. My interest in these places, which I see as examples of violent eruptions that have occurred throughout the history of humanity, stems from the fact that these events have created deep disruptions in emotional bonds between people, as well as greatly affecting and transforming the physical location of each site. I am interested in the narrative that surrounds these disruptions. How do we say the unsayable? Speak the unspeakable? For me, the answers lie in the memories of these events that are stored in the earth. Philosopher Edward Casey contends that all memories are formed and retained in our bodies: our first, most essential place. I argue that just as our bodies store memories, so does the earth, and these stories are central to my thesis.

The Earth Remembers Everything combines poetic and creative non-fictional accounts of my experiences visiting the Cui Chi Tunnels in Vietnam, Tiananmen Square in China, Hiroshima in Japan, and Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. I have also visited First Nations sites including Mosquito Lake on Moresby Island and Chinlac, a deserted Carrier village at the confluence of the Stuart and Nechako Rivers, where the Chilcotin massacred the Carrier in 1745. Woven through my narrative is the oral history of the Carrier nation, written in my own words, but taken from the accounts of A.G.(Father) Morice, from his book *The History of the Northern Interior of British Columbia*. Though

this is a colonial account of the nations of the central interior, I argue that its value lies in the oral history that was passed on to Morice, due to his knowledge of both the Carrier and Chilcotin languages. These stories help keep the history of the land alive, a crucial link to the themes of trauma, memory and place that are the framework of my thesis. This trip was also the basis of a creative non-fiction piece entitled “Chinlac in Dene means ‘wood floats to,’” which was accepted for publication by *subTerrain* magazine for its Prince George folio issue, coming out in the winter of 2011.

My intention is to seek links between the international sites I have visited and the lesser known First Nations sites. In my view, the narrative I have created from my experiences can be seen as one link, with another being that all these sites represent wounds that have not truly healed, or if they have healed, these places will never be the same. They also signify an undercurrent of violence and cruelty that is common in humanity that is difficult to make sense of and articulate. My goal is to explore these histories of the earth and the common link between all of them. I contend that ruptures of human bonds are also ruptures in the earth.

A retaliation to the Chinlac massacre supposedly occurred in 1748 on the Dean River in the Chilcotin, between Anaheim and Nimpo Lakes. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, this site will not be included in my thesis. In a conversation with writer Sage Birchwater, I learned that the area has been marked by commemorative plaques, but that they have recently been taken away. The Dean River, along with Chinlac and Mosquito Lake, provides a strong counterpoint to the high profile international sites I have visited. I argue that the earth holds stories here that are as powerful as any other site in the world. Though my journeys to these places have been profound and I have enjoyed writing

about them, I also realize that there are strong feelings around the history of these places, and I have approached my travels with a high level of respect and attention. I anticipate that what I have learned will contribute to the underlying themes of revenge and retaliation that are so often motives to massacre. I mix historical accounts with my actual experience of the place.

I see my thesis as a hybrid form of travel writing that includes historical information, poetic impressions and creative non-fiction accounts of the deep experience that place has had on me as both a traveller and a writer. I have chosen the genre of creative non-fiction as it allows me the freedom to explore my experience of place in my own voice offering a true account of events mixed in with created dialogue and some invented characters. This freedom allows me to delve into the actual and the imaginative as sources of expression. To me, this combination accurately reflects my experience of place, which is grounded by physical bounds that are also permeable and open to change. Creative non-fiction allows my work to address both the limits and spontaneity of experience. While my work focuses on specific places in writing about massacre sites, the underlying theme is the phenomenological experience of place. My view of phenomenology is the search for the essence, not only of a place, but the experience of the place. Creative non-fiction also allows me to express something of my own essence, as the underlying core of all writing, I believe, is the need to express oneself. My thesis will combine these experiences in my own voice along with my research into place theories that support my views. My research and creative work focuses on an area that is rarely discussed but crucial to further understanding of place in two main areas: first, by linking massacre sites from different places in the world, it demonstrates the continuing

effect that the stories of the earth have on us, and second, as the ruptures of the earth are also ruptures in human bonds, they reflect the lack of separation between self and place. I argue that this interconnection is intrinsic and is the very root of what it means to be human and living in the world.

Place is prior to all things, claimed Aristotle, one of the first recorded thinkers on place. He also saw place as a vessel that cannot essentially be moved, as it is our bodies that move in place and this movement forms the basis of our experience of the world. We are both rooted and free to move, and our entire existence is held within the confines of place (Casey 31). In addition to place as the experiential fact of our existence, philosopher J.E. Malpas claims that place is also primary to the construction of meaning and society (Cresswell 32). I argue that this combination of rootedness and freedom of movement forms the basis of our experience not only of the world but also of the self in the world; it is the foundation of identity which in turn forms culture. The meaning of our experience of the world is derived from place. Further, places are affected and informed, just as we are, by a history of experiences; this is what we encounter when we are in place.

By the end of the seventeenth century, however, place had become geometrized. It became space, which was conceived as a continuous extension of length, breadth and width that could be three dimensionally mapped. In this view, space, or site, superseded place as a topic of interest. Descartes argued that place was not a container but an open area specified by maps, making sites essentially indifferent to what might occupy or be contained in them. Sites do not enclose, and there are no points of attachment. An example of site, in Descartes' view, can be a building site; an area that fills up with

clutter and events that appear and disappear. Newton, however, saw place and space as closely tied. Place was a part of space, a specific region located within the more basic area of space (Malpas 28). Space, seen as general and containing sites, also does not possess a horizon, while place exhibits an internal and external horizon. The external encompasses all places and regions, held within the line of earth meeting the sky, while the internal horizon is our immanent inner limit, the one that holds us in place (Casey 203). These horizons contain both place and our bodies in place, upholding Aristotle's assertion that the primary action of place is containing. Casey argues that the "point is that place, by virtue of its unencompassability by anything other than itself, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists" (15).

If place is the container of experience, so is the body, which, as I mentioned earlier, is our most essential place. Casey views the body as a place of passage, both inter and intra of place: intra meaning a place of anchoring, and inter is the place between places – the in between (194). Thus, the essential link between all these narratives of massacre is my body; my presence in all these sites can symbolize the in-between, the place where my experiences and past encounters the story of place. As exemplified by the nightmares at Mosquito Lake, there is a visceral connection between the land and the body, which combines to create an in-between, or inter space, which mixes the essence of the land and those emplaced in it. This in-between space can also be seen as "thirdspace," as developed by the phenomenal geographer Edward Soja, Soja based his theory on Henri Lefebvre's work that deconstructs the binaries that structure how we see the world: space/place, real/imagined, objective/subjective. Thirdspace is practiced and lived rather than simply being material (conceived) or mental (perceived) (Cresswell 38). I find this

definition apt in describing my experience of place, as it includes the combination of factors at play that create this in-between experience: the memories and stories of a place, and the stories and memories in the presence of a person. Both affect each other to create a lived experience – a thirdspace. In my thesis, I have attempted to explore this in-between experience considering how place is changed by the experience of a human presence, just as presence is affected by place. Further, I also realize that the in-between includes much more than the earth and the presence of a human; it contains and is affected by the non-human as well, which includes abundant plant and animal life, as well as the supernatural. Though it is not the focus of my work, the non-human is included in sections of my accounts of massacre sites. The search for mushrooms and timber, for example, shows how a quest can force us out of our usual paths to confront the story of place. This openness to experience enables us to encounter not only what is in the land, but what is within us. Historian Simon Schama claims that landscape is the work of the mind (7). I argue that whatever is in us is reflected on the land and further, that the land, including the non-human, has its own mind and way of being that reflects back to us.

To follow Kant's theory that all knowledge begins with experience, I argue that knowledge of place begins with the bodily experience of being-in-place. To know a place, is an intimate experience: it requires the presence of a body, which is the basis of our own experience of the world. As I mentioned earlier, my thesis is based on my bodily experience of place, and, I argue that not only is my body one of the links between all these sites, but also that my body determines how I am emplaced in the world. I cannot experience place or know it without the presence of my own distinctive being; thus, it is

essential to my work that I have the physical experience of being in a place. Though reading provides valuable information, it also slants certain perceptions and images. Although I read basic historical information of many of the sites I visited, I found that the facts pale compared to actual experience. The truly exhilarating part of a journey is the spontaneous, direct experience of the body in place, as the body is continually taking us into place.

We are bodily oriented by what Husserl termed “the absolute here.” In this sense, I see my body in place as a means of being altogether here. It is an all-or-nothing affair (Casey 51). Being a traveller and often getting lost offers another dimension to the absolute here, as any sense of disorientation can be overcome by what Whitehead argues as finding other “(t)heres”: “The traveller who has lost his way should not ask where am I? What he really wants to know is: where are the other places?” (54) Knowing the ‘here’ is how we know where we are. The reason for this is that the body is never simply positioned in space; it is implicated in the theres that surround it. When travelling, this experience is especially evident, as the organic body is a ‘total event’ that reaches out to many locations (66). This total event of being interacts with the event of place, making the experience of place both internal and external. This interaction of body and place happens continually, but, as a traveller, this sense is heightened. I was often disorientated, which caused me to reach out, and open us up enough to recognize the encounter between myself and place as the deep experience it is.

The absolute here also infers that there is no doubt about where you are. I argue that one can only experience the in-between – the inter of experience between body and place – in the absolute here. However, I also contend that while the body is the lived

experience of the world in the moment of the here, our actual experience of place perdures since the intermingling of presence and place continues. This is the distinct experience that I hope to capture in my work, by demonstrating how place lives on in our imaginations and memories even after we leave.

From the absolute character of here, the body proceeds into directionality in which near and far have more porous and emotional boundaries than can be measured by degree. Casey posits that emotional, cognitive and memorial elements structure the experience of near and far (58). I argue that the subtleties of near and far inform the phenomenological experiences we have, as more than any other dyad, near and far reflect the way we are inserted in the life-world. It also measures the self-world that is emplaced spatially and temporally. Place theorist Yi Fu Tuan argues that we get to know the world through human perception and experience of place. He has developed the term *topophilia* to refer to the affective bond between people and place (Cresswell 20). To me, Tuan's *topophilia* is very close in meaning to what phenomenologists mean by *essence*, that which makes something what it is (23). As I have mentioned, the search for *essence*, for meaning and feeling, is the drive behind experience.

When I spoke of my travels to massacre sites with friends, they were often incredulous as to why I would want to go. I told them that the dark places are as important as the light. Going to massacre sites, for me, was a balancing of the generally carefree existence of a traveller. We are all implicated in the atrocities as well as the triumphs that happen in this world. A sense of repulsion was evident among some of the visitors at the sites themselves. I found this interesting, as there was a kind of confrontation that was occurring, which I view as the darkness of the place meeting some

deep internal experiences in those who were encountering it. This engagement of personal experience and the imagination interests me, and, I argue, helps to create the memories through which place perdures.

Near and far also engage in depth. In particular, what is of interest to me is primordial depth, which Merleau-Ponty saw as 'existential'. This depth is more like a medium than an axis line. Primal depth is not a matter of space or time: "It is a matter – perhaps *the* matter – of place," which is based on the active intervention of the lived body (68). I argue that the emotional and memorial experiences of the near and far are based in the medium of primal depth, which is also the basis of imaginative engagement with place. This mixture is what constitutes the in-between; the physical, emotional and memorial aspects of place that lives on in the body, and the actual place itself.

Mosquito Lake was my first transformative experience of the in-between, which includes memories of trauma the place holds. It inscribed itself on my imagination and lives on. This perdurance, I argue, has little to do with actual memory of place. Schama contends that "we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, [when] they are, in fact, indivisible" (6). An interesting experience illustrates this point. When I went back to Moresby Island, driving down the old logging roads I had been on fifteen years earlier, Skidegate Lake and Mosquito Lake had switched locations in my memory. When I arrived at Skidegate Lake, a place I had been to almost every day during the months I spent on the island, I remembered it as Mosquito Lake. When I drove past the sign that said Mosquito Lake, I became confused. Hadn't I just been to Mosquito Lake? The memory of Mosquito Lake stayed with me as a place, but also, perhaps more importantly, as a story. To me, this suggests that Aristotle's model of place as container

remains deeply pertinent to the remembrance of place – that it has a holding power (Casey 212-13). I argue that this power is physical, emotional and spiritual. Though things may give structure to place as a visible world, they do not always contain the invisible, which has equal, if not greater power to inscribe place in our memory.

Cultural geographer Carl Sauer argues that “cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, natural area the medium, cultural landscape the result” (343). This interplay of culture and experience is how we become attached to place on a personal and collective level. Thus, the experience of massacre sites is produced by the combination of an individual who is also a member of a collective (a tourist, a woman, a Canadian,) and a place that has been both an individual and collective experience. The experience is both personal and social, and culminates in a profound impact on culture.

Massacre sites enter the collective memory, but they are remembered, or not, differently. Some sites are obliterated, as in the case of Mosquito Lake, where the traumatic event persists in stories and nightmares, Chinlac has been excavated by anthropologists and memorialized by the Carrier with a stone marker, which acknowledges the massacre and its enormous affect on the Carrier nation. A physical marker requires a conversation about the traumatic event, and a consensus about how to memorialize it. Because of this, memorials are inherently political. Yet, they do not necessarily speak for an entire population but rather for those who have the means to erect it. Even if there is a vote, memorials do not include the voices of all who were affected by a tragedy. Even though Chinlac has been commemorated, the feeling of the place is of obliteration. Nothing grows there. As with the other sites I visited, it has not

been returned to use. Anh Hua, in her essay “What we all long for: Memory, Trauma and Emotional Geographies,” claims that “memory is a narrative, not just a replica of experience. It is a form of interpretation. And how we remember is as much about desire and denial as it is about remembrance” (139). Referring back to my view of the narrative of place, Chinlac represents a pause in a conversation, or a conversation that has stopped. The story of the event at Chinlac is not my story, but my experience of the place is; I moved in the silence, the deep grief that still hangs in the air and that has sunk in the soil.

There are no markers of commemoration of the massacre at Tiananmen Square, though the event is internationally known. The square is the heart of Beijing, a major meeting place for Chinese and tourists alike, but it also represents a pause in a conversation that signifies an unwillingness to discuss, on the part of the Chinese people, what the massacre meant and continues to mean in the story of the nation. My experience of Tiananmen was of a great emptiness that I experience in my body. If there is a pause, however, it is edged by defiance. It is still a place of protest, where violence occurs.

The Peace Park in Hiroshima, on the other hand, has a plethora of statues, stones, and fountains as well as the ghost of the past represented by the A-Bomb Dome, which presides over the park. All these objects are inscribed with memory: the small community that was incinerated at the epicenter; a school, a business; a stone chest that contains the ashes of thousands of people who died in the blast. There is an eternal flame that commemorates the trauma that is inscribed not only on the Japanese psyche, but also on the earth in the physical landscape of Hiroshima. The museum records the horrors the Japanese lived through via translated stories of survivors that line the walls. Comparing memory to narrative, Hiroshima represents many conversations happening at once; the

past is acknowledged and discussed but the wound is opened and may never entirely heal.

The park is a crowded, beautiful place with an underlying sadness.

Though there are few stand alone memorials at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the physical experience of walking down the dusty lanes, through the buildings and barracks where the prisoners lived, suffered and died, turns these sites into places of memory. An especially powerful experience is walking through the ovens where inmates were gassed. The barracks at Birkenau are empty shells, the wooden slats where people lay every night seem pitiful and bare, like human shelves. There are wash basins and a painting on one wall. All the smoke stacks of the ovens have been removed. What I remember is the deep silence, how the earth stopped responding in some way. There were no birds flying across the expanse of either Auschwitz or Birkenau, as if in memorial, or avoidance of a deep pain.

At Cui Chi, just out of Saigon, the tunnels that the South Vietnamese built underground are a memorial to suffering, war and survival. Even being underground, squeezing through the cool, dark tunnels, it was difficult to imagine what it would have been like to have lived there. Walking through the jungle, there are still deep pits in the earth with sharpened bamboo poles spiking out. There is the sense in all these sites of trauma that the past is present. Memories endure in these places, just as my memories of the places endure in me.

Defining the genre of my work has been challenging. I see it as a creative non-fiction account of my intimate experience of place which has its roots in travel writing. It is not travel writing in the traditional sense, though in a contemporary sense it is on the

border. Travel writing began in the fifteenth century with written accounts of colonial explorers from countries such as France, England and Spain, who set out to find the Northwest Passage, to discover India, and ultimately to conquer lands for the glory and prestige of the nation. The first travelogues were written by sailors, usually men, and much of this early writing focused on appropriation. Whatever these voyagers discovered was to be claimed for their country. Whoever they found in their path were to be subdued. Travelogues were not of literary value so much as a record of booty, of riches discovered and captured.

The time of the Grand Tour – from the latter part of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries – continues in this vein, albeit for more sophisticated reasons. Writers such as Boswell and Shelley all made requisite trips to Europe, which was a prestigious finishing school for the well-heeled and culturally minded, and their works reflected a narrow view of the world they experienced. Again, this writing was done mainly by men. With the exception of a few stalwart female travellers and writers, such as Freya Stark and Mary Kingsley, there would have been no female voices at all. In the Victorian era the world was still a restrictive place for women and even with colonialism on the decline, unaccompanied women were rarely allowed to venture outside the home. When they did, they often appropriated a male voice and their work was rarely viewed on the same level as that of their male counterparts.

The combination of World War II and the advent of trains and passenger ships made travel accessible to all in the twentieth century. This was the dawn of mass tourism and it is now commonplace to go half way around the world in a day, with very little time to prepare for what awaits upon arrival. Writers such as Pico Iyer claim this global space

structures a new way of being. For Iyer, we are in the age of the global citizen, where boundaries that used to be traversed by the privileged few are regularly crossed by anyone who can afford a ticket. This ability creates the opportunity to experience many cultures not possible in the past as well as the tendency to take this great gift for granted. Tourism has become commercialized and travel writing, as a result, has become commodified; travel writers work for magazines, which in turn sell tours to readers. This kind of work has not garnered respect among the literary community.

There is, however, some exemplary work in the genre of contemporary travel writing. Peter Mathiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1979) and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1986) are deeply personal records not only of physical exploration, but also of interesting and unwieldy internal journeys. Both writers begin with a quest: to see the rare snow leopard for Mathiessen, and to trace the aboriginal songlines in Australia for Chatwin, and neither fulfills his goals. Instead, they are waylaid, confused, opened up. Their resulting books are not accounts of conquest, or appropriations of a culture through the cool eye of the observer; rather, they record personal journeys while emplaced in the cultures of Nepal and Australia.

The strongest influence on my work is Peter Hessler, who calls himself a long form journalist. I read his first book *River Town*, which is based on his experience of teaching English in China as a member of the Peace Corps. I found much of his experience living in Asia similar to my own. He wrote very honestly about the physical experience of being in China, and about his equally powerful contacts with people. For me, Hessler's work evokes people as landmarks that grounded him and also shared his journey. I incorporated this idea in my own work by including the people I travelled with,

whether they were friends, strangers or fellow travellers. On a bus full of travellers crossing a border into an unknown country there is a subtle bonding that happens, produced by excitement and fear. Being-in-the-world is vulnerable; personal boundaries are broken down, and the journey becomes about the people and place, or more accurately, about people in place.

I realize that the examples of contemporary travel writing I have chosen have all been written by men. Their work seems to have resonated with me the most. I have read travel writing and theory by women, most notably Sara Mills, who repudiates the colonial, patriarchal past of travel writing. I would suggest, however, that the male/female dichotomy in travel writing is changing, as women are travelling, writing, and receiving recognition for their work. Though not, in my view, literary travel writing, *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert is still an empowering story of a woman striking out on her own. Women are starting to make their mark in this genre, and I acknowledge that without the significant advancements and freedoms that women now enjoy, especially Western women, my work could not have been accomplished. It is on the backs of Mary Kingsley and other Victorian writers that I owe my current freedom to travel and write. My unmarried and childless state was often, sometimes enviously, commented on when I lived abroad, and I realized the privilege I had in coming from a country that lets me follow whatever path I choose. I was treated differently as a woman, but more specifically as a Westerner, a foreigner. That was the most important difference for me. It did not matter so much that I was a woman, but that I was a Western woman.

While I write as a woman who travels, gender is not a central concern in my work. I argue that the experience of place as a woman or a man is profoundly personal, I

did not see myself specifically as a woman travelling to massacre sites, but rather as a body emplaced in a culture, directly experiencing place. The space I am interested in is the in-between, the thirdspace, where the human and the nonhuman connect.

Though I never did find out if there had been massacres on Moresby in the past, I did hear stories from locals while I visited that Sasquatches are on the islands, that you can tell they are near by the stench, and their laboured breathing. This story stayed with me. It illustrates, to my mind, how stories live in the land and effect the landscape. I used this image of the Sasquatch in one of my stories, when Cook encounters one in the forest. There is a territoriality that I wanted to explore: who does the land belong to? Cook and the creature both inhabit the same place, but are from different worlds. They also seek similar ends. Cook wants to claim the area – Mile 13 – as his own territory, where he can start logging and make a life. He makes his mark by chopping down a tree. But he is in the Sasquatch's territory; it tracks him, and has left its own marks; a pile of clam shells, a pile of dung. Sasquatch, in my view, has always been at Mile 13; its story is a part of the landscape. Schama states that “the wilderness, after all, does not locate itself, does not name itself,” and to me the story of Sasquatch is of the wild, it cannot be removed or claimed. Like the memory of a massacre, it lives in the land, and is experienced, like Cook does, by being emplaced (7).

Reading the stories of the first Carriers, albeit through the voice of the colonial A.G. Morice, gave me a sense of the territory I was and am living in. I am from Vanderhoof, which is the traditional territory of the Sai'kuz Carrier, but I knew very little about them. There were the annual trips to Chinlac for senior science students, guided by George LaBrash, but the actual story of the massacre, as told by Father Morice, had a

powerful effect on my imagination. I saw it as a connection to all the other massacre sites I had visited; it was the foundation story of massacre. It captures the fear, the pain and anguish, the retaliation; the cycle that seems to continue throughout history. Massacre never ends. The unspeakable, the unsayable is continually inscribed on the land; it lives in the land. I also included the story of Na'kwoel, the first man to have been storied by the Carrier. His story, to me, is a commemoration to the past and to place. He was the first man to own an adze; he was violent, he loved his sons to a fault. He railed against old age and caused a side of mountain to fall when he died. His life was completely bound with the land; indeed, his body became stone and he entered the landscape – the human becoming non human. These stories weave the story of the land I am from in with the stories of the places I have been to.

Another reason why I have chosen these stories is that I wanted to make them my own. This may be an appropriation of an appropriation, as the works of Father Morice are merely translations put into his own words. There are varying degrees of respect for Father Morice and his work, and I also know that there is some disagreement amongst the Carrier nation that the massacre was actually committed by the Cree. There is also deep silence and pain around certain aspects of First Nations history that would take me years to unravel. In my debate with myself about using oral histories, I knew I would run into the problem of appropriating someone else's voice. If I interviewed someone, I would have to honour their voice, how they chose to tell the story. As this is a work of creative non-fiction, however, it is my story. So I decided to honour a story already told – already appropriated – and use my own voice. All these interlinked experiences are, in this sense, my story.

Why have I partaken in the experiences of all these wounded places where the narrative has stopped, where there are many and varied voices? I argue that I have added my own unspoken, my own unsayable to the ongoing conversation. This is some of my essence. Everyone has their own dark places. My attempt to give voice to my experience of wounded places is also an attempt to give voice to my own pained places. In exploring the in between of all these sites, *The Earth Remembers Everything* can also be seen as a record of my own in between.

My thesis weaves together three avenues of knowledge: the place theorists whose insights spoke to me and closely mirrored my own thoughts; the genre of creative non-fiction that allowed me the freedom to use personal and imaginative accounts to express my experience of place in my own voice. The theory has greatly influenced the critical thinking surrounding my work; it has been valuable in giving perspective, not to mention the words, to articulate what I knew and felt instinctively in the writing of my thesis. Further, the genre of creative non-fiction was a great breakthrough for me. Using this form in my thesis was the first time I ever used it and it was liberating. I found the right voice for this work. Finally, the underlying cohesive theme that there is no separation between the land and people connects all my far-ranging accounts of massacre sites. The land and the people are one, and what happens on and to the land deeply affects all those who come in contact with it.

At the mushroom pickers' camp there are stories about the haunted lake.

"I don't believe it," says Nigel, the crooked-nosed Australian.

"I haven't had nightmares since I was a kid and my grandmother was standing at the foot of my bed," I say. "She had her dark heart in her hands. Her eyes were black holes."

"You dream of death at the lake." Toby the blonde skater swigs back a beer. We are standing around a licking fire and the guts of berry fed deer. "Lucy and I stayed there and we dreamed of marauders three nights in a row. Lucy woke up screaming, we packed up, slept in the truck on some logging road."

Dogs rummage through scraps, strips of dead deer. There are hunters and you know them. Your mother kills your father. Your sister has a gash on her arm, you can see bone. It won't heal. It won't heal. People you loved with your whole self. It was a massacre. The earth remembers everything.

POLAND

Leaning out the window of the train, hot spring sun warms my face, wind tears my eyes. Land slopes and rolls along, brilliant yellow fields, a few bored dogs watching. Rolling green hills with cottages needing an extra coat of paint; doors hanging off hinges, hammers, rusted saws strewn. Fresh laundry needing to be gathered in from the yard. Passengers around us murmur and the rustle of dinner being unpacked prompts a "You hungry?" from Kat. Kat is short for Katherine. Tall, blonde and from Denver; she laughs easily, gives into to my whims. She's recovering from a failed affair. Her boyfriend drove her to the airport and she cried the whole way. He had to pull over so she could get

a hold of herself, so she wouldn't miss her flight. In Prague, she is what my friends call a flat mate. Our flat has round wide windows and two balconies where we sit and smoke. We are teaching English to very smart, unimpressed students.

"I am STARVED," I declare.

We have not even thought about making dinner so we go to the dining car, square tables with pale peach covers, fake carnations in white vases. The air smells of burnt butter, onions and the salty yeast of rising bread. We order goulash and dumplings from a sour-faced waiter.

With full stomachs and a glass of wine, we dodge stockinged and bare feet jutting out at odd angles in the aisle. Our beds have been made in our absence, a sleepy calm has ascended. Soft sleeping sighs, eruption of snores. We flip coins and Kat gets the top bunk and we settle in for the night after a furtive trip to the bathroom to brush our teeth. Close the window, close the blinds, chat ourselves to sleep. What seems like minutes later we are shocked awake by the customs official standing at the entrance of our car. A bright hall light illuminates the outline of his frame, short, bulky. His face is shaded by the wide brim of his cap. Business-like voice requesting passports. He peruses our documents and hands them back and abruptly turns. Kat's voice booms:

"Can we get a stamp?"

"No," he grunts, annoyed and is gone.

"No? Why not?" She trails off. "What a rude bastard," she whispers to me. We laugh a bit and the train rumbles and jerks. My body rolls to the sudden bursts of movement and I imagine all the other sleeping bodies on the train rolling, sleeping, rolling, sleeping.

That night I dream of our street in Prague, where I am sitting on our balcony which overlooks a narrow cobble-stoned street. I am watching dream people walking below, no one I recognize. Then a tall thin man with a brown dog leaping and barking beside him turns the corner and walks up just below the balcony and stops. He is trying to control the dog but then the dog starts howling, long mournful sobs. They are both disheveled, and I can't make out his face, just his mouth as he turns his head up to the sky, his lips move and a voice comes in to my head *You must get ready*. Such a clear voice. I wake up immediately. I see Kat's hand dangle near the window.

We arrive at seven am and grab some bread and sausage at the station and find a cab to take us to our hostel. The driver, distracted, balding barely looks at us when we get in and we are already moving when he glances at our address, nods. Our hostel turns out to be a college dormitory with a long stall of showers. From across the courtyard we can see men showering, steam clouds, glints of skin.

Krakow is cobble-stoned, smooth brick buildings, winking windows, nuns in dark robes flit across side streets, imposing churches on every block. We trudge the slow incline of a road to the church where Pope John Paul preached, passing tourists with cameras, stores with fresh irises in the windows. At the church, which is somehow quiet though crammed with people, there is a bell the size of a small house at the top of a narrow winding stair. I can imagine it rings with a depth and clarity that I have never heard.

"Stop crying!" A stylish middle-aged mother hisses at her daughter.

She is pale, blotchy and sniffing, with long, dark braided hair and pink shoes.

“I’m tired!”

Mother and daughter are at a stand-off on the stairs.

“Travel is hell,” Kat whispers under her breath.

After the church we scramble down an embankment to the river. “What’s the river called?” I ask Kat but I know she doesn’t know. We travel well together. No forced conversation. Instant intimacy that often comes with traveling, family histories, past loves, has sparked fast friendship. Hurts bask in the open air of our balcony, seem less daunting. The word ‘regroup’ comes up, and ‘space’. I listen to Kat, glass of wine in hand, passing a smoke. I don’t want to be home, I tell her. Japan changed me, the world opened up. I was going to Kyoto every weekend, climbing mountains to the tiny temples and listening to the cicadas, the bamboo click clack in the wind, watching the monkeys scurry up the paths, careful not to look them in the eye to avoid a possible attack. I want to keep going, feel so constrained so easily, and I am lucky and selfish right now, discontented, restless and unwilling at this moment to grab what is lying there, just below the surface, shimmering and alive.

“What does it look like,” she asks, “this shimmering?”

“An exotic fish, a koi in a Chinese garden, a salmon, bucking free in the ocean. Do you know that a salmon molts, that it loses its skin like a snake when it returns home?”

We lean back in our chairs, into the world like it will hold us so we can do some great thing, or escape for a little while, or heal. Krakow continues on the other side of the

river and for as far as we can see. Warm June sun melts us into a lounging recline on the concrete ledge where we perch.

A white, dusty bus picks us up at 7:30 and we are the first ones in, so we take the best seats near the front. The driver is long and skinny, carrying on an intense conversation with the portly, middle-aged tour guide. It is all in Polish but Kat and I play a game and pretend that they're discussing their uptight boss, stupid tourists, money, a really good restaurant. The pros and cons of buying a country home. Conversations that would be irritating, funny or intriguing, if we could understand them, but in another language, they're like a spell being cast. The words parsed, mysterious, incantatory like chanting of the Buddhist monks in Japan, in Thailand, in Laos, the *om* that thrums and buzzes, burrows into you and then bursts out. *Om*. We are off on a labyrinthine journey to pick up the others at hotels and the city is just waking up. Warm spring air drifts and huddles in the corners of tiny cafes; we pass bakeries where customers stand, their morning mouths churning bread and coffee catatonic like cud, gruel of life. Finally the bus is full and our tour guide introduces himself as Petr, born and raised in Krakow. His voice is slow, somber and matches the solemn blue of his eyes. The other tourists are middle-aged and formally dressed, khaki shorts, crisp white shirts and blouses. Sensible walking shoes.

He stands in front of the bus and starts talking, his slow voice rising just above the rustling and mumbling. He knows eventually people will stop talking and listen; he has done this a million times, his eyes blanking out our faces. *The drive to Auschwitz will take an hour and a half. There is a short film at the museum and then you are free to*

wander the camp and take in its exhibits. There are guided tours in a variety of languages if you wish. After a few hours there, we will regroup and go to Birkenau for a few hours in the afternoon. There are guided tours there as well. Petr counts our nodding heads. There are twelve of you. Don't get lost. We leave Birkenau at three and will be back in Krakow for dinner, drop you off at your hotels. He sits down and resumes his involved conversation with the driver.

City melts away and the country homes are tidy, all the laundry and tools gathered in, folded and packed away. Everything in its place. Window shutters painted in smart shades of red, lawns are cut and flowers toss their luscious June yellow, pink and purple coifs. Kat nods off in the seat beside me, the sun lighting half her face, her brown firm arms. The couple behind us share a muffin, slurp coffee, mumble “*where's the guide book, how far did he say it was?*” Heads are nodding, rolling side to side. Did they have relatives that died here? My ancestors could have died here. They could have been the killers.

I need to see the wound.

There's a bubble of silence that happens when the home of language is not available, a reprieve from the constant change and decision-making, tinged with loneliness. It is not unlike waiting in line at the bank or a store, a kind of enforced meditation. Homesickness strikes, a sucker punch, then ebbs. In an hour we arrive and tumble out of the bus; we join a crowd of hundreds, it seems, filing into a large building where the movie will be shown. Wooden chairs shuffle and scrape the cement floor in a large, cool, utilitarian room and the movie is old, black and white with trains and children and it flies by me. I don't catch a word. I don't get it at all and the lights go on and the

exit doors open and we are turned out into the sun like children at recess and there it is.

Arbeit Macht Frei.

This sign like some omen shivers me when I pass under it, crossing over into ghost town brick buildings with curved roofs separated by dirt foot paths, patches of flourishing grass. Glassed in rooms separated by the creak of knotted wooden floors, piles of hair, piles of glasses, piles of clothes, piles of toys. Crutches, plastic legs, plastic arms. Piles of shoes, kid-sized, women's heels. Small dark rooms with slatted spaces for air where people spent days in solitary. In an empty courtyard there was a pole with a hook on it. I heard one of the tour guides say that this was where people were punished; they were hung howling by their wrists for hours.

"Do you want to get a tour guide?" Kat whispers, like we are being watched.

"I don't know. How much do you want to know?"

She looks at me, squinting in the sun. There are groups thronging through the camp, huddled close to their guides like clinging children. We stand in the middle of the road for a few moments.

"What do you think of all the mounds of stuff?" I ask Kat. "Is that what becomes of us? A pair of glasses?"

"Maybe," she says. "It's hot. You're chest is turning red. Did you bring a shirt?"

"Yeah." I pull a blue cotton long sleeve out and shuck it on. It clings to my clammy skin.

We follow the crowds to a small building with a flat roof, a half buried bunker. People are lining up to get in and there is a steady stream coming out, like marching ants.

As we get closer a couple of young women dressed in shorts and tanks ahead of us stop suddenly, hands on hips.

“I’m NOT going in there!” One of them cries out as Kat and I approach.

“What is it,” I ask. They are both blonde, a bit plump, strong Australian accents.

“It’s the ovens,” the one closest to me says, distraught.

“Where you from?”

”Melbourne,” they both answer.

We stand and chat a bit about Krakow. They are staying close to our hostel and introduce themselves as Lila and Linda. Sisters.

“This place is horrible,” Linda laughs, rueful. “We’re heading back to the bus.”

“I don’t know why we came here,” Lila says and they turn around.

“Should we?” I’m curious, feel dirty. “Let’s go.” We follow the crowd, line up like pilgrims to see something holy. Descending the three steps, an oppressive wave of heat shot through with sweat hits, room is cramped, guides talk above the shuffling and mumbling. *This was the first gas chamber at the camp and was kept to show the annihilation that was going on here . . .* The largest chambers and ovens were at Birkenau but they have been destroyed. What happened was this: the inmates were segregated into two groups, women and children together and then the men. They were told they were going to bathe so everyone took off their clothes. Once they entered the chambers, gas came out of the walls. There was no water. Panic soaked in, changed the molecules of the steel and cement like a force field, toxic, undiluted. Small bits like shrapnel absorb into our bodies, like gas seeping in, silent flood. Ledges of seats and little shower heads like the stalls at our hostel, innocent, utilitarian.

For a moment we are submerged, buried alive in consuming tongues of panic, arms and legs pounding in fear and then futility against the steel walls. Like a drum still percussing, reverberating fear, flowing out in waves, a grenade exploding the sea. We emerge from the chamber disoriented, stand in the sun. Breathe. It is time to head back to the bus.

The faces of the other travellers are flushed and overwhelmed. I am reminded of another hot bus full of tourists in Chiang Mai, where shooting rapids in a bamboo raft and hiking in the hills to Hmong villages, created a casual camaraderie and personal disclosure that connected us. Here, we are confronted by enormity, by horror and history and it is too much to talk about. Eyes are averted. Quiet reigns, thoughts reined in. Sombre Petr announces we will be at Birkenau in fifteen minutes.

Brzezinka. Polish word for birch.

Auschwitz has three simple words to introduce its horror. Birkenau has train tracks and a narrow brick train station, relentless stare of the lookout tower. Kat and I find a map of the site at the tourist centre and start our exploration through the rows of barracks, blank buildings, dirt floors. Deep, battered sinks for washing. Wooden slats of bunks in stacks of three. Grounds feel like a graveyard, the barracks are memorials with no written names, fringed with stark, thin birch trees, sky wide and void of birds singing, flying.

“Here is the place where the old women were left to starve,” Kat points at a mark on the map, crumpled and sweaty in her wide hands.

When the women became too old or ill to work anymore, they were moved here and given no food or water. Warm wind blows through the hollow empty center, shafts

of dirt fan the doorways and on to the next one, where a painting of German officials in dark blue, thick severe moustaches still menacing. They are holding clubs in their hands, waving them in the air. Konigsburg is written above the scene.

Earth has absorbed so much emotion that all it has the energy to do is grow grass. It is June and the buildings are dappled. I would love a smoke but I won't, it would feel like a desecration. All the crematoriums have been destroyed. There are only flat pieces of concrete to mark where they were and memorials of bright yellow daffodils, soft pink carnations, black and white photos rest on the corners of memory. Kat and I settle on one, the heat of the concrete rough on our bare legs, passing a bottle of water between us. Unknowable hovers at the entrances, the gates, the railroad, and rises up through the soles of my feet. We walk back to the bus, weary, like we are wading through knee deep water instead of grass. The ride back is quiet, even Petr and the driver have worn out their conversation. Something has been settled, maybe, between them, the world fitting back in to where it should be, and we are the voyeurs of black holes. The earth remembers everything.

DENE i

The Carrier village of Chinlac is on the far side of Stuart Lake and is best reached by canoe in the summer months. When I was in high school, there were class trips to Chinlac, as it was and is an archaeological site, a place of artifacts, of memory. There were photographs in the school yearbook of campsites and clowning students and I heard stories of haunting, shadowy presences, sleepless nights. There was a massacre at this site in 1745 but I had a dim idea of what massacre meant. Certainly something bloody

and raw, occurring for reasons unknowable and primal. This was my teenage version of things. A Catholic priest, Father Morice, spent ten years in Fort St James and worked closely with the Carrier. Previously, he had lived in Williams Lake and began his study of Chilcotin as well as Carrier, and became proficient in both languages. He learned and transcribed their stories.

*

On our last day in Krakow, we come across the Remuh synagogue beside the Jewish cemetery, a smooth, white-washed building guarded by a black gate and up winding stairs there is a gathering of school age children surrounding an old man, short, bald, sagging blue eyes with a bit of dance in them. Laughing, he clears his throat, and a quiet descends. The kids are expectant, American we find out from a translator, a bright-eyed woman with a bouncy dark pony tail.

“The man is a holocaust survivor, one of Oskar Schindler’s kids,” she says by way of introduction. “He was chosen from the Krakow ghetto at the age of ten and worked in one of Schindler’s factories making mess kits for the German soldiers.”

“I was very scared.” His voice muffled, a bit shy. “But I kept quiet, kept busy, for my family. Most of whom, including my mother, father and brother, were killed at Auschwitz.” Placid face, no wrinkle of emotion worries it.

“I survived the war by working in other factories and by the time it was over I was a young man and an apprentice mechanic. I never left Krakow.” I notice that a few teeth are missing in his warm smile. “And when I turned twenty-one, I married a

Catholic girl and we had five children!" He laughs to himself and the talk ends.

Everyone claps enthusiastically.

That night at the hostel we watch the men shower from the women's bathroom. They preen, soap up, some shave, shampoo rolling down their faces in white waves. "They know we are watching," I tell Kat. They are putting on a show. We eat bread and cheese in our room and then go out to the town square, drink wine while the gypsies make their rounds, playing violins, a tattered guitar. They are young.

"Ten? Eleven?" I say to Kat.

Some part of me is hollowed out, a clear space for the wind to blow through. We almost miss our train even though we've had all day to get ready, we scramble and swear on the platform. God. What is wrong with us.

Later we laugh, roll and rock in our narrow beds like babies. We return to Prague and discover that our other flat mate, Robert, has left without paying rent. No note, just dust under his vacated bed. I see this as a sign and I decide to go home. It is the summer of 2004. Kat stays on, finds a job, falls in and out of love with a Czech man and moves to England. I find a job in Vancouver and begin the process of what I call normal life, but I'm restless. Kat meets a man in the army and begins a long distance relationship. She moves back to Colorado and teaches but is restless too.

What is it? She writes me. *This urge.*

DENE ii

The main tribes of the Northern Interior are divided into four. The Sekani occupy the western slope of the Rocky Mountains and all the adjoining territory, reaching as far

as the 53rd latitude. The Babine inhabit the shores of the lake called after them and the Bulkley valley, though many of them hunt near French and Cambie Lakes. The Carrier have villages all the way from Stuart Lake to Alexandria on the Fraser, and the Chilcotin mainly occupy the valley of the river to which they have given their name.

These tribes form the Western Dene, with Dene meaning 'men'.

*

In 2008, I go to Ho Chi Minh City to work for a friend for six months which extends to a year because I fall in love with a Japanese man. I am becoming unhappy though I try to convince myself I am fine. Kat finds a job travelling with a retired army captain who wants to go back to Vietnam before he dies. She makes the arrangements, keeps him company. When they come to Ho Chi Minh City, I meet Kat at a Lebanese restaurant down one of the narrow, twisting dark alleys. There is outdoor seating, plush pillows, candles, puffs of sweet apple hookah smoke. When I see her I begin to sing *and the Kat came back, the very next day, yes, the Kat came back, we thought she was a goner, but the Kat came back the very next day, the Kat couldn't stay away*. She is effusive, laughing, tanned, wearing big silver hoops and heels that show off her shapely, athletic legs.

"Should I leave him," she asks me. "I never see him."

"I don't know. Do you love him?"

"Love is the least of it," she sips her wine.

"I can't stay here. It kills me to leave him but this is not for me."

We order tangines and a bottle of wine. It has been four years since our trip to Krakow, since we lived in our flat with the balcony where we talked, smoked, healed a little. We don't mention Auschwitz or Birkenau.

Toby dreams he crosses the lake. Marauders throw flaming hatchets past his head, hiss as they plunge. He paddles an old canoe, insides scooped out, scratched raw. He can hear the howl follow, searing sound. Leaves of skin glint sinking waves, glow of bone. Water still cold after all that burning. Canoe reaches a hill so steep he scuttles sideways. Shell of torn jacket pummeled with cones, branches tired of holding. All this dreaming war arrows slice. Salal rustles, grumbling bear gnawing roots, berries. Blood pounding shifting guts sweat speckled. As a child he made shadows on grass, shape of cross. He did not dream then. Bear becomes his father, smooth hair glowing skin. Only circle of light in the forest. When Toby wakes, Lucy is screaming. His father shakes his head his hollow mouth shaped *no*.

HAIDA GWAI

No one goes to Mile 13 to pick mushrooms except Cook. Efficient, he chops, cuts, carries. Chanterelles he picks show up in omelettes, in stews, peppery and light.

"There must be more where they came from," Corey says. "Picking territory gets snatched up quickly. Here's a chance to grab ours."

"But isn't it Cook's territory?" I say, judicious, trying to back out for good reason. Respecting tribal lines, invisible to me but inscribed as surely as any drawn on a map.

“He doesn’t care, I asked him.” Corey gives me a level gaze. So it is decided. We’re going in. We’re going in with buckets that used to hold oil, cleaned out, scoured but still retaining a whiff of noxious residue. Bear bells, fluorescent rain gear that is not standing up to the weather. Box cutters as mushroom scalpels. Packs around our waists with nuts, raisins, chocolate chips. Gardening gloves for a firm grip of the thin plastic handle. My fingers ache in them. Dirt still clings to my scalp after my shower yesterday, imprint of permanent earth on my knees. Corey insists that we bring bright pink tape to mark our way in so we can find our way out.

“But we have a compass,” I say. They don’t always work here, he tells me. Something about iron deposits or the ghost of a logger killed here awhile back, sliced up at the green chain, messes with the directions. The green chain, a makeshift mill with a giant saw is at the center of a clearing, Corey tells me, a few miles north from the road. I imagine a crude gallows, where trees refuse to grow, moss shrivels from branches. Impatient to get going, he is already climbing the embankment, looking over his shoulder: “Come on!”

An experienced picker, Corey offers terse instructions. Make sure you wear cork boots, double tie your laces. Stop to take a reading on your compass at the top of a hill, every few hundred feet if you can remember. Watch where you step, it’s easy to break an ankle if you slip between logs. I am careful, careful like I am carrying tea cups in my hands while walking tightrope. Moisture coats my face, twists my hair into a thick, unmovable wave. At night we are so exhausted we hardly speak and in the morning I wake up first, make coffee in the blue-tarp lean-to, sit on the cold bench. Mist makes pudding pools in the hollows of the road. Knees, elbows ache. Nosecums, tiny

transparent flies, dive into my eyes, ears, try to crawl up my nose. Bites and unbearable itch force me down the road, involuntary morning walk.

We met in a bar in Vancouver, long glances over brims of beer. On a break from tree planting contracts, he told me about Haida Gwaii, about Yoho, sand dunes in Oregon. Letters with pressed purple, orange, blue petals, seeds settled at the crease of the envelope. Smell of stony mountain slopes, sun warmed earth. Three months later we are squatting on an abandoned logging road, huddling together for warmth, instructions filling the up and down of our days. Passing patches of trees ripped and strewn and rotting. Every so often I stop to tie ribbons on sturdy branches, so they will stand out from the blobs of moss, bulbous mounds thick at the base of trees, spatters from a child's paint brush.

"Does the ghost do anything," I ask. Our feet make light hollow sounds on the moss like we are treading softly on the moon. Smell of earth beneath, taste of sea. I am hungry but it is too soon for lunch.

"No. He watches," Corey answers, out of breath from a fight through a salal bush. Streaks of blood from scratches graze his fair skin, leaves stick out of his hair, sheaves of wheat ruffling his collar.

Trailing blobs of bright pink ribbon, we continue north. I think of the van, peaceful behind us, long to be safe in the seat, rolling down the road. In the gully below a patch of peach chanterelles calls out to Corey, who descends on then, ravenous gatherer. I catch my breath, cold sweat slips down my spine. While he can spot them instantly, it takes a few minutes for them to peep out at me from the moss and rot that they are hiding in. Clamber over fallen logs, haul our half full pails over and crunch

down to cut. Monotony of trees, trying to calm my sea sick stomach. Constant fear of bears. At the campfire in the evening there are stories, bears eating salal berries surprised by a sudden face in the bush. Curious ones climb trees, claws ripping through thin bark. You're supposed to make noise, fight fear, look big, jump up and down. We are a bony nuisance or novelty, Corey says, and the pickers nod. Fire licks the dried wood and roasting deer, raw meat braising brown.

As I lean down and cut, heat blazes the back of my neck, unmistakable sense of presence. Corey cuts stems and doesn't raise his head, so I carry on. Stories pass the barriers of knowing. I could be making it up. Down the next hill, our buckets covered with old t-shirts to keep the leaves and moss out.

"Let's stop for lunch," I say to the back of his head.

"We've just started," he looks at me, frustrated.

"Do you feel like someone is watching you?" He looks at me blankly; no, he didn't. "Why? Do you?"

"Yeah, when we were picking I thought someone was staring at me. Felt like *get out*, you know?"

"Yeah, well, there's plenty of good picking. The ghost isn't going to hurt you."

DENE iii

Na'kwoel is the first really historical aborigine mentioned by the Carrier Indians of Stuart Lake. General agreement of his birth is 1660 and his name became the symbol of old age. He was short and very corpulent, which was quite rare among the western Dene. He held the position of *toeneza*, or hereditary nobleman, of the Stuart Lake clan

and is the first Dene who owned an iron axe or adze, which he acquired in 1730 from the village of Tsechah, which is now Hazelton, on the Skeena. He held a great feast for his fellow-tribesmen and the adze hung like swinging gold from the rafters of the lodge to be admired. Na'kwoel kept it always within his sight except one winter, when it fell off a bough it was tied to into the snow. It was found only after a Medicine Man divined it, being lead by his prayers to the gods.

*

Cook heard about Mile 13 from the loggers at the boarding house breakfast table years ago, men twisted over eggs and porridge, knotted and rough. No one had been there in awhile, green chain blade was slimy with moss but there were plenty of trees to be taken, that's for sure. Wouldn't recommend going alone, son, they said.

"I'd just moved from the mainland. Didn't know anyone," Cook said. We are in the cooking shack, chopping vegetables for venison stew. I help him out, rest from the bush. And it's warm in the shack, out of the rain.

"They told me 'it's a two man job, and with you, maybe three,'" they laughed at him, chortling around the table. He decided then to go, report back to the geezers that Mile 13 was his. He had been shadowing for a week now, bucked a few trees on his own and it was time to stake his territory. No one would stop him at Mile 13.

"I was skinny then, not like now," he pats his soft stomach. He grew up in the interior, the lakes and rivers and open space of the Carrier. Lithe, he slipped through the rain forest and wasn't stopped by the thick salal. Only homesick in the evenings, he told me, he would've written to his aunt but he didn't know how. He learned the basics in

school, the loops and curves of his name but he quit in grade eight, didn't learn how to write his insides.

Packed lunch in his burlap sack, the truck let him off at Mile 13 to raised eyebrows and silence. Sack slung across his shoulder, he carried his chainsaw and axe up the embankment and into the soft moss. Quiet closed in, moist embrace. Sound of his *thunk thunk* footsteps, he stopped every once in awhile to rest, chain saw weighing his right side. I can see him, picking his way through, sharp eyes measuring the huge trees that crowded out the sun. Moss dripping from branches, sound of wings, *tchock, tchock, tchock* of the raven. Breath rising and falling with the hills. Last night, I dreamed the hills were swelling waves, rising higher and higher until I was crawling, hand to knee, like a child.

"It may have been going on for awhile but there was the sound of breathing." Sizzle of frying venison, air heavy with herbs and oil, we both stir steady. "It was heavy, like an animal dying right beside me. Reminded me of a horse my uncle shot, it had been hit by a truck. And it tried so hard to keep breathing. Sounded like that. And the smell of shit was so strong, almost made me sick." He kept stirring, I added the onions. "Felt like someone was watching me, you know? When your neck gets all hot, you look around and no one is there. *Frick*. I thought that maybe one of the men had followed to scare me, but there was no way that breathing was from a man."

"What did you do?" I asked. Cook wiped his hands on his smudged apron, lit a smoke, bits of white and black hair in his eyes.

"Thought I would scare it off, take a swing with my axe, make some noise. I yelled really loud, *aaaaaaaaahhhhhhh*, maybe it was a bear. I started up my chain saw,

chunks were flying, and I bucked the tree. Kind of like, this is my territory, leave me alone.”

Shaking, sweating, too afraid to look anywhere but straight ahead to the next hill, he told me, the smell got worse. Thing was breathing like its lungs were full, like it was drowning. Cook grabbed his gear, moved on. There was money in the forest, he wasn't going back until he saw the size the trees. And he didn't want the men would know he was afraid.

At the top of the next hill, there was a clearing with a trail of mushrooms in a dip of valley below. By a shredding trunk was a pyramid of mussel shells, perfectly shaped, stacked in precise diagonals. Pile came to just past his knees when he got up close.

“Who could eat all this?” He looked at me, his eyes narrowed. “*Frick*. This was no place for a picnic, believe me.” Breathing became a high pitched scream like a warning, off to his right.

“It was beside me, close enough that there was a dark shadow in the bush. Screaming right at me, I could feel its eyes.” Rasping gasps curdled breath. He knew then the horror behind the silence of the men and he hated them, he told me, angrily hacking up the venison for the second pot of stew.

“I couldn't go back, it kept walking beside me. It didn't get any closer but it didn't go. *Frick*. I made it to the green chain, notched a few more trees, show it that it was my territory now, it had better go.” Cook swept his arm in front of him, clearing an invisible path.

Luke got lost past Mosquito Lake last night. Said all night he was so thirsty, he was more thirsty than afraid. And here there is so much water. I'd be so hungry I'd see fish frying in the bush, smell the smoke if I let myself. Or remember things like when my best friend left in grade nine I wrote a poem about her by the side of a choppy lake. Maybe I'd remember that. I think maybe I would remember lying down in the sand in some hot place, feeling the perfectness of my body, the completeness of that somehow. What does it matter when it's dark and there's no one to listen. Keeping your flashlight on till it burns out. You're in some war movie you watched when you were a kid and safe on the couch. Keeping your wits about you like someone would steal them. Laugh while they're taking them.

At Skidegate Lake, I choose a place that is protected from the still cold wind so the smoke from the fire doesn't blow in my face. Swirling wisps and crackles rouse me from the dream of watching coals flare up, crumble. Snow capped mountain presides over the lapping depths. Not many campers here, too early in the season. Fifteen years ago Corey and I camped on an abandoned logging road not far from here, bounced and rolled in the van. I got out and moved fallen trees from our path. In Sandspit, loggers leaned out their windows to glare at us, hippie mushroom pickers, and they blasted by us on the narrow dirt roads to Moresby Camp. Now, logging has stopped. Everything has been cut for the time being. Muddy roads, knee deep potholes force slow swerving travel. Deer pass me, nonchalant, on the road.

Nightmares happened here. Campers told me that first a mist covered the lake and then it cleared, hatchets and arrows flying. Crying, moaning, ravens translating who

was killing who. Acrid smoke flesh incineration. Pickers didn't stay long at Skidegate Lake, the uncovering was too much, bones and fears dug up and swimming in the lake, coming straight for you.

At Mile 13, I pull over, gather water, nuts and chocolate, compass. No bright tape, or buckets. No corks. Trail in is still deep, wet brown cut through the moss, edging around salal and wild rose bushes. Pickers up in Masset, who still come here every year, tell me it's not as good as it used to be. ATV tracks have ripped through where the tread of boots hardly left a mark. Machines cut down time, no more hauling buckets. Mushrooms don't get crushed, stay clean. No need for bear bells, screech of motors drowns out any warnings of ravens. After a few minutes of trudging, I recognize the feeling of the first salal bush we broke through to where the hills roll.

DENE iv

One day when Na'kwoel was butchering a caribou on solid lake ice, killed and brought to him by friendly neighbours, he heard footsteps on the frozen snow. Bold, they echoed in the stillness, then a sudden stop. It was a native from Natleh, Fraser Lake, and Na'kwoel immediately seized his bow and arrow and aimed it at the unwelcome intruder.

"You know that we do not speak with people from Natleh. Why are you here?"

The visitor pretended not to notice and if he was afraid, he hid it well. Snow blew veils of white dust between them. He looked straight into Na'kwoel's eyes and walked over to where other members of Na'kwoel's tribe stood on the lake, watching. They welcomed the stranger and talked and laughed for some time when the stranger suddenly bent his bow and aimed his arrow at Na'kwoel.

“Who are you, old Na’kwoel, who will not speak to our people. What reason do I have not to sink this arrow between your ribs.”

The men stood on the firm ice in taut silence, waiting for some word or gesture of forgiveness or aggression. Na’kwoel sharp dark eyes took their time deciding and eventually his body bent back to his work. The stranger from Natleh chatted and laughed awhile longer and then returned to his village, named for the salmon that come back.

*

Horror of the sound passed like the shock of pain after a blow. Cook stopped wondering what it was. He could still hear the heavy thump of footsteps beside him, keeping pace. Dense like a moving mountain, whatever it was, pungent smell warning him to stay on edge.

We are taking a break, sharing a smoke by Skidegate Lake, grey and motionless, sprouting stalky reeds like spears.

Outline of the green chain in the bush reminded him of an extinct animal. “Some kind of long, lean raptor with a gouged crown down its back,” he said, his face drawn, his compact body sprawled on a log. “There were piles of logs waiting to be cut, so I turned on the generator, found the switch for the blade and it was a little wobbly, but it worked.” Eyes watched him but he ignored it. Maybe it would at the sound of his weapon. Screech of the blade the sound of money rolling in.

“Then a huge hairy beast comes into the clearing. Tiny black eyes, teeth bared and a wide squashed nose. Smell so strong I could hardly breathe.” Cook stood up on the log, his short thick arms flung straight up beside his head, trying to convey its size,

but I can't picture it. "We stood and looked at each other. It was breathing like it was dying but I couldn't see the wound."

After lunch, we continue to the green chain. Corey hasn't seen it in years and he wants to show me the scene of the crime. Back of my neck is still tingling, burn of eyes but I try to put it out of my mind. It's just a story. Logger was killed so long ago that there can't be anything left of him here. Further in we go, the more nervous I get. It's always like this, like wading into the ocean past your head until you're walking underwater. Further and further away from the van and the road, where the clear light hits and you can see where the next bend is, comforting curve. I stand at the next hill and check my compass. Due north it points and Corey is already heading down to the next mushroom patch. His internal radar is alert, he doesn't need the safety of checking and re-checking the way I do.

"So good that we have come here! This is it. Our new territory. We have to come at least once a week, these buttons need to grow some more, waste to pick them now." He glances over his shoulder at me with a look of *are you listening?* He sees me staring at the next hill, bright pink ribbon tied to the end of a mossy branch. I have tied well and carefully and it is easy to see from here. I point to it, say, there's a ribbon I tied and we're going north, I just checked.

Corey says nothing, leaves his buckets where the mushrooms are and hikes up the hill, grabs the branch, checks it and keeps going straight down the next valley, up the

next mossy hill. Checking the ribbons on the branches to be sure that we have come full circle in the maze, that we are being lead out the way we came in.

DENE v

Na'kwoel had two sons, A'ke'toes and Chichanit, both of whom wielded great influence among their co-tribesmen, with A'ke'toes being in line to become hereditary chief. He was a fierce, jealous man whose demons forced his two wives, Chalh'tas and Atete, to live in isolated seclusion, fighting off accusations of unfaithfulness. Tormented and lonely, Chalh'tas was quick to anger and fought often with her husband. Atete was more submissive, overwhelmed by the demands of her husband and Chalh'tas. A'ke'toes was believed to have the forces of evil at his command, to be possessed by malicious spirits that could prove fatal to himself and those close to him. He was feared by the Carrier and was protected by the love of Na'kwoel.

*

After some false starts, I find the path that leads to the green chain. Piles of brush hide clear cuts, raw sides of hills laid bare like slabs of meat. Dead stumps grey in the mist. Sprinkling of saplings are protected with tall white plastic sheaths to keep the deer away. Tree graveyard seems like nothing will ever grow here again. An hour in and I should be at the green chain but the clearing has been taken over by salal and I dive in making swimming strokes, twisted branches tearing my jacket, catching my hair. Earth

has claimed most of the structure and the saw lays on the moss, entirely covered in green. No longer a symbol of prosperity, a weapon, a landmark. Extinct, like Cook said.

Corey told me about the time he was lost for days in the forest, kept alive with berries and water from streams. We are lying in bed in the van, held by the black night. He was so cold and thirsty that it consumed his fear. Panicked, he wandered at first and then he gave in, surrendered out of exhaustion. Helicopters and other pickers searched the hillsides of the territory where he picked, guessing that he had hit a patch of iron ore, metal that disturbed his compass. He was found huddled at the base of a tree and cried with relief, shaky when he walked out. A rookie, he was bolder, less afraid, he said, more aware than before he got lost. He went picking after a few days rest and stopped talking about it altogether. There isn't a lot to say when you are alone in the woods. When you know where you're going and the picking is good, the forest is friendly. When you are cold and lost, the moss turns into shrouds, keeping you from the light. You fold in, focus on survival, on imminent rescue. Like after a meal and all the blood rushes to your stomach, all your thoughts crowd around that one thing.

Wake to the sound of rat-a-tat choppers, searchlights beam through sloped tent like some war movie. Thought I was in Vietnam leaving killing fields, a wounded hero going home. Clutched guts scrunched fists to my sides, breathed through it. Toby whispers "it's okay Nigel" cold hands on my flushed arms. "Choppers will take you to Rupert. Your appendix burst, don't move. You were yelling," Toby says "you wouldn't stop." I tell him I saw Lucy drag bodies from the lake, wading through flaming arrows untouched somehow. I called her name from shore but I couldn't move. Marauders

threw axes, the trees screamed, kept missing her. Canoes capsized flinging bodies, the lake red with blood. “It’s OK” Toby says. “Lucy saves the lake.”

VIETNAM

Vietnam is oppressive wet heat, apocalyptic murk hangs in the air, ground particles, detritus from the war that everyone breathes in, though no one ever talks about it. Relentless roar of sputtery motorcycles swerving and swaying on the pocked streets, skimming by pedestrians, guided by road warriors, expressionless eyes, faces covered with cloth masks that look surgical from a distance but when I buy my own, they are pink and blue, patterned with flowers, ribbons. Long black pony tails and high heels mark out the women. The men wear cheap flip flops and sag a bit more in their seats. Terror slows my steps so that it takes me half an hour to cross an intersection.

“Act like you’re a pylon”, Winnie says, “and they will go around you.” Winnie is my friend and my boss, giving me the benefit of her time and experience, showing me where to shop, what restaurants are good, how much you can expect to pay for clothes and food.

“Which cabs are the good ones?”

“The white ones with the green writing. The drivers speak some English usually and they won’t rip you off.” She has lived in Saigon for five years already and is adept, matter of fact. I rent a room in the centre of Ho Chi Minh City, in a narrow cinder block building, blue tile with white skinny balconies legged amongst yellow, pink, green blocks, pushing up against the pavement, the confines of narrow alleys, looking for space to grow.

Within a week I am working and I have *a xe om*, motorcycle driver, Mr. Quang, who picks me up at my door for work. He must be in his fifties and so slight that I have to be careful not to crowd him off his seat. A makeshift café with plastic stools sets up every morning in the alley, along with the fruit lady and the couple that make sandwiches. Coffee is thick and sweet, the bread crunchy with feathery insides, tang of pickle and salt of hot fried egg. Young men in dark blue pants and crisp white shirts smoke, laugh, ice tinkling on their teeth, constantly checking their cell phones. Sleek SUV's squeeze by, picking up expat executives, holding up the constant hum of motorcycles for a moment but then they veer around like ants encountering obstacles. Drivers stand and chat with the men drinking coffee and mothers half drag their uniformed children to school. Harry Potter backpacks, smiling Winnie the Pooh. At work, I am interviewing young Vietnamese for jobs with our clients, checking for English, confidence, good eye contact. Applicants, mainly young women, are eager and want to work for foreign, prestigious companies. Is the boss a foreigner? If not, they are not interested: No chance to improve English.

One lunch break, I find a new restaurant, a two story outdoor café with a pond on the main floor, murky water and the flash of fins. From bins of food I pick out fried pork chops, rice and green beans, find a table on the top deck, wreathed with hanging lanterns, fringe of elegant trees. Leaves flicker in the breeze. Burn holes in the red table cloths, glasses of iced beer click, laughter. It was difficult to walk here, crumbling sidewalks crowded with parked motorcycles, vendors selling t-shirts, coconuts, handbags from China. A charming waiter teaches me numbers, writing them out on my stained paper placemat.

“One is *mo*!” He declares in his laughing way. His hair is styled to stand straight up with the use of gel, which does not flag in the heat.

“*Mo, hai, ba!* That’s one, two, three. It’s also what you say for drinking. *Mot tram*. Say *mo jam*, means one hundred.” He shows me a one hundred dong note with the beatific face of Ho Chi Minh. I go to the outdoor cafe twice a week and eventually learn the numbers, which I cobble together with my street and the first thing I learn is my address— *moi tam bis wee tee minh kai*. I am triumphant. I can find my way home.

I go to the backpacker district, Pham Ngu Lao to seek out company; busy blocks of hostels, restaurants, bars, internet cafes, revelers drinking beer, waves of tourists, of Vietnamese on the sidewalks, chatting in alleys. Indoor and outdoor markets crowd narrow streets, tables with raw lumps of beef, pork, squirming fish, bundles of bananas, coconuts, stern women calling children out of the street. One night I meet a woman from Vancouver, Teresa, middle-aged and chubby with a green and yellow scarf shot through with silver tied through her unruly hair, cheeks flushed from the beer and the heat. She was on her way home after two months living in Phnom Penh, volunteering at an international aid organization.

“I lived by the river and watched old people pick through the garbage every morning. The riverbank is full of hotels with old foreign men and young Cambodian girls they rent. It’s disgusting. The heat, the bugs, my place was a dump....I kept trying to talk to the girls saying don’t do it, they’re pigs. But they need the money. It’s awful. I didn’t know what else to say. There was this great restaurant. I went there all the time. The owners were so wonderful.” Putting down her glass, she looked at me with bewildered eyes. “I wondered what I was doing there. I felt so useless.”

DENE vi

One such secluded place where the family stayed was Long Island, at the outlet of Stuart Lake, five miles from the village of Tsauche, where their tribesmen lived on the same lake. A violent fight started between A'ke'toes and Chalh'tas, in which she accused him of the recent death of her two children. It started like many of their fights, angry words hurled like stones, raining down wounds but this day it escalated to a raging storm of blows and Chalh'tas became determined to kill her husband. She fell on him and cried out to Atete to help her.

"If you do not help me I will kill you myself!" she screamed and Atete, who fell on A'ke'toes with more fear than rage. They beat him to death and dismembered his remains, Chalh'tas feeling triumph and Atete intense fear and shame. They carried his bones to the mouth of a stream emptying on the opposite side of the lake, and buried them in the sand.

*

When I pick my way around the hawkers and travellers to our appointed meeting spot, the *Sinh*, or Peace Café, Kelly is waiting, reading a travel guide, his Singha beer t-shirt already sticking to his bit of a belly.

"Kelly!"

He rises. "ADRIENNE!" Big warm bear hug, he is clean shaven, leaner than when he is at home. He is known, familiar, like a landmark.

"How was your trip?"

“Fine. Got in last night, ended up arguing with the cab driver, he was driving around in circles, running up the meter.” We order bacon and eggs, Vietnamese coffee.

“How are you?” he asks, looking over at me quickly. De Tham Street in front of us is a crowd of taxis, buses, ladies in matching print tops and bottoms that remind me of pajamas, old bow legged ladies with cone hats selling fruit, coconut drinks, *xe oms*, men and boys smoking on the seats of their motorcycles parked on the sidewalk. Children coming to our table with stacks of books in their arms; Lonely Planet Guides to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*. They stand silent in front of us until we say no thank you and they move on to the next table.

“I’m okay. Adjusting. It’s so hot and noisy. Work is hard.” Kelly and I were roommates for seven years in a revolving number of houses in East Vancouver. We have survived friends, lovers, boyfriends, girlfriends, pets and cleaning disputes. One night in Bangkok we shared a room in a hotel. I was living in Japan and had come to travel with him. He cuddled up to me and I froze.

“Kelly! What the hell?”

“I missed you,” he said. I removed his hand from my hip. We have since never spoken of that moment.

“The bus to Cui Chi leaves at nine right across the street. You got everything?”

“We don’t need much, just some water. I got money changed at the airport.”

“What do you think of the city?”

“Cross between Bangkok and India. Except India is worse. Crazy, crazy traffic, people following you around. Traffic here makes Bangkok look slow; it’s all the

motorcycles. Food's really good. Chicks are pretty cute," he winks at me, crossing his legs, a sandal hanging off his toe.

The bus is already full when we arrive, so the driver pulls out seats that block the narrow aisle and stuffs us all in. Forty of us in a bus that comfortably seats twenty-five. Kelly and I are next to a couple from England, Matt and Kerry.

"What happens if we have to get out? Quickly? We can't MOVE in here! And it's so bloody HOT!" Matt complains.

"How do we get out? In an emergency?" Kerry wonders aloud.

"Slowly, I'd say. Slow as hell."

"I hear it's cooler there," Kerry says hopefully, telling us that they are heading to Hanoi the next day. She is blonde, flushed cheeks, freckled arms. Acid coffee churns in my stomach and the oxygen seems to be all used up. As the bus pulls away from the curb, a group of skinny, beautiful kids kick a deflated soccer ball into traffic, their mothers call out in sharp, staccato voices, call out to passing tourists in loud, listless voices, carry on their chats that sound like arguments, the caw of crows. Eyes weary, wary. Pots of soup and noodles at a tiny street café, plastic tables accompanied by tiny plastic stools like the furniture from childhood tea parties. Customers slurp, chat, smoke. Wafts of charring meat mixes with exhaust.

The tour guide shuts the flapping doors as we lurch forward into traffic, grabs a crackling microphone as he clears his throat.

"Good...morning. My name is Thanh. It's spelled T- H- A -N -H. It is pronounced 'ton'. Like ton of fun!" He is tall and more solidly built than many other Vietnamese men I have seen, lustrous black hair cut short, slicked back with gel, unlike

the usual parted on the side style. His white shirt has a blue and white name tag of the tour company with his name printed in black. T H A N H. *Ton*.

Sweaty heads bob and roll and panic, incited by claustrophobia, tingles up my spine. All I can think about is how do I get off the bus? Even if I could? Where would I go? Wander through the miles of back alleys, be chased by dogs, listen to the screech of karaoke from tiny cement living rooms?

"I spent two years living in America, in California, where I learned English," Thanh continues. His pronunciation is slow but clear, like he is reading a well-practiced script, "so I could come back to my country and talk to YOU."

Kelly laughs beside me. "This Thanh guy is pretty funny."

"I was born in Saigon, I am Saigonese. All people from here call Ho Chi Minh City Saigon. We are the workers. Saigon is a lifestyle city. We are going to a residence of war orphans on the way to Cui Chi. These people have lost their family. Or they have lost limbs, or are sick from the war. They are very talented artists."

"How long are we going to be there?" someone asks from the front of the bus. "This stop wasn't mentioned when we bought the tickets."

We start and stop through the centre of the city, streets, sidewalks, alleys are swarming. A few of the sightseers on the bus are munching on sandwiches, the smell of fried eggs in the close heat is overpowering.

Thanh is quick. "Not long at all. They are very talented. We will be there one hour!" And he sits down.

"We will be expected to buy something," Kelly says and Matt nods in agreement. After an hour of slow progress, the city thins out, replaced by fields of skinny trees and

rice paddies. Oxen pulling ploughs and dots of wide brimmed hats mark farmers, digging, pulling, pushing. When they stand up they still seem bent, like curved wire. Roads turn to gravel and a fine mist of dust floats through the open windows until finally we pull up to a field with a hangar-like building and a few sheds. We file out slow as hell, as Matt predicted, and follow Thanh to the entrance.

“This should be an interesting detour,” Kelly laughs. India has taught him to wait, he says. “I have to go every day to the factory or nothing will get done. They’re always happy to see me, make tea, chat. I ask how things are going with my clothes, ask to see things and they show me. And I come the next day. Same thing. But if I don’t go they will forget about me, not do anything. And I need my shipment by a certain time and they say they will make it for sure. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t.”

“Why do you keep going back?”

“I don’t know. It’s the way it is.”

The hangar is cool, fans *swish swish* from the ceiling to bring us back to life. The ground and plywood walls are covered with pearl in-laid Vietnamese women, elegant in their *ao dai*, riding bicycles, white fabric flowing, waves of black hair. Young men and women are bent over, sanding wood, painting frames. Some look up and smile at us, hopeful, others completely ignore us. Shelves of black and apple red lacquered bowls gleam and when I pick them up they seem to float in my hand. Wall hangings dashed with Chinese characters, women crossing a bridge, iconic cone hats.

We file out and Thanh herds us back to the bus. Some of the travellers carry packages wrapped in newspaper.

“Cramming back in our sardine can.” Matt says under his breath.

Instead of a movie, Thanh gives a presentation in a square room with scraping wooden chairs that reminds me of Auschwitz, with the exception of whirring fans and the dripping heat. *Swish Swish*. Thanh stands beside a diagram of the tunnels, which look like the elaborate paths of ants corkscrewing into the ground. Halls and meeting rooms, kitchens and bedrooms. An entire community subsumed. Through an open door the jungle beckons, thin trees, hillocks, screech of cicadas. Air free of fumes from exhaust, salt and tang of food. Stillness. Thanh uses a pointer that reminds me of my Grade Two teacher Mrs. Benner, firm diction, frequent eye contact with the class but with Thanh's distinctive, forceful voice.

"The Viet Cong planned their attacks here," he points to a conference room, square shaped and separate from the other spaces that are round and hovel-like. Expansive, the heart of the underground village, where all the men met, the soldiers and commanders and generals, drinking, smoking, planning. "People carried on their entire lives underground.' *Swish, swish*. Part of our group is nodding off to Thanh's tone. Though distinct, it lacks cadence to rouse us from the heat. "They cooked. Raised their children. They even got married. And had a honeymoon! Underground!" He points to a small roundish blob at the far reaches of the community, a private space. "This is where the happy couple spent the first few weeks of their marriage, alone together. They didn't have to work." They were allowed to be happy together before rising to the surface and continuing with life, with the war. But they were fortified, according to Thanh's tone, by love.

He went on some more, said a few things about the Tet Attack, which was planned here as well. But my mind wanders, trying to imagine a life underground. I

cannot. But I cannot imagine a war going on above me either. Would I have escaped? Left my home? But to where? War was all around. The Vietnamese dug in, they stood their ground underground, coming up from the depths to maraud in the night like ghosts, like the Terra Cotta warriors standing at attention in the ground in China. Except they were alive and fighting, planning, getting married in the dark earth.

DENE vii

The women hid his bows and arrows in the woods and rocks of Stuart River and fled to Fraser Lake, leaving behind a message with the Tsauche tribe that following one of their usual disputes, A'ke'toes had tried to kill them but they escaped his wrath in his canoe. When he tried to pursue them he went past the level of his skill and drowned. Believing the story, the Stuart Lake tribe searched the river for days, where they recovered his missing quiver. A few days after this they recovered his mangled remains buried in the sand. The pain and anger Na'kwoel and Chichanit felt knew no bounds and they guarded this feeling, kept the need for revenge alive through the years that the wives had disappeared.

*

Finally Thanh leads us to the jungle. There are dark stains under his arms and the line above his lips is beaded. We are guzzling water.

“Do you have more?” Kelly asks.

“Yeah, in my pack.” He reaches in and hauls out a warm bottle as we walk.

Birds are singing, small little black sparrows that hop lightly in front of us. Gun shots

ring in the distance. Rat a tat tat staccato sounds. We stop at a deep hole in the earth and gather round, looking down at thick pointed bamboo poles waist high embedded like jaws.

“This is a booby trap!” Thanh proclaims loudly. Air smells like earth, mineral like dried blood. Birds chirp. “This hole would be covered by leaves in the night. And BOOM. An American soldier would fall in. And he would scream in pain. The goal of the Viet Cong was NOT to kill but to maim, to cause pain. Then the other soldiers would hear their friend’s cries and come to the rescue and BAM. The Viet Cong would be waiting in the dark. And they would kill all the soldier’s friends that came to help. The plan was to inflict pain, to inflict fear of the night in the American soldiers. They did not know the jungle they way we do.” There is pride in Thanh’s voice and his eyes flash as he stands there. Gun shots continue, get louder as we follow him.

“What is that?” asks one of the travellers, an edge of nervousness in his voice. He is tall and dark. I hadn’t noticed him on the bus. “Oh. There is a shooting range near the canteen. You can shoot machine guns after if you want. AK-47’s!”

“Holy shit!” a girl says behind me. Her accent is American, I think. “Guns?”

“Yeah. It’s creepy,” Kelly replies, turning to check her out. Dirty dog. Stinky smelly Kelly with the jiggly jelly belly.

“God, I need a beer,” the tall dark traveller says and the group titters, a little wave of welcome laughter. Unrelenting sun blasting through the thin branches and the meager dusty leaves. The next booby trap is above ground, a huge net made of fishing line lies dormant on the ground. Once we gather around obediently, Thanh covers the net with leaves, crunchy and dry, mottled green and brown. A few thin vines connect the net to

branches over head, like veins connecting to flesh. From behind a shrub he hauls out a mannequin, a bald plastic sexless body, loose and jangly. He tosses it in a casual heap on the net and WHOOSH the body and net boomerang up to the sky, where it bounces and flails, simulating what would happen to an unsuspecting soldier wandering in the jungle, on the alert for the enemy. Rattle of guns getting closer.

“You see. Another booby trap. American soldier would scream when he got caught and his friends would come. Another ambush. Viet Cong strategy.” I am hoping he notices that we are in need of a break, sustenance. *Rat a tat tat*. “God it’s hot,” another girl, English, complains. She is covering her freckled shoulders which are raw red with a scarf. “Now we will go to the tunnels!” Thanh declares, unflagging in the heat and we follow him single file through a knot of trees to a clearing with a small hole with a ladder on the edge. Again, we gather around like sheep and it slowly becomes apparent that this tiny aperture is the entrance to the underground world.

“Any volunteers!”

Stunned silence.

“I will.” A young man with blonde dreads in a blue head band steps forward. I can’t place his accent. He’s wearing a white t-shirt, long jean shorts and skater shoes.

“Go down and walk through the tunnel to the end,” Thanh points to another ladder in the ground, a few hundred feet away. Ground is hard and packed and golden like brown sugar. “What’s your name?”

“Chuck!” he calls out and impossibly disappears down the hole, his hand shoots up as if to surrender.

“The tunnels have been widened for tourists who are taller and bigger than Vietnamese. But you still have to bend over, crouch a little, and follow the light to the end.”

“There’s no way I’m doing this.” Panic waves from the soles of my feet, nipping along my thighs, sweat of my spine to the flushed nape of my neck, watching the procession of travellers going down, down into the pit.

“It’s what you came for. Come on!” Kelly laughs, giving me a flustered look. “At least try.”

I am the last one in line.

Thanh notices my blanched face. “It’s okay.”

I climb quivering down the stairs and the bird- sounds of the jungle muffle. It’s cool. Voices ricochet down the length of the tunnel. Light is immediately eclipsed by the shadow of ground. I make it to the bottom, which is a small enclosure, a mini cloak room, with four others waiting to enter.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I say to no one, to all of them.

“Yeah, it’s pretty freaky down here,” says a comforting voice of a young girl, I can’t make out her face, just the outline of her curls. Smells of earth, metallic fear in my mouth. Anxiety claws, ready to tear. At least try. Bodies are clearing out and soon I am the next one to enter the tunnel. I hunch over, make myself into a comma, crunch in and as I move through the walls squeeze. Just keep going. No air, can’t breathe. Bodies moving ahead of me, muffled voices make it hard to see the light at the end. What if I can’t make it? No one’s behind me, I can turn around. Stop for a second. Breathe. Breathe. High pitched thrum and then nothing. Nothing. Just close your eyes and go.

But I don't. I lie down very still and wait for the wave to pass and soon there is no sound at all, just cool air, dirt against my cheek. Heart slows slows breathing silence. All the people that have passed through here, running, screaming, crying, stealthy, maybe some of them crawled out like I did, hands and knees, hands and knees towards the light.

When I finally haul myself up, Thanh is standing there. I am the last one, he has been waiting. "You did it. Yay!" he cheers, beaming at me. Everyone else is standing around, drinking water, laughing, lively again. We did what we came for, made it through the tunnel and how awful. In three minutes I combusted to the pressure of fear. Sound floods in and I recover to full, quaking height. Kelly is chatting with Matt and Kerry. I stagger up to them.

"You okay?" Kelly questions, alarmed.

"Yeah."

"Pretty fucking crazy, heh?" Matt explodes. "Can you imagine living down there? UnbeLIEVable. Like little bugs scurrying around."

I gather myself together, bit by bit, picking up missing pieces, visible only to me. As we walk towards the canteen, the dummy American GI is lying in the dirt, limbs splayed, its blank face watching our slow procession. I can see the tourists standing in a row, firing at bulls-eye targets through a clearing up ahead. Not so long ago those were soldiers in a jungle with the Vietnamese talking, smoking, planning in the ground, living like rodents. Invisible during the day. At night, cunning marauders.

CHINA

Leaving the controlled grounds of the airport, our feet on cracked concrete, we are now in China. Without a visa. After a tense conversation with a middle-aged man with the demeanor of a fighter, 'the boxer' leads us to an old white BMW and the driver unlocks the trunk. At the airport, the driver avoided eye contact, shrugged into his black leather jacket that seemed too big for him, his face soft and hairless, thin dark hair standing straight up like grass. He still has not looked at us. We toss in our bags and squeeze in to the back seat. This will be the last we see of the boxer and his short bursts of irritation. He pockets half of our fee. We have negotiated to his great annoyance to pay the remainder of the fee when we return to the airport.

Taxi leaves the airport and moves into the rush and haze of Beijing traffic. Uncomfortable thoughts rise along with the exhilaration of movement – we might have been too hasty, we could be going anywhere. Christian is a stranger but it was the driver, seemingly harmless, that I am now worried about. What have we done? I almost utter, but don't. Then we will both lose our nerve.

Everything will be okay. Everything will be okay. Everything will be okay.

DENE viii

Living in exile started to wear on Atete after several years. She missed her family and wished to return home. Feeling vindicated by being the unwilling accomplice in the murder, she decided to end her exile and tell the whole truth of the matter to her tribe, hoping to have a happy homecoming. But as she neared Stuart Lake her return was

revealed to Chichanit, whose rage sent him out to the edge of the lake and he killed her with his bow point – a spear fixed to the end of a bow – before she had a chance to speak. He later found out that Atete was coerced by Chalh'tas in the murder of A'ke'toes and he repented, feeling shame that she was unable to explain herself. He then decided to spare the life of guilty Chalh'tas if she became his wife in memory of his late brother. Messengers were sent back and forth and Chalh'tas agreed to the arrangement, which was quite common then. Widows often re-married their late husband's nearest kin.

*

Dark silt hovers over every building in little depressed clouds. Trees waiting for a few more weeks to bud. Spring would add some sheen, bring some life that seems missing. We move through the suburbs, short squat apartments interspersed with shiny steep skyscrapers. An occasional old man or woman on a bicycle peddles down the side streets. Aside from them, we could be anywhere. Downtown rises in the distance, white and grey blocks fused together. The driver turns off the freeway and my stomach lurches. Looking over at Christian, he seems calm, half asleep, his hoodie covering his head. We met at the Bangkok airport, just a few hours before, where he mentioned that we could leave the airport without a visa if we flew out within twelve hours. When we got to Beijing, found some coffee and changed our money, I convinced him to go see the city. It was an opportunity that wouldn't happen again, I told him, seize the day. We are freezing in jeans and hoodies. Just a few hours ago we were sweating in Bangkok heat. My lips are sunburned, stinging, puffed up.

After driving through increasingly bumpy residential roads the driver pulls over suddenly and parks. He has not spoken the whole way and I know now that either he can't speak English or is not confident enough to try. Instead of telling us where we are going, he saunters a few steps ahead. Apartment blocks, about four stories high, rise up beside us. There is no one outside and a few pots of plants are trying to grow at the entrances.

"Where the hell are we?"

"Doesn't look like the Forbidden City."

Around a corner some old men are feeding pigeons in an ornate, manicured courtyard, lounging on cement seats, seeming out of place in such a formal setting. There is no litter, which I noticed collected in the alleys and ditches on our way. We must be getting close. They wear parkas and caps and laugh to themselves, smoking and talking. Cages with tiny white sparrows rest on the ground between them. A gazebo is raised up, surrounded by trimmed hedges.

Further down the block all signs of ordinary life disappear. Just birds singing and our footsteps. The park expands to include ponds with cement bridges curved over like drawn bows, grass a dull green, thin yellow stalks struggling up from the soil. Christian and I must have picked up speed because our driver lags half a block behind. Bunches of tourists sprout up across the street and we cross to join them. Suddenly, we are in Tiananmen Square.

Enormous slabs of concrete fringed with puffs of trees and shrubs and grand, faceless government buildings seem to mute all sound. Masses of tourists are swallowed up whole by the mouth of an invisible dragon. Mao watches with guarded eyes. Sky

gains weight, presses in. I think of the squares I've been to in Europe: lively plots, the gathering point. This is hardened voiceless earth, empty, impossible to fill, no matter how many people it could enclose. A soundless tomb. Young, serious guards standing like saplings, guns at the ready. Tourists gather and scramble all the while being watched like moving targets. Small, exposed, insignificant. You could walk the perimeter, down the centre and not get the sense of anything. Except size.

Christian stops to look for his camera and I am suddenly dizzy but there is nowhere to rest. The driver stays nearby, hovering like a ghost. Groups of tourists gather around guides who hold signs above their heads, cameras flashing and swinging around their necks. An expectant feeling in the air, some children are laughing and eating candy but they don't stray far from their watchful parents. Vague tension, like the feeling of a headache coming on. Christian starts snapping shots of the crowds.

"So this is where the massacre happened. The stand-off point of China," I say to him. Families surround their aging mothers, fathers, who look tired and overwhelmed. There is no centre, no hearth, fountain or statue. Great blank expanse beneath us, energy flowing out through the soles of my feet. This is where soldiers opened fire on random citizens dumb with disbelief at such betrayal. Burning tanks, citizens beating lone soldiers with sticks, steel bars, hurling Molotov cocktails. Bodies being carried on park benches, behind bicycles. Blood sweeping down the smooth faceless granite, dripping through the cracks into the earth.

Beside us is a group of older Chinese men and women, about ten of them, holding a wide yellow banner like a shield with Chinese characters written in black, with red and green exclamation points at the end. At first their expressions seem blank but their jaws

are taut, mouths pressed grim in defiance, chanting a rhythmic incantation that rises just above the clear voices of tour guides, yelling children.

“Are they waiting to get attacked?” Christian sees me watching them.

I am nervous looking at them, stalwart in the cold day. There is a wide berth like an invisible moat around them, but nothing happens, at least not while we are there.

DENE ix

Na’kwoel grew to be so old that his snow white hair turned a yellowish hue, his knees and elbows were covered with scales that looked like moss. His hearing failed him, and his eyelids drooped until his eyes disappeared. His limbs knotty and swollen, his heart hardening to stone, the earth taking root, claiming him through the soles of his feet. Basking in the sun on a rock or emerging from the shallow water, he would howl in rage at seeing himself ravaged and powerless against time. But he would fight back, exclaiming: Ah, here I am, a young man again!

*

“Let’s head to the Forbidden City,” I say, looking at his watch. We have a couple hours left.

“Sure,” he says, snapping a few more pictures. We head towards Mao, the face that was desecrated and rehabilitated. His gaze steady, unchanging.

“What are you taking pictures of?” I ask.

“Interesting faces when I see them. I took a photography class before I came here.”

“You know that the guys who threw egg on Mao are still in jail. One of them was beaten so badly by a guard that he can’t function. Did you take a picture of the guards?”

“No, I didn’t want to attract their attention. Though it’s hard to tell what they’re looking at.”

As we approach the entrance the crowds thicken and swarm, heads swaddled in hats, bright scarves wrapped around bundled children. As we pass through the gates a young woman runs up to us, her sleek black hair flapping down her back.

“Come buy my pictures! Where are you from? I studied English in San Francisco. I am an artist. Come with me, there are many beautiful pictures.” She latches on to Christian’s arm and leads him to a gift shop, exclaiming, “Where are you from? Canada! Beautiful country!”

Scrolls of rivers covered with curved bridges, koi fish swerving upstream. Mountains encircled with clouds, cranes, black characters spelling out poetry. The room is crowded but warm, I feel the tension melting a bit from my shoulders.

“My name is Hui. What’s yours? Are you married?”

“No,” Christian says, laughing, “we are strangers.”

“Strangers? What?” Hui is puzzled. Christian seems taller here than at the airport, ruffled blonde hair, slight fringe of a beard makes him seem older than twenty-five. He is a manager of a real estate sales team in Kelowna. In Thailand, he went to Chiang Mai to learn *muay thai*, Thai boxing. The Thai boxers are tough, he told me, he was beaten every day and they laughed at him. It took awhile for him to get used to praying before the fight started, but he liked it, it calmed his nerves.

“We met on the plane,” I explain, wanting to get away. The driver is just outside the gift shop, eating a bag of peanuts.

“We should get going,” I say to Christian and Hui relinquishes his arm as if she is his betrothed.

“Why is the driver following us,” he says as we leave. “She was nuts.”

“Not nuts. Just eager. I don’t know why he is. Probably he wants his money.”

Courtyard opens up, enclosing cement arms, swallowing sounds like a blanket. Gold urns rest by the pomegranate walls trimmed with gold. Dragons writhe up the staircases to all the separate buildings, sinewy snakes with flashing eyes, open jagged mouths. Leaning in over the balustrades, we gawk at the elaborate objects left behind by the emperor. Tiny chairs embossed with dragons, gold and silver strokes, semi precious inlays. An oval mirror, brocade cloths draped on the fairy tale high bed, all that is left from the emperor and his family, who lived here in seclusion, in luxurious lock down. High walls of dark wood, the simple furniture with ornate designs in stark contrast to the freshly painted bright swirl of sky blue, yellow with orange pointillist dots on the underside of the eaves. Inside seems cavernous, without light. Guards stand at attention on the periphery, handsome in pea green fitted suits, dashes of red, hooded eyes. Compounds of the city rise up like mounds from the sea of concrete; grand library, secluded bedroom, quiet ceremonial meeting room. Squares of perfect gardens dot up in corners, symmetrical, vertical lines.

“Are you hungry? I need to eat.” Christian pauses from his picture taking. There is an outdoor buffet lined up along a wall, vast vats of food covered and watched over by old Chinese women. No one is eating.

“Is that a good sign? No one is there except now there’re some guards. Don’t think they would poison them.”

The women are eager and beckon us with crumpled hands as we approach, smiling eyes. Uncovering pans of chicken legs, noodles, red soup with yellowish balls floating, fragrant steam rising. They give us a bit of everything on paper plates, laughing at us, and we settle on a concrete step to eat.

“So. What do you think?” I ask in between mouthfuls of gooey salt and sweet. I’m freezing, huddling in against a sudden sharp wind.

“Of the food or the place?”

“Both.”

And he considers for a bit. We are suddenly all alone. I haven’t seen the driver for awhile, wonder where he’s loitering, now that he’s finished his peanuts. Comfortable silence. *Oh girl, I love you so, never, ever going to let you go. Once I get my hands on you . . .* in the background.

“It’s amazing. Glad we came though this morning I was thinking nahhhh. Thanks for kicking my ass.” Sun glints off his hair, cold wind ruffles it a bit.

He laughs, a hoarse cough. “Do you think this is really chicken?”

“Maybe. What else would it be? Duck? Goose? Snuffulupagus?”

“Snuffulupagus would not have bony little wings.”

“How do you know? No one ever saw the Snuffulupagus.”

“Yes! He was an elephant that snored a lot.”

“No. That was the fake Snuffulupagus. The real one can never be seen. Just like dragons.”

Christian rises and we walk to the entrance gates where the beige driver is waiting, huddled in his black leather jacket, his fine hair blowing like grass. We take the same route to the taxi and ordinary life returns. The old men are still in the garden, feeding birds, smoking. Trash returns to the streets and the brownish light of March becomes duller with smog as we head back to the airport. Standing in the customs line with a crush of straining bodies I think: *We did it. We made it.* When we choose our seats the attendant assumes we are together and we sit side by side in the crowded plane, sleeping against each other, eating in weary silence. I have the dream I had in Prague again except this time the man is blue-eyed and stern, sharp lined face but also not old, looking up at me saying, “You must get ready!” and I wake, stiff with fear. At the airport in Vancouver, Christian stays to catch his flight to Kelowna and we hug good bye. No one is watching.

JAPAN

After a year in Osaka, I have learned the basics of Japanese from my teacher Yuki. I started lessons with her when the US invaded Baghdad. I still remember watching the first bombs being dropped, looking up from my notebook, tracing the lines of *hiragana* over and over again, slowly sounding them out. I know how to navigate the myriad train stations by the time I go to Hiroshima. It is 2003 and I am at the beginning of my years of travelling, though I don’t know it then, the urge, the restlessness, has already begun to seep through the earth, up the soles of my feet. I want to see everything, go everywhere. The exhilaration of learning a new language makes me feel like I am in grade one, shy and insecure, counting numbers with my fingers under the desk. Train

travel in Japan is efficient, a smooth ride through the monotonous suburb that is Honshu, bumps of mountains, occasional glimpse of a temple, bright orange gates of a Shinto shrine, cement embanked rivers. Farms, but no animals. I ask my students, “where are the animals?”

They laugh. “They are inside!”

Shannon and I go with her parents, who are visiting from Canada. They are exhausted from the flight over but want to get to Hiroshima as they are only in Japan for a week, so we take the *shinkansen* the day after they arrive. My students tell me I will love Hiroshima. *It is so beautiful. You must go to Miyajima too Adrienne san. Floating torii in the sea is very beautiful.* Shannon does not look like her mother. She is small with thin dark curly hair that she has been trying to grow; it swirls in ringlets, popping like corkscrews. Her mother is voluptuous, blonde, worried. *What time are we arriving? Is the hotel near the museum?* Shannon assures, placates. We eat bento boxes we bought at the station, carefully packaged, perfect piles of rice, pickles, thin grilled fish. Salt smell of miso, soya sauce. Train conductor in official blue with white gloves and blue brimmed cap walks calmly through our car, turns around and bows slightly before he moves on to the next car, where he bows again before walking through. The floors are immaculate, the windows shine and we move at the speed of a plane gearing up for take-off.

We take a taxi from the train station, the driver with immaculate white gloves and blue brimmed cap efficiently packs our luggage in the trunk. I hand him a piece of paper with the address and he nods. Hiroshima is much smaller than Osaka, and greener, my students tell me. The city ranges over craggy hills by the sea, hotels and residential

streets fringed with blooming May flowers, the covered shopping streets, *shotengai*, hosting streams of tourists. Cicadas screech in the humidity.

Shannon and I met a few weeks after I arrived in Osaka, became inseparable, sharing a restlessness that brought us here, urging us past the familiar. We had tea every day in the alcove of her long narrow apartment, seated on the floor on silk cushions, leaning out the window to watch women in business suits and high heels ride their bicycles to the train station, talking on their cell phones. *Moshi mosh?* We would complain how there were no men in Japan. Is that why we came? I moved from the suburbs to her apartment building where many teachers lived, which was known as the space ship, due to its shiny silver exterior. The landlord wore plastic flip flops and drowned a rat in my bathroom. Occasional giant cockroaches raced down the hallways. We sprayed them with insecticide and took pictures – some had wings and could fly, which was a revelation. It was an old building. My next door neighbour was a Buddhist, his chants low and sweet coming through the walls, competing with my electronic music. On my days off I would go to ramen shops, line up with the rest of the customers at the narrow counters, slurp the salty noodles. I would pick a village within an hour train ride and wander the streets, find a temple I could sit in for awhile and if I was lucky, there would be monks chanting, their wrinkled heads bowed. I learned to kneel in Japan though the bones of my ankles would never quite conform to the hard ground, being reshaped by a new discipline that felt unnatural, exhilarating.

Shannon's step father pays the driver. He's tall and lean, friendly, rangy like a corn stalk. Dave and Muriel. They are going to China after this, to see the Terra Cotta

Warriors. Shannon is breezy, bright, summer wild flower. Muriel a potted plant, sturdy, that blooms in the spring.

“The Peace Park is over there,” I gesture broadly to the left and no one notices; they’re already inside the air conditioned lobby. A porter dressed in hotel colours, white tailored shirt, blue pants holds the door for them, his head bowed slightly, hair gleaming blue black.

Our hotel is a few hundred feet from the hypocenter of the atomic bomb. Where it stands was flattened, burned for weeks, bloodthirsty, parched. After dinner Shannon and I walk across a curved stone bridge to the Peace Memorial Park, built on the banks of the Motoyasu River. Dave and Muriel are at the hotel resting. Elegant inscriptions on stone tell us that the Park was built on the grounds of Nakajima District, which contained seven towns and 6,500 people, most of whom perished in the bombing. The district is about the size of the village I grew up in. A round mound rises up on our right, a grey concrete pagoda resting at the crest, holding the ashes of 70,000 unclaimed or unknown bodies. Elegant hotels with balconies, street side cafes and shops, puffs of shrubs and trees watch over the park. The A-Bomb Dome is a shambling dinosaur, the only wreck left standing after the incineration. Majestic and eerie, a sign says it was built by a Czech designer and is a World Heritage Site. Blasted window frames like eye sockets, dark, immobile. A river eases past.

Blue green white yellow red delicate cranes folded in sharp pointed angles and tied together in long strings drape over natural stone monuments, dedicated to villages, schools and workers wiped out at the hypocenter. A three pronged sculpture in the shape of a bomb with a young girl standing atop, arms stretch wide to hold the shape of a

bronze crane. Imposing arc shaped cenotaph at the heart of the park keeps the souls of 221,893 names safe in a chest and fountains spray tonnes of water a minute to quench thirsty souls. Behind the A-Bomb Dome there are hundreds of cranes hanging in bushels, made by school children from all over Japan, a sign says, in the hopes that a disaster of this magnitude will never happen again.

How many bodies are buried here? Bones, ashes beneath pavement, deep in the ground. All the signs say the souls are resting and they may be. The park is peaceful. Families, knots of friends seem to float by as if on some invisible, calm breeze. Teenagers sit on the edge of the river where the grass is soft and nubby, chatting and smoking. Some girls wear the classic school uniform: boxy blue blazers, short blue pleated skirts and white leggings past their knees. Jagged, straight glossy hair. A boy with dark blocky glasses and rolled up grey jeans sits alone, listening to music through head phones. Air smells like green buds, fresh and lemony.

Walking the circumference of the park, monuments pop out pale like ghosts from the trees and shrubs. Severe grey concrete monoliths ribboned with strips of *kanji*, natural stone standing bold, unmovable. Sculpted willowy woman with a delicate deer by her side. Lion's head fountain spouts continuous streams. Coins glint through the clear water. We find a bench, share a smoke. As the sun goes down, the shadows from the A-Bomb Dome stealth across the grass, part of the river, the holes of the windows blacken so no light gets out at all.

Glow of cigarettes spark the night. We don't leave right away. It's cool, the flutter of voices and bark of laughter punctuates the black. Birds flit, sing to each other.

Stillness sets my legs straight out, toes hanging out of my sandals, even they feel relaxed, weary after cramped crunching on trains and taxis. Puff of pot floats by, aromatic.

“Smells good. Should we crash that party, track down the smoke?”

“Nah. They don’t want to hang out with gaijin.”

“I could get some for your mom. I think Muriel needs a puff.”

“My mom is driving me crazy. I wish she would relax.”

“She’s worried about you. God knows why.”

We don’t move for awhile, pass cigarettes back and forth. Breeze picks up, flips my hair around, and we curve to the hard slats of the bench beneath us. It is inscribed with the name of Naoto Yamamoto, a respected teacher and former resident of Nakajima. She was forty-three when she died.

DENE x

Na’kwoel was constantly smarting under the pain caused by the untimely death of his eldest son. Though he was now well advanced in years, he used to visit Chichanit’s lodge and reproach Chalh’tas with her crime, in which case blows would generally follow words, to all of which she had to submit, though the blows stoked her own rage.

One day, when she was stripping willow bark with a small stone knife, her father-in-law became so violent that, unable to stand his abuse any longer, she grabbed him by the hair, and, throwing him to the ground, stabbed him in the neck. Her knife broke in the old man’s collar bone before it could inflict serious injury, and Na’kwoel screams of pain brought Chichanit running, and he killed Chalh’tas on the spot with his bow point

*

Next morning Jack Johnson's mellifluous voice breezes in the background of the café. *On and on, on and on, on and on . . .* Dave and Muriel seem to have recovered, clear eyed, buttering their toast. Muriel looks at Shannon intently, as if trying to glean some secret she knows the answer to. Best to be quiet, her firm even mouth seems to say. When Shannon told Muriel she was going to Japan, her mother slapped her, marked her cheek like claws.

"Coffee's good! So girls, what's the plan?" Dave is handsome when he smiles.

An efficient waitress dressed in a faux Dutch uniform with an elaborate hat that looks like a folded diaper clears our table. She smiles, "good morning!"

"Museum and then Miyajima in the afternoon," I answer. Shannon is texting on her phone.

"Will we have time?" Muriel is hunched in her seat. The room is yellow, bright, stuffy, smells like sweet bread.

I am not rested. Even with the air conditioning I woke in a sweat and stared at the blank grey ceiling which was screening an internal war movie, wooden forts being defended, gun shots and whizzing axes. I watched daylight seep in white ghost fingers. Shannon didn't move in the next bed.

"Yeah, we should," Shannon answers curtly, flips her phone. "Let's get going."

Our café is in a *shotengai*, a covered shopping street. In Osaka, the *shotengai* at Namba feels like a surging carnival, a colourful roving shopping breathing being. Hiroshima crowds don't run in the same numbers and it feels like being in an atrium, rounded opaque awnings giving off a refracted greenish light.

Irashaimase! Irashaimase! Beautiful young girls in shops call out to us.

“It means welcome,” I say to Dave, who is walking beside me. Muriel and Shannon are in heated debate behind us. I can hear Shannon hiss, then yell “NO!”

“Mothers and daughters,” Dave says lightly and laughs.

We are nearing the end of the tunnel where the park opens up, a Saturday morning moving, milling landscape, groups of families festive with portable karaoke machines. Bash of drums and slash of guitar – two or three impromptu jam sessions crank the air. One singer is swiveling his hips like Elvis, his hair in a slick pompadour, bright red lipstick.

Dave is delighted. Muriel takes pictures of the A-Bomb Dome, asks us to stand in front of it. Cacophony seems to have erased the mood of last night. Earthy aroma of roasted nuts, moss-coloured *matcha* ice cream. We follow the crowds to the museum.

“What were you guys talking about?” I ask Shannon, as I dodge a huge pink Miss Kitty balloon.

“She wants me to come back home, get a job teaching in Toronto.”

“Why? You’re teaching now.”

“That’s what I told her. She’s never happy. Wants what she wants, you know? She was like that with my dad too.” Shannon’s father is remarried and lives in China with his second wife.

The museum is grey, sprawling blocks, flat-roofed, like a spread out accordion, slatted sections with brief black windows. At the entrance a picture of licking flames takes up the entire wall. Orange red yellow daubs and gashes. Spattered spilled and splayed like flesh.

“That was painted by a survivor,” says the cashier brightly and hands me my ticket.

Inside there’s a slab of stone emblazoned with the shadow of an incinerated body. Those closest to the hypocenter combusted instantly, leaving black imprints and ash. Behind glass, torn and burned school uniforms, books, crushed eye glasses. Framed letters from the Japanese government pleading for an end to the war. Pictures painted by survivors of naked bodies, tongues bursting. There was no water. Thirst was so intense that people threw themselves in wells, off bridges into the river circling the park. Skin peeling off in whole sheets like puff pastry. Accounts from the survivors, translated, etched in vellum, accompanied by broad charcoal strokes of leaning naked bodies.

As we near the end, Shannon realizes that we’ve lost Muriel and we back track to find her sitting on a bench, weeping. We circle her, shielding her from stares. Dave is as shocked as we are.

“I don’t know,” she cries in a high voice that croaks in a sob. “I can’t imagine how horrible it would be to lose. . .” People pass by, too polite to stop but I can tell they’re listening. “To lose a child. How horrible.” We are near the exhibit with the children’s clothes, blasted book covers.

“Muriel, you’re exhausted. Let’s go back to the hotel,” says Dave. She doesn’t look at any of us, pulling her face together after its collapse, determined, smoothing out wrinkled thoughts.

“No. Let’s go to the island. I need to get out of here.” Grown up voice again with forced cheer, which does not inform her weary laboured walking. Shannon hands her a napkin to dry her eyes.

“What a place,” Dave says as we walk toward the bridge to our hotel, hoping to open up the conversation, deflect from the outburst. He may have a knack for making light of things. The path is less crowded than when we came, the bands have packed up.

“It was grim,” I say, thinking of all the survivors, talking to translators, the wrenching of words, images seared to their insides. Primal, unbearable heat. “How can you not remember it and carry on?”

“I guess you cannot not remember,” Shannon adds. We stop for *matcha* ice cream. “Does that make any sense?” We laugh but it takes awhile to shake it off, like the morning after a bad dream, wanting the familiarity of your room to crowd out the unrest that came from somewhere. A little boy’s jacket, a little girl’s skirt.

We get directions to Miyajima from Kimi, a clerk at our hotel. She has very thin, fine hair that frames her narrow face, tiny curved shoulders huddled in a cardigan, her narrow fingers point at the red *torii* on the map and trace backwards to our hotel. A streetcar will take us there. We catch it here, and she points to a tiny spot in a myriad of lines, marks it with her pink pen.

“You will find it, no problem,” she smiles.

“Can we take the map?”

“Of course,” and she hands it to me, bows slightly.

Although Shannon and I are famous for getting on the wrong trains and not noticing for several stops – stories which we regaled her mother with – we are allowed to do the navigating. Probably because Dave and Muriel don’t want to think.

“Things all cleared up now?” I ask.

“Who knows. What’s with the public meltdown? Is she trying to guilt me?”

From the immaculate streetcar windows Hiroshima peeps out in carefully cultivated beauty, flashes of tankers on a choppy sea. New housing areas open up outside the downtown core, chunks of ripped up earth covered over quickly in concrete, paved roads. Tiny perfect cars in the driveways. We pass a school that is playing children's songs on the outdoor PA system, high pitched clear voices float through some open windows. In my guide book the Shinto temple on Miyajima is built on wooden pillars, resting on the lap of the sea.

"We should go for a swim," I suggest to Shannon. I want to get away from Dave and Muriel. It has been uncomfortable being in a family dynamic that is not my own.

Streetcar weaves and climbs nubby green hills. Industrious caterpillar about to shed its passengers at the ferry dock. A young gaggle of girls giggles at the back, light tittering laughter. Afternoon heat dumbs us down. Muriel is sleeping in her seat.

"Great idea. They can shop for awhile."

My legs are sticking to my seat and I have to slowly unglue them. The ferry is a welcome, breezy boat and I lean over the metal railing, trying to catch a glimpse of the torii like some beacon. My guidebook says the torii is a traditional Japanese gate most commonly found at the entrance of a Shinto shrine. It symbolically marks the transition from the profane to sacred.

.Salt air reminds me of home and for a moment sadness mars the moment; I want the familiar, to feel snug instead of wide open.

The ferry grunts and puffs and sways off to the island and when we arrive the *torii* is as magical as the book, floating on the sea though its foundations go deep. Shinto shrine has light *tatami* rooms that smell like wheat, lined up against each other like secret

compartments. Incense circles in the corners. We walk on the wooden slats, bright orange beams reflect off Shannon's sunglasses in blobs.

"Think about walking out here every morning with your java!" I say, enchanted.

We find some concrete steps that we can jump off of near a little beach at the end of the shopping street. A well dressed little boy is picking up pebbles, dropping them in his mother's lap, one by one.

"We can change into our suits at a restaurant bathroom when we have lunch."

"Does anyone swim here? I don't see anyone swimming? What if we're not allowed to?" Suddenly, Shannon is apprehensive.

We have to go swimming, I've decided, that it is necessary at this time to feel clean. The shopping street on the island is an elegant shanty town selling rice cakes, ice cream, paper fans painted blue green outlining thin white cranes. Smell of roasted sesame seed, a dry green mixed with salt.

"Come on. No one will stop us. What will they do?"

DENE xi

He could feel his end coming and he told his people that at the time of his death the mountain Na'kal, which rose on the eastern shore of Stuart Lake, would dance in his honour. It was an agreement he made with the mountain for his long life. A spur of the mountain fell into the water, just as he himself fell to the earth.

*

Water laps past my knees and the roundish stones rub my feet. The *torii* looms in front of me and I think briefly of swimming to it. Shannon is splashing beside me, “Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink,” she calls out to me. Sounds recede and I think of the Shinto priests listening to the rush and suck of water as they go to sleep, when they wake up. From here, there is no Hiroshima, just the mountainous island behind us, the jagged Japanese coast where a warlord decided to build a city. When the water reaches the bottom of my chin, I submerge myself and then let the salty sea lift me back up, resting my feet above water. Blue sky opens up, unbounded, swirls of grayish cloud like smoke drift past the horizon and show up, I am sure, of the other side of the world, which would be home.

DENE xii

Chinlac chief Khadintel was a respected man who had two wives and told stories of his ancestors to his many children. Strong warrior, brave, a graceful dancer. He had killed an equally respected warrior from the Chilcotin clan some time back. Chinlac villagers heard rumors of revenge, of marauders that would come to the village. They talked about it with fear, like a coming storm. What would they do when the avengers arrived? They prepared, made bows and arrows and armour, waves of the choppy lake slapped the bottoms of their repaired canoes. They prayed and waited, hoping that the reprisal would not come. And then one day the marauders came, a large group of Chilcotin warriors paddled in from the south, armed and ready in sturdy canoes.

*

Day we go in to Chinlac the morning pours, doesn't let up till we start at eleven a.m. and the muddy road to the trail is flanked by excavators, fallers, trailers for the loggers to fill up on coffee.

Peter in the back seat with his white-haired dog Phoebe built the trail in years ago. Fit and sixty-one, still a beaming boy scout passionate about beauty the earth shows. He wants to reveal it, clear away tangled brush and muddled minds. Hatchet sticking out of his canvas backpack is for hacking the small stuff; there has been a lot of blow down in the past few blustery months. Though it is summer, sun has yet to warm the earth and water floats on top of the soggy soil, waiting to sink in. Janice and I are in recovery from a late night with wine at the campfire, when she decided to join me.

"Take two ibuprofen and drink a ton of water before bed and I'll tap on your window in the morning," I told her. And it worked, minimal headache, though the scratching of a pack rat skimmed the edge of sleep. Thought it was under the bed, but it was beneath the floor of the cabin, trying to find a way in.

Sign for the provincial parking lot, brown with white carved letters, is pounded to a pine tree. Parking lot is mush. When I pull in, Peter says I should turn the car around; if anything happens we want to be sure we can get out fast. He is matter of fact, pointing out survival strategies natural to a forester. He gathers his maps, shows me the squiggly trail. I stare at it blankly, anxious to get going. It's a two hour hike under the best of conditions, which we do not have. So he rolls them up, leaves them in the back. Later, I will look at them and wonder what squiggly lines we actually did trace through the bush.

"I forgot my lunch!" he cries out.

“That’s okay. We’ve got bologna sandwiches, some cantaloupe...” says Janice. A lab tech, mother of three, practical, enthusiastic, she is prepared. She even brought foam bug dope you can spread on your face, the back of your hands. Before we start, Peter combs his perfectly cut white hair and pulls on a Norwegian knit toque. He shows us his sensible wool pants, orange rain coveralls, mirrored compass. I am in jeans, rain gear and ankle length hiking boots; Janice in running shoes, Cleveland Indians ball cap perched on her head. We are completely soaked within the first five minutes, edging around deep mud pools that inhabit the path. Bush is lush, much more than last summer when the dry heat scorched the green to a mottled brown. Looked like disease but it was just thirst.

DENE xiii

Chief Khadintel was not at the village when the Chilcotin arrived on the shores of the lake. He had left early in the morning before the village had woken to inspect snares further up the Nechako River. He liked the stillness of the dawn, the sound of his footsteps soft on the earth. Violent avengers did not wait for him to return, they annihilated the village with vengeance. Hatchets and arrows flying, panicked thud of feet, hands and knees pummeling the earth. Terrified, a few young men ran away to the surrounding forest, in search of their chief. They came across him on the banks of the river and Khadintel could tell by their stricken faces that the Chilcotin had come and he knew they had come for him.

“I am the one they want, you must run back to the forest to save your lives. I alone ought to die.”

*

Through the thin stands sprouts of new trees cover the earth and a full throated creek rushes clear and cold. “We used to portage a seventy pound canoe down this path,” Peter tells us. First part of the trail is a road that meets and then follows the swollen Nechako, leading to a switch back up a ridge to an eskers, he tells us.

“Do you know what an esker is?” he calls over his shoulder. Dollar size leaves flip silver sides in the breeze. Rain cloud hovers; I hope it will hold. I don’t know what an esker is but it is a beautiful word, like a baby Eskimo.

He doesn’t wait for a response. He is spouting knowledge, unstoppable: *An Esker is a long winding ridge of sand and stratified gravel which occurs in glaciated and formerly glaciated regions of Europe and North America. Eskers are frequently several kilometres long and have a peculiar uniform shape.*

Phoebe trots ahead, follows scents off the trail but always comes back. She is silent, steady. I am always relieved to have dogs around, a kind of sonar for what lies ahead, though some say they bring back bears. When we reach the Nechako, pink and yellow ribbons are tied to trunks. Pinks are Peter’s and yellows are from a friend with a GPS, I gather from his conversation, mainly with Janice.

“I’ve been doing this for years, ladies, and I know the best way in and out. Not always the fastest. GPS’ll tell you to cut clear through,” he explains but I barely follow through the exertion of trying not to slip in the pools that widen we walk.

We stop on a ridge and the river, twice its normal size, is languid, braiding ribbons bubbling brown sugar. Across from us is an abandoned ferry dock, white platform still half in the water, half on shore. Ferry brought miners and foresters to work

and it cut down on bridge building, of which there never was one. Grass on the landing is long and leaning from weight of water. I want to stay longer but the mosquitoes descend in a merciless haze. Janice and I move towards the trail but Peter stands behind us, a half dozen mosquitoes feasting on his face. He wipes them away in a bloody swipe.

“What are foresters like,” I ask. Peter has been building trails, planning logging roads for years, mainly on his own. “Foresters are individuals. Independent. Bit on the extreme. On both ends, I’d say. We like people. We don’t like people.” He smiles at me, gentle misanthrope. When I asked him to take us, he was reluctant but then he relented. “If it’s important to you, I will take you,” he said, like he needed some time to gather himself, not for the bush, but for us.

DENE xiv

Khadintel could see the canoes of the avenging warriors rounding the curve of the river, slowing at the sight of him, sudden war cries coming from the dark of their open mouths. Terrified, the young men scrambled up the bank but the chief stayed to face his enemy, his feet and body doing a crazy dance, nimbly dodging all the arrows whizzing by. Khalhpan, the captain of the war party, stopped the attack. He didn’t want to waste more arrows. What if the Chinlac chief was charmed, watched over by strong spirits?

“Khadintel, you have the reputation of being a man and I see you are a good dancer. You have danced for your life once. If you are a man, dance for me again.”

*

Submerged trail means we have to bushwhack to get to the steep ridge on our left. And we plough through, Peter leading the way. Undergrowth is light, you can see ahead but it hides slippery trees you can fit your hands around, black from rot but still solid obstacles. We huff up and down, following what becomes a kind of slough beside us, accompanied by a trill that declares *I am here*.

“What’s that bird?” I ask Janice and Peter at a brief stop. Slough around the eskers is rounding a bend and it looks like we’ll have to backtrack to where we started to reach the ridge.

“Don’t know my birds, just the bush,” Peter says. Off the trail we see things. Half-eaten deer announced by smell of decay, ripped in half by a hungry bear. Curve of jaw and hollow eye socket, rounded ribs in one spot, bent legs with bits of hide clinging in another.

“Sounds like a chickadee,” Janice says.

“I read somewhere that chickadees only sing in isolation,” I say. I’ve seen pictures; they are full-breasted, black-capped, aware.

“Something has been sleeping here,” Peter points to a round space crushed by weight.

“Bear sleeping close to the food?” I say. A pause and no one answers. Raw death sleep satiated hunger.

“I’ve lived here for twenty-five years and this is the first time I’ve bushwhacked!” Janice breaks the silence. Sweating, smiling face, rosy cheeked, straight brown bangs plastered to her wide forehead. Wanted to climb Fraser Mountain, but any adventure would do, she told me, throw herself unplanned into the thick, see what comes out. Peter

is her neighbour, she waves at him when she goes jogging but he doesn't remember her. All of us have fallen, lurching off slippery wood into prickly bushes, getting back up, wetter, muddier. Forty minutes of backtracking and finally the steep side of ridge rises like a green wall.

"At least you can see what's up ahead here. In Haida Gwaii, salal was so massive you didn't know the direction you were going when you came out," I say. We have all wanted to turn back at some point, but not at the same time. "My instinct was to head for the ridge, skip all this," Peter said, surveying the swamp we had slogged around and through. I had wanted to follow the path, so I could come back another time, know my way, but water had forced us to improvise.

Peter showed us his scar, jagged red indent on his right forearm like the sharp curve of the trail we were taking. "Nearly lost my arm, chainsaw skidded off a log and cut to the bone. I was by myself, half hour from the road." Though we're up out of the muck, ridge isn't as dry as it looks, I keep skidding. "So I hold my arm up, tie a rag at the elbow. Blood is running down my arm, my side, filling up my boots. I want to lie down, feel light headed, but I keep moving. Phoebe was with me."

DENE xv

To show that he was in control of his emotions, that the fear and pain of death could not overcome him, the Chief danced on the beach of the river, but this time a traditional dance of the Carrier people, slow and rhythmic his feet touched the earth and he sang in a cracked voice. He was sure that he was going to die and he thought how he was not prepared, that he was a selfish man. The warriors watched and jeered at him,

trying to break his spirit but as he continued to dance it came to him that if he survived, his job was to gather the bones of the dead and heal the earth as best he could.

“You are a strong man,” Khalpan said. He stood in the canoe, his arms across his chest. “We will leave you with your life.”

*

ATV tracks suddenly emerge and we cheer, trudging turns to walking and we start to look around. Bloated brown Nechako just to the right of the Slough of Despond now below us.

“I got to the truck keeping my arm up, and I called the ambulance when I got close enough, using the radio phone. Told them get here quick or I’m going to die. I got in and drove straight, that’s why I told you to turn around. Never know what’s going to happen.”

Above the tree line and still no birds. Eskers is the next winding stage, slippery, like walking on the back of a snake. Peter says it’s about two thirds of the way there. Four different environments take us to the site, he tells us. First, boreal forest along the creek, then the meadow by the river, then the eskers and finally Chinlac, which is on a level plain thirty feet above the Stuart.

“Ambulance met me on the way to Fraser Lake. By then my boots were full of blood and I tried to tourniquet my arm. Lucky I didn’t or I would’ve lost it. We sped to emergency and the attendants were so quiet, I think I was yelling at them. The doctor, I still remember his face, he was tired, you know? And he looked at me like *O my God* but he saved my life.” Halted suddenly by gratitude, he stops and looks over his shoulder at

us, blue boyish eyes. Sun starting to warm the edges of the day, we shuck a layer of coats, rain pants. Air some skin. Lean over trail edges around a sheer drop. River fills the whole frame, smudged green reflects on the brown. Peter takes our picture but it doesn't turn out; we are blocked by light, just an outline of bulk and smiles.

He tells us that we are walking through a burn that looks recent, trunks tarred up to the edge of our ribs. But it was four years ago. Earth has not recovered. Spindly growth doesn't absorb our voices; they fly like arrows in the silence.

"Notice anything different?" Peter quizzes. Janice sees it right away. "The burn stops at the edge!"

"Yes! The burn stops at the edge, and that's where the trail is, where it always has been. Carrier feet made the original trail that we're walking on." Burn is the natural border then as it is now. We are finally on the path and it feels like hauling on to shore after a long swim. Peter says something like you can still see footprints if you brush away leaves and topsoil, careful excavation revealing scuffs of toes and heels. Raw years marked with fire, tough feet holding to the edge.

DENE xvi

As the Chilcotin departed, Khadintel, shaking badly, forced himself to stand straight as he could. Even so, his shoulders sagged like an old cow. But he howled his vengeance, that one day he would come like a nightmare to their village and avenge their marauding and the Chilcotin again jeered and laughed at him. The young men came silent as ghosts out of the forest and they all returned to the village. Everywhere there were broken bodies and the earth was bathed in blood. There were two long, sturdy poles

planted in the ground and on thick forked sticks the bodies of children hung, ripped open and spitted through turned out ribs like drying salmon.

*

Fork in the road down a steep hill gives us pause. Yellow and pink ribbons separate, go their own way. I am really starving now. “How long till we get there?” I am plaintive.

“Thirty minutes from here if we take the pink line across the burn. Heard the yellow line is full of blow down, it’ll slow us down. Though it’s by the river, way prettier.” He shows us the confluence of the sleepy skein of the Nechako slipping into the muscling Stuart; two rivers, negotiating curves and obstacles at their own speed, converging in a circling maelstrom.

“Why do they move so differently? A river’s a river, right?” I ask. No one answers. We all turn left to cut across; fastest is best this time. “This trail was done by GPS, should take us pretty close to the site. It’s not what I built, what I made took time, I considered the beauty, what was easier going in, coming out.” Peter’s voice is indignant, that the best way has been so quickly side tracked by a machine. His boyscout energy is unflagging as ours starts to, out of hunger, weariness.

Land flattens, desert plain offering brief oasis. Death pulls stronger than life here, surrender to enormous force. Undertow of silence sharpens thin blades of grass tufting, clumps of scraggly growth. Earth listless, hasn’t recovered. Bright pink ribbon flashes in the blackened grey stalks, leafless branches. Sky brings heat on a frigid wave, season seems confused. Beneath us, dirt hardened by thousands of footsteps.

“See these holes?” Peter points out deep indents, about two feet down and around, packed close together, pockmarks on the level ground. There are 2200 of them, he tells us. “People from Chinlac smoked their food and buried it here. Generations used the same spot.” We are cutting through, so we’ll miss most of them, he says. If we circle the perimeter, we would lose our breath counting.

DENE xvii

Khadintel carried out his fate, he burned all the bodies and saved the bones, placing them into leather satchels for the surviving relatives of the victims. For three years he sang and prayed and danced on the earth of the village, trying to bring it back to life. But his heart was full of pain and rage at his loss and he could not rest until the massacre was avenged. In the spring of the third year, he prepared to journey to Khalpan’s village with a war party built from allied bands in the area, from Stoney Creek, from Natleh. They travelled deep into Chilcotin territory and passed the night in a terrace above the long row of lodges where the Chilcotin lived. Though his men slept well in the dark, Khadintel lay awake and watched the stars of the night shift above him, knowing that if he slept he would have the nightmare of despair, of torn flesh and howling dogs that had tormented him for three years. The next day the Carrier soldiers moved stealthily through the forest to attack.

*

Final pink ribbon takes us to the edge of the swirling Stuart. Dead grass, blackened rotting trunks circle around us. Opposite bank is high and green, looks healthy

in comparison. "Where do we go from here?" I ask. Rush of river is welcome after eerie hush.

"Chinlac is down river, ten minutes or so," Peter is already scrambling over a log, bedraggled, we follow. All I can think about is food. Should have eaten more this morning but all I could handle was coffee and a bun. Silence spreads over us from the clearing in a mute wave. A hollow space, a vacuum the size of a baseball field. Knee high grass. Yellow heads of wild daisies. At the centre a skeleton teepee stands, dessicated sage hanging from a string. Heading towards it, our feet feel out the edges of ghost buildings.

"Thirteen houses were built here, along the edge of the bank," Peter calls out.

"I thought the Carrier were nomadic," I say.

"They were and they weren't. I don't know. Maybe after the massacre no one wanted to live here anymore, they became nomadic."

"What's with the outhouse?" Janice says. Dark green, modern, it looks odd, plopped down.

"It's for Carrier ceremonies. There're some white boards in the bush, they make them into bleachers."

Chinlac was a thriving community for a thousand years before the massacre. A Ming dynasty coin was found in the dirt. Arrow tips, tools, made by knowing hands. No digging happens now; the Carrier won't allow it. Enough has been uncovered and land has gone back to sleep. Finally, we settle on the banks and Janice unpacks lunch, squished sandwiches, crushed cantaloupe. We are ravenous.

“Many people who come here say this is a sacred place,” Peter says. I’ve heard this before – how people are moved by it, like you are in a temple or a church, some kind of holy place. Across the river tall dead trees gnarled branches wave at us.

“Why aren’t there any nests there?” Janice says. We sit eating in restful silence. Wind blows wisps of grass between us.

Peter talks about how the Carrier kids in town should help him make a better trail instead of playing video games, watching TV. This is their heritage, after all. He tells us that in his yard he has cut huge swathes of branches from a beautiful spruce near the top and the bottom in the Carrier way, so he can see what’s coming the way they did. Dried grey wood carried by the river collects at the tip of a narrow island just below us.

DENE xviii

Khalhpan was not in the village that day, but his younger brother, ‘Kun’qus, heard the marauders approaching as he was checking salmon traps and rushed back to the village. Kind, stubborn, strong, thick legs, round belly, his footsteps thundered on the earth. Rumors that had spread through the Chinlac village before its own demise had then spread through the Chilcotin village. ‘Kun’qus was wise and fortified his house. His first wife plastered the walls, watched over his adored son but his second slave Carrier wife was sullen, threw stones and sticks at him. ‘Kun’qus did not sleep well the night before, feeling an uneasy sense of eyes watching from the forest, silent and cunning. As he approached his home, passing his Carrier wife crying and running to her people, he ran after her with his war club in hand, but he gave up and returned to the fight and to protect his wife and young son.

*

Peter gets up to look for another trail out besides the one we took. He has been here many times and talks through the silence, so I'm grateful for the moment of quiet, a full stomach. Think about the eyes that watched the bank I'm looking at, watched the wood gather, the ones who named this place Chinlac.

"So. Was it worth it?" I ask Janice. We share a chocolate bar, melted a bit but still crunchy. "Absolutely! It's beautiful but so quiet. Weird quiet."

"I know. No birds."

"And no birds sang," she adds, like it is the name of a song, or book.

I get up to walk around, get a feel of the weight. Try to discern the pull. Trees only grow so close to the clearing, then stop. My feet feel out the edges of things, shapes of places that still take up space. When Peter was talking I thought I heard singing, a hearty male voice, but there was nothing when I paced the place. Maybe voices weave in when we're not really listening, subtle like grass binding with flowers.

Peter is back, talking to Janice when I return, triumphant with a rusted tin can in his hand. "I found a midden! Which is a nice word for garbage pile. This must have been Borden's stash. Probably a can of milk, you can see the punctures." Charles Borden was the archeologist who excavated the site in the 1950's, wrote a book, got famous. His book is lying on my living room floor, full of graphs and lists and maps.

"Follow me. I'll show you where we come in by canoe." Peter calls over his shoulder. We come across a stone just before the steep climb down to the water. A story is spelled out in Carrier shapes and symbols, round loops and straight backs. We stare at it dumbly. "English is on the other side!" Janice calls out.

“Here it says that the massacre was over women,” she says.

“I thought they had killed a chief,” I add. Stone says Chun-lac. “And it’s not Chinlac. We’ve been saying it wrong.”

DENE xix

‘Kun’qus’ wife sobbed as she helped him into his wooden warrior armour, the sleeveless moose skin tunic slathered with glue and gravel. Fighting back tears he watched his people fall, shooting arrow after arrow, he squeezed his son between his legs but an arrow struck the young boy in the heart. ‘Kun’qus fought the urge to lie down with his dead son, let the earth take them both. Carrier warriors set upon him like hungry dogs, but he held them off with a stone dagger, slicing the air. Then one Carrier warrior dodged his lance and held it, and the avengers swarmed him, clubbed him between the eyes, bludgeoned his body. Dead children were butchered and splayed on three poles instead of two and then the marauders left the village.

*

It’s too steep and we’re too tired to go down to the river. Launch area is submerged but Peter points it out anyway, it will emerge when the water stops swallowing. Coming by canoe is the ancient way, how it was done for hundreds of years. We would see Chinlac how the Carrier did, how their friends and enemies did, by climbing up the bank.

“That’s what the Chilcotin did,” I say. “Paddled in quietly, got out with their bows, arrows, spears. Probably smeared paint on their faces, braced themselves for war.

Just women and children were here, the men had gone fishing.” I stand on the edge, trying to imagine fierce warriors coming up the bank. Silence of shock, then running, screaming, some young men escaping the slaughter, trying to find their chief, Khadintel, whose misdeed was being avenged with such brutal force. Try to imagine Khadintel’s face changing as he sees them coming, alarm spreading through their lean limbs and into the ground.

Janice tells us it’s four and we should be heading back. Sun has relaxed, spread out across the whole sky. And we walk to where the emptiness meets the trees, from the in between into the world again. There is no singing, bold voice swallowed up or stubbornly silent. We clamber over the same trees to get to the first pink ribbon. Peter points across a sand bar in the middle of the river. “That’s where Kadintel, the Carrier chief, danced for his life.” See him dancing and crying, dancing and crying, the Chilcotin chief taunting him. But were the men quiet or jeering who watched safe in the canoes? I can’t hear them. They had just flayed flesh, torched dried hides, dragged off young women to be their slaves, killed the old ones. Long history. Sudden stop.

DENE xx

Returning from his fishing trip, Khalpan sensed an unnatural silence as he approached the village that turned him cold, but then panicked yelp and howl of dogs crying for their masters broke through the air. Carrier had come, hunting for him. Smell of smoke singed hair hovered above the clearing of the village, splashed with carnage and blood. Brother half swallowed by the earth, family dead, ripped arms and torsos strewn by vengant storm. Lonely daughter taken as a slave. Greatly shaken, he set out with the

other survivors to pursue the Carrier. No stealth in his shaking legs, feet dragging, clumsy. At a fork in the river the warriors were preparing to leave. They all stopped to stare at the chief, hollow-eyed, but it was Khadintel who stepped forward to meet him.

“They say that you are a man, and you call yourself a terrible warrior,” Khadintel said in Chilcotin. “If you are, come to meet me and do not retreat.”

*

Way back is always shorter than the way in. Body eases up and down, jagged corners become gentle curves. Sun helps, brightens things.

“The massacre happened in 1745. After all the buildings and bodies were burned, the village was abandoned,” I tell Janice. Peter is up ahead, he has told us all of his concerns and is quiet on the way back.

“It’s strange that it is so empty,” I say. “After all that time, something should have grown there. Nature always takes over.”

“Nothing will ever grow there,” she says, like she is sure. Passionate gardener, she knows more about growing things than me.

We stay on the high ridge back, edge around the Slough of Despond. I have given up on following the trail – I know it is waiting to be revealed when the water goes. And I trust Peter, he is gallant, apologizing for taking us through ATV tracks, deer trails and Carrier footsteps until he decides to check his compass, make sure we hit the wide trail near the Nechako.

“Do you know what a culturally modified tree is?” Peter asks. We have stopped by a spruce with a broken branch. Mosquitoes dive to our exposed skin.

“I don’t know!” I cry out.

“Yeah, the mosquitoes are bad,” he takes another bloody swipe at his face.

“Anything that has been changed by people. See this branch? It was broken on purpose to mark a direction in the trail. Carriers did it all the time.”

“Like trees become part of the path,” I say, wanting to be a good pupil, but Peter has charged ahead. “What hasn’t been changed by people,” I tell Janice. Probably every step we are taking has been taken before. No part of here is untouched.

DENE xxi

Khalpan moved on shaky legs, strength seeping out, gush of blood thundering his temples. Enemy stood still, flexed, glaring and he could not face them, inched back to the forest, crying.

“Now, Khalhpan,” Khadintel, triumphant, bellowed, “when, all alone against your people, I was cornered on the river bank and you wanted to kill me, I danced for you. If you are a man, dance now for me, as I did for you.”

*

When we finally make it back to my car Peter has declared our trip the worst ever in all his years. Day is marked by dubious honour.

“You were troopers, stellar, I tell you,” he says and we laugh, relieved to be sitting, safe from the bugs. Phoebe is huddled on her blanket, her white hairs are floating with the dust in the waning light. It’s 6:30, two and a half hours back but it felt faster, like we were helped or hurried along. Heading back to the highway, lemon fields of alfalfa

wave to us. At Peter's house, he shows us the tree we can see through, cars speeding around a curve below. Canoes and kayaks in his garage.

"Don't have a car. I walk or ride my bike everywhere, so Phoebe can come with me." Smiles his boyish grin, goes into the dark of his house.

DENE xxii

Khalpan stood on the beach and remembered all his relatives and friends gone and his daughter dragged into slavery. "Please spare my daughter's life!" he howled. Wracking grief, wretching, he fell to his hands and knees. Silent Carrier watched, no birds flew or sang over head. Sobbing, Khalpan hauled himself up, faced his enemy.

Khadintel, scornful, jeered: "Khalhpan, we sought revenge upon the men of your village to repair the great wrong you set on us, but you weep like a woman, so I will let you live. Go in peace, and weep to your heart's content."

*

Around the campfire at Fraser Lake, my feet drying on hot stones, I roll out the maps. One of them is by Father Morice, famous oblate of Fort St James who spoke Carrier, Chilcotin, wrote the story of the Chinlac massacre. Map is dated 1907. Dot of Fort George. In random spots, words written: *light soil, natural prairies, undulating with small meadows*. Janice and I hunch over, hot dogs in hand, we find Chinlac written in fine hand, just down from *wavy rapids*, on the *swift and shallow* Stuart River. Indian trails traced in perforated lines. Sun sets, map squiggles start to fade but I find a little horseshoe above Summit Lake, where he wrote *Stuart River springs from here from the*

ground about knee wide. I roll it up, watch the flames descend to cinders, cold nipping at my back. Walk weary to bed.

Lucy dreams killer whales with shark teeth slice the lake. For three nights now naked fish deer children fight for shore. She sees Nigel, hears him calling, waving his arms, arrows strewn around his wounded waist. In his eyes pained, deep offering. When the lake dries up starts to burn, she wakes Toby. *Let's get out of here.* Drums beat the fist of invasion. The engine struggles, wheels roll, mountain heaves. Screeching birds claw at the space between her eyes, where the nightmare peaks. Killer whale turns reptile talons tear the earth. What she dreamed before was shadows on grass, effortless flight. They sleep on an abandoned logging road, crossed by fallen trees. She wakes up rolls over drags souls like sacks of sand to the shore. The dream won't leave the lake.

The Earth Remembers Everything is open-ended in the sense that its focus is the intimate, spontaneous experience of place. I hope to have captured the exhilaration and confusion of the events surrounding these journeys, as well as the people I shared them with. I've tried to write as close to what I felt as possible. By exploring my experience of place through massacre sites, I hope to give my readers an opportunity to think about their own relationship to place. Maybe some of the questions that I asked myself will arise: What is it about certain places that we are drawn to? What is its essence? The writers I most admire use words to evoke characters and events that have a powerful effect on the imagination. I believe that the goal of any writer is to let their readers come to their own conclusions. This has been the aim of my thesis, and I hope I have achieved this.

My years abroad were essential to my development as a person and as a writer. Coming full circle has changed my perspective. There is a term called ground-truthing that scientists and technicians use when they gather data, measurements and observations to give a fuller, more realistic view of information. This term feels apt in the writing of my thesis, as I used actual experience – field work – viewed from the perspective of my original place. I wrote about travelling from the firm stance of home. This grounding has added depth to my work as I sorted through my experiences. Coming home and writing has been my own ground-truthing.

One central discovery that has come from this process is that place is central to my work. Place is the main character; that which holds us and forms us. Place has power; it is its own entity, and it has its own story. In my thesis, place is also the earth; they are interchangeable. Writing about massacre sites made me think about place as a body with

its own surface of skin covering all the layers underneath. I saw the surface of the earth as the skin of our own bodies, with our insides – though intimately us – as unseen and unknowable. We live on the surface of things. We see ourselves and others from the outside, but there is an on-going dialogue, a conversation that we have with ourselves. When we travel, that conversation becomes engaged in place, and the experience takes us to a deeper level.

I mentioned in my introduction that place is narrative. Obliterated sites are a pause or cease in conversation, and there are places in us where that is true as well. In writing my thesis, I came to see the earth and our bodies as connected. Our bodies remember everything. The earth remembers everything. The special power of obliterated sites is that on some level, they speak the same language as our own desert places. By exploring the wounds of the earth, I explored my own. The process of writing has been cathartic and transformative because of this, but it was not what I set out to do. I was drawn to this topic because of a question. Why do I want to write about this? I was interested, which was the most important thing, as it carried me through the writing, which was really an uncovering – an excavation. I found my voice and was able to speak the language of these places.

As a writer, trying to create a ‘true’ and ‘real’ piece of work seems possible only from using a variety of perspectives. Each one reveals its own bit of insight. By weaving different genres and experiences, with my body squarely in place, I believe that some small part of the essence of these places, mixed in with my own, has been revealed. Looking back on the process of my graduate work, I see the combination of research and

thought around travel writing and place theory as sifting through and shaping my work. It is at this intersection that *The Earth Remembers Everything* was created.

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