

#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER
SHARON BUTALA

10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH A NEW PREFACE

The
Perfection
of the
Morning

AN APPRENTICESHIP IN NATURE

The Perfection of the Morning

An Apprenticeship in Nature

Sharon Butala

 HarperCollins e-books

To Those Who Knew This Land in Ancient Times

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PREFACE TO THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

When I published this book in 1994, although its writing felt necessary to me, I had no great hopes for it. I was happy that it was being published, but I rather expected that people simply would not believe what I had to say, despite my recounting of the long travail during which I learned it. That ten years later this book is still in print is a welcome surprise, not only because most books go out of print soon after publication, but because, just as this book spoke to certain Canadians in 1994, it must be continuing to speak to others. I venture to say that it perhaps opened up possibilities for other authors who wanted to write about nature in a new way—new to our generation, although not new in the English-language world of letters—that is, about the way nature affects us all spiritually, about its inexplicable power over the senses, about the way it enters one's dreams at night and opens the psyche to a new and profound realm, about how we need it for much more than a source of livelihood or for recreation. Humans wholly severed from the land, as many North Americans are in danger of becoming, have lost a dimension of their very humanity.

By the time this new edition is published I will have been here on the land in southwest Saskatchewan just short of thirty years. The loneliness I speak of in this book has abated, the deep spiritual crisis has ended, or at least, mitigated enough that life is mostly enjoyable. If none of these things had happened to me, I would not have had to delve so deeply inside myself for sustenance: I would not have become a writer. But my profound respect for the land grows stronger, even as I age and find it more difficult to spend the hours that I used to walking on the prairie. My humility in the face of the vast knowledge about land of the Aboriginal people of the Great Plains continues to grow, and my regret that we took so long to hear what they were trying to tell us grows in proportionate measure.

It was my husband's dream that his thirteen thousand acres of unplowed native grass, where most of this book takes place, would remain in a natural state. In 1996 we made arrangements with the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Saskatchewan government, to make them the owners of what had been the Butala ranch. In 2003 and 2004, fifty head of pure blood Plains buffalo calves from the Elk Island Preserve, twenty-five males and twenty-five females, were introduced onto the ranch, now called The Old Man On His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area. Together with the prairie restoration efforts on the few plowed acres, Peter says what has happened is even more than he dreamt. We look forward to a peaceful old age together, filled with, instead of regret about what has been lost forever, some measure of satisfaction.

And yet, a part of me has great tenderness still for those early years when, in sometimes near-despair, or filled with awe, and often fear, I learned to walk the prairie, and to give myself over to its wonders.

Sharon Butala
The Frenchman River Valley
December 27, 2004

PREFACE

In 1976 when I was thirty-six years old I married my second husband, Peter, and came here to live on his ranch in the extreme southwest corner of Saskatchewan, just north of the Montana border. Although I'd been born in Saskatchewan and had lived here all but five years of my life, I had arrived in a landscape that, although I found it extraordinary, was not only unfamiliar to me, but of a kind I hadn't even known existed in this province. I hadn't studied it in school, since no early explorer had crossed it, no one going this far south, the miles and miles of open plains being as daunting as an ocean to a nineteenth-century traveler. In my car trips across the country I hadn't seen it, since no major highways went through its heart; everyone I knew holidayed either in the lake country of the north, or the Qu'Appelle Valley in the southeast, while southwest Saskatchewan, as far as I knew, had only the tiny man-made lake in the center of Cypress Hills Park, and no major river systems. Now it seems amazing that I knew nothing about a place that covers about 28,000 square kilometers, is five times the size of Prince Edward Island and slightly bigger than Vermont.

Southwest Saskatchewan is best grasped as part of the vast Great Plains of North America which extend north to Edmonton and south into Texas. It's a high plateau—the Butala ranch is at a typical one thousand meters—and it seemed from the first time Peter took me there that I knew this, as the terrain and even the air in some nebulous way seem to breathe of altitude. Its topography is low rolling hills and flat or sloping grassy areas cut here and there by coulees, chasms of varying sizes eroded by rain and meltwater in which shrubs or, in the larger ones, trees, often coniferous, grow. There are virtually no trees growing naturally elsewhere—a nearby municipality is called Lonetree—and no other shelter. Coulees provide the only refuge from the insistent, inescapable burn of the summer sun or from winter blizzards, and are havens for deer, rabbits and other small animals and birds. They are always fascinating places to explore since their steep clay sides provide dens for bobcats or coyote families and high places for golden eagles to anchor their large, reusable nests built of sticks.

The climate is one of extremes, with temperatures ranging from minus fifty Celsius to highs of plus forty Celsius. A constant, steady wind in winter brings on blizzards of appalling severity and in the summer heat, tornadoes which, because of the thin and scattered population, usually do little damage, and are frequently not even reported. The severe climate I was used to as a native Saskatchewanian, but, also used to battling mountains of snow all winter, I was surprised to find that some winters, month after month, the pale ground, frozen hard as rock, would be covered by only the occasional skiff of thin, dry snow. In the early years, before I'd gotten used to the winters here, I found it depressing to look out my kitchen window and see, instead of fields of glistening snow shading from purple to blue to white to silver, dun-colored barrenness day after day all the long winter. But this area of the province is blessed with Chinooks, too, which blow in from Alberta now and then during the winter, their warm winds taking away what snow there is, and bringing sudden, springlike temperatures in the midst of the deepest cold.

As the American writer Wallace Stegner—a resident of Eastend (the town nearest us) from 1914 to 1920—has pointed out, the true West on both sides of the border is defined by its aridity, and in practical terms, settlement has always been determined by the availability of drinkable water, of a reliable supply for livestock, and sufficient moisture to grow crops. I didn't know it at the time, but the place I was about to call home is situated in the driest part of a region so dry the annual precipitation runs to only about thirty-one centimeters (twelve inches).

Water is indeed a scarce resource: the lack of it determines also the flora—species which conserve water, like cactus—the fauna—which must be able to go long distances for water, or to make do with little of it—and the livelihood of its inhabitants. After I'd been here for a while I began to sense that the constant worry about having enough of it for even the most basic needs also helps set the character of the people, for the older generation tends to be determined sometimes to the point of rigidity, having a touch of grimness which makes belly laughs fewer than rare, who instead find relief in a more reliable laconic, dry humor.

As in much of the true West, rivers are few, small and tend to run dry in drought years. South of the South Saskatchewan, the region's northern boundary, the only true river is the Frenchman, which runs out of the Cypress Hills, more or less southeasterly till it crosses the border into Montana near Val Marie, eventually emptying into the Missouri-Mississippi river system. The Frenchman was once called the "White Mud," after the outcroppings of high-quality white clay that gleam in the sun on bare cliffs along the river valleys. To this day that clay is mined in the Ravenscrag valley running west of Eastend, and carted off daily to Medicine Hat where it is turned into irrigation tiles and sundry other ceramic utensils and vessels.

Before the advent of settlers or even ranchers, the river was called the Frenchman in the United States and the White Mud in Canada, and on early maps (I have seen one dated 1875), there was a gap between the two. When it was demonstrated that they were the same river—how can I help but wonder who first made that trip of discovery, although his name is unrecorded?—the name was changed in Canada to the Frenchman. The other major streams are both called creeks: Swift Current Creek and the historic Battle Creek—"historic" because the Cypress Hills Massacre took place there in the spring of 1873, the event which finally brought the North-West Mounted Police to the West. During the worst drought years all three creeks may run dry, at least in places where there are no springs feeding them.

The area, in fact, had been designated historically as too dry for farming. It is part of the Palliser Triangle, a term not quite synonymous with southwest Saskatchewan, since the Triangle runs into southeastern Alberta. The area acquired this name through Captain John Palliser, an Irish army officer sent out by the British under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society in 1857 to survey some of the Canadian West as to its suitability for agriculture. His report, not published till 1869, described a triangular area having the American-Canadian border for its base between 100 and 114 degrees longitude, with its apex at 52 degrees latitude, including most, if not all, of southwest Saskatchewan unsuitable for agriculture.

But the Canadian government soon became eager to prevent Americans, whose policy of Manifest Destiny was causing them to look over the border with a grimly acquisitive eye, from simply riding their horses into this uninhabited area and calling it their own. Palliser's report was a deterrent to settlement for a while but in time, with the encouragement of others who traveled over and studied the same territory, bringing back more favorable reports (none of them, Palliser included, reaching as far south as where I sit writing), it was opened to farming regardless. Palliser's pronouncement, although an unwelcome and frequently maligned one, contains enough truth that it can't be erased, and to this day it hangs over the land.

The most striking geographical feature, and the one even I had heard about, is the Cypress Hills north of here, lying across the Alberta-Saskatchewan border and extending so far south and east as to account for Eastend's name. The hills peak at an extraordinary 1,392 meters, the highest point in Canada between the Rocky Mountains and a high point in Labrador. There are no cypresses in the Cypress Hills: the lodgepole pines which actually grow there were misnamed by the Métis, who used

the word to mean “jack pine.” Because of their straightness and height, these pines were used by the Natives as tepee poles.

Not only are the Hills beautiful but, together with a tip in the Wood Mountains about three hundred kilometers southeast, they are unique in the West. During the Pleistocene ten to twelve million years ago when glaciers scraped down this area, the highest part of the Hills remained above the level of the ice. To this day certain montane species of flora, which occur elsewhere only in the Rocky Mountains two hundred miles to the west, can be found there.

The climate and fauna of the Hills are different enough from the rolling grasslands that surround them; locally they are considered to be the showplace of the area. But familiar as I was with forest, the wooded Cypress Hills didn't hold nearly the appeal for me that the great sweeps of shortgrass prairie south of them did. Standing in a field of six-inch to foot-high grass, or driving down a road with the long fields opening out to each side of me ending in a low line of blue hills at the bottom of the sky, I felt I had at last been freed into the elements. It was as if places where I'd lived, the forests of my birthplace in the north, those of Nova Scotia, and the mountains and ocean of lower mainland British Columbia, were all merely mistakes of Nature. It seemed to me that I had at last found the one true landscape, the place where sun, moon and stars could shine free, lending their light to the pale grasses painting them gleaming apricot, gold, mauve, or rose. I had never seen such beauty.

I didn't have the slightest inkling of it that weekend almost eighteen years ago when I first saw this place, but I had arrived here at a turning point in its history. The last equally momentous turning point had occurred in the 1870s when the hundreds of thousands of buffalo that wandered here were hunted to virtual extinction. The loss of the base of the Native culture, especially of its principal food source, was in part responsible for the Cree and Plains Ojibwa finally agreeing in 1874 to sign Treaty Number Four, and the Blackfoot to sign Treaty Number Seven in 1877. Then the original, nomadic way of life led by the Plains' people for thousands of years came to a tragic end, and a new one, that of agriculture by Europeans, began.

The treaties removed Native people from the area, making it safe for ranchers, often American, to use it as grazing land for their great herds of cattle. Southwest Saskatchewan quickly became the home of famous, huge ranches: the Z-X (read as “zed bar x” or “zee bar ex” as its American owners would have pronounced it), the Turkey Track, the Matador, the Wallace and Ross spread, actually an Alberta ranch so enormous its leased land ran into Saskatchewan, and the T-Down—on part of which Peter and I now live and have our hay farm.

Gradually over the next twenty years the ranchers were forced to give way little by little to farmers. Today most of the vast stretches of shortgrass have been plowed up to grow crops, mostly durum and spring wheats, forever changing the appearance of the landscape, and of course providing the death knell, although other forces have been at work, too, for most of the ranches.

When I arrived here, the second period of major change was already poised to begin. Soon conditions came together—sufficient rain, a rise in wheat prices, benevolent government policies—which resulted in a sudden prosperity such as southwest Saskatchewan had never known, and which people saw as the fulfillment at last of the hopeful prophecies of those who lured settlers into this inhospitable country seventy-five years before. Nobody then had any idea that the bonanza would be only an ironic footnote to a much greater and more sorrowful, if still incomplete, metamorphosis. If during my first years here I often bitterly regretted my decision to come here to live, looking back, I would not now choose otherwise, not the least of the reasons being because of the privilege, however appalling at times, of being witness to the second tragic transformation.

Having made the fateful decision to throw up my former life in favor of a brand-new one, if in

the beginning I often found myself having a difficult, even painful time in finding a social footing and in feeling I could ever be a member of my new society of rural, agricultural people, in my awe at the beauty and openness of the landscape, I felt as if my soul had at last found its home. Slowly, through my joy in the beauty of this new landscape, I began to learn new things, to see my life differently. I began to realize how life for all of us in the West is informed and shaped by Nature in ways we don't even realize, much less notice consciously. Eventually, all that I was learning led to this book.

The other day a woman friend remarked how she struggled to make her life "congruent." I hadn't heard that term before, and psychobabble or not, it struck me as apt. It seems to me an accurate description of how I feel my life is now in the important ways. I came a stranger to this magnificent but in some ways terrible place to live, with its more tragic than triumphant history, and gradually, although never easily, I found both a way to feel at home in my own skin, and in this place.

Through that struggle to fit—to become congruent—I became not the painter I once was but a writer, and I discovered that the writer I've become is the Self I've been in search of for so many years. But at the same time it has been the act of writing that created and continues to create that Self I've at last found, and that acts as the instrument of integration between myself and my environment, chiefly my home in the landscape. The last seventeen years here have been a long, intensely personal spiritual journey, one that has been inextricably intertwined with my reacquaintance with the land and the effects of this renewed relationship with Nature on my own woman's soul.

The Perfection of the Morning began as a small, impersonal book about building a relationship with Nature. As I wrote and rewrote, I began to see that there was no separating my spiritual journey, my life, from the reasons for and the effects of my daily contact with Nature. Although I did not want to write autobiography and for a long time avoided it as much as I could, the book kept growing, and gradually recognized that it would have to become autobiography, at least to the extent that would make clear my themes.

But nonetheless, there's a way in which all nonfiction is fiction: the backward search through happenstance, trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of life to search out a pattern, themes, a meaning is by its nature an imposition of order onto what was chaotic. It's an attempt to give a linearity to events, many psychic, which had no linearity, which, if anything, were a spiral, or had more the hectic quality of a dream. What is true are thoughts, dreams, visions. What may or may not be true are the order and timing of events, the perception and linking of them. If it's true on the one hand that everything is what it seems to be, and I constantly remind myself of this, on the other, there is a way in which it's also true that nothing is. I begin to think like the Bushmen, as Laurens van der Post reports them as believing, that in the beginning a dream was dreaming us, and like Clifton Fadiman who said that the older he gets the more his life seems to him to have been, rather than a series of actual events, one long, interesting dream. In writing what the world will call autobiography, I am torn between the fact and history and the truth of the imagination, and it is to the latter, finally, in terms of my personal history, that I lean.

In terms of the people and the land—their history, the economics of the area, the statistics, and the current situation—I have tried to be as accurate factually as possible.

DREAM COYOTE

The day I left Saskatoon for good, I had sold my house, abandoned a promising job teaching at the university as well as my nearly completed master's degree, and said farewell to a circle of good women friends and to my mother and three of my four sisters and their families who lived there. I was both rather proud of my own daring and a little appalled at it; the image of a burning bridge was strong in my mind, and I stoked the flames gleefully, with a feeling close to triumph.

Although they said nothing, I knew both my friends and my family thought I was making a terrible mistake. Such is the prestige of a university job, the sense of those who make a life there as being the annointed, that my fellow graduate students and lecturers must have found my abdication from it very hard to understand. If my mother and sisters were collectively holding their breaths, not wanting to pass judgment and hoping against hope for the best, I knew my friends expected me to be back, newly divorced, in a year if not sooner, for marriage breakdown was happening all around us at the time—divorce, separation, reshuffling of couples, more split-ups, more divorces, more unhappiness.

And the truth was, in that first two or three years of my new life, I often said to myself that if I'd really understood what I was getting into, I'd never have done it, not realizing before I left that if my own family and friends had their private doubts about our marriage, the same was true of Peter's family, his friends, even his hired man. In my new life I would have to learn to deal with, at the least skeptical glances, and for every person who was welcoming, there would be no shortage of people who, though they ought to have been at least silent, if not kind, on the subject of my suitability as a wife for Peter were neither.

Peter had been born and had never lived anywhere else but on the remote family ranch in the Old Man On His Back range of hills, south of the Cypress Hills, and north of the peaked, purple line of the Bears Paw Mountains in Montana. Unlike most of the city men I knew, he didn't nourish in secret bitterness unfulfilled dreams about another, better life; he loved his life as a cowboy-rancher and rural man. And, too, he was secure in his community, surrounded by men he'd gone to school with, cowboied with, had good times with as far back as he could remember, who'd married and whose wives he'd known since childhood, and whose children were being raised into the same rural, agricultural world as their parents and grandparents and sometimes even great-grandparents had been.

Maybe it was his calmness, engendered by the deep sense of security stemming from a life lived all in one place, and of his sense of the rightness of his life that attracted me. But looking back, I see such a complicated mix of factors: the man, yes, but also the greenness and beauty of the landscape, and the smell of the air, the cool, sharp wind that swept away those things that in my city life I had thought were inevitable and unavoidable.

I first visited this place eighteen years ago on a twenty-fourth of May weekend when I drove down with my son, Sean. Peter had invited us months before, but I hadn't wanted to come, thinking that a ranch held no attractions for me. Peter repeated the invitation and Sean, all boy, had been begging me to go, till I finally gave in. Through a mix-up about dates (the twenty-fourth of May weekend didn't fall on the twenty-fourth that year), the day we arrived at the hay farm Peter was taken aback to see us. He and some other men were hard at work rounding up his cattle, sorting them, and loading them into huge trucks (called cattle liners) to haul them south to the ranch for the summer, since for a variety of reasons, including uncooperative weather, it was too late in the year to trail them

on horseback the forty miles as he usually did. He explained to us that the cattle spend most of the year on the ranch, but winters they're trailed to the hay farm in the Frenchman River valley where the supply of winter feed is grown. This is a more economical alternative to moving the feed to the cattle. Peter was embarrassed because he couldn't leave his work to act the proper host and had to leave us pretty much to fend for ourselves.

I spent the entire day perched on the corral watching the men work. There is a snapshot of me sitting there, my hair well down below my shoulders, wearing jeans and a thick siwash-like sweater, which always reminds me of B.B. King since I bought it the same day I heard him perform at the Montreal Forum, in what was one of the highlights of my life (overshadowed only by the time in 1966 when I'd heard a young Bob Dylan perform in a half-empty Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver).

I was so fascinated by what I saw that the day flew by, even though all I did was sit and watch. Sean sat with me at first, but then he helped in the chute loading cattle into the trucks, and was nearly trampled by a steer when it backed down the chute, turned around, and was about to run over anybody who got in his way.

"Climb the corral! Climb the corral!" the men shouted at him, as Sean and the thousand-pound steer faced off and I watched, too dumb even to realize his life was, quite seriously, in danger, since the steer might avoid him, but more likely wouldn't. Sean, twelve at the time, leaped to the side of the chute and scrambled up the corral rail with the agility that marked him as a young athlete, so that my heart swelled with pride. Later there was a branding, and Peter invited Sean to help wrestle calves, an invitation Sean eagerly accepted. When Peter teasingly invited me to do the same, I laughed and said no thanks.

I think now that if there hadn't been that confusion about which weekend we were to arrive, and Peter had taken the days off to do as he usually did for visitors—drive them around the countryside, show them the ranch, saddle horses and take them for a ride—I would have said, Ho hum, gone away and never come back again. But the privilege of actually seeing the real work of the ranch and all the things that went with it had a different effect on me. I remember afterward laughingly telling my mother we'd spent the weekend in the middle of a Roy Rogers movie, but if I joked with her about it, and if Sean viewed it as an entertaining but not-to-be-repeated adventure which he soon forgot about, was actually stirred so deeply that everything in my old life—friends, job, family, politics—paled beside it.

It wasn't just the scenery or the novelty of everything that captivated me. I was struck also by how comfortable those men had seemed, how at ease they were in their work, and how unassuming and casual in their skill with the animals and with the tools they used to manage them. I was surprised to see they were actually enjoying themselves. They laughed, cracked jokes, kidded each other while they worked in the corral or on horseback, roped, or cut out cattle and chased them in. I was used to a world perpetually fraught with tension, with competitiveness so extreme at times as to seem really crazy, where the only constant was steady but, nonetheless, gut-wrenching change and the resulting mad scrabbling for position. As I sat on the rail watching and listening that day a new world was washing slowly over me, seeping in without my noticing, a slower world, and a timeless one that resonated with a sense that it must always have been there in just this way and always would be.

It had been an unusually wet spring, and although it wasn't warm, the hills and grassy plains were as green and inviting as Ireland, so that my first look at the area was, to this extent, deceptive. As I look back to that weekend such a long time ago, when my world changed forever, the memory is dreamlike: the men riding their horses at a walk through the tall green grass and wildflowers on the riverbank, the wave of sloping green hills behind them, the clarity and the veracity of the light, in the

lulls between wind gusts the music of birds, the splash of the shallow brown river running by below the corrals, the click of the cattles' hooves, the cowboy ululations of the men.

I had never lived on a farm. Both my parents had come from farms, though: my mother from southern Manitoba and my father first from a farm near Magog, Quebec, and then from near St. Isidore de Bellevue, Saskatchewan, about seven miles from Batoche, the site of the Riel Rebellion in 1884–5, the trenches of which may still be seen, as well as the bullet holes in the little church. I have sometimes wondered if my father, who didn't speak English himself till he learned it at school in Bellevue, had heard from his French-speaking teachers in that French community about Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont and the battle fought just down the road from where they sat. Even though we have no Native blood that I know of, I do remember him mentioning Dumont more than once in a way that suggested the name and possibly the events were a part of his community's folklore. In those days, around 1912, there would not have been Native children in school with him, although many of the children must have been Métis, since Batoche was the heart of the Métis community in the old Northwest. But all that is an aside. It was a farming community and the Le Blancs, too, having come as farmers to Acadia in mid-seventeenth century, were still farmers.

My sisters and I came from pioneering families on both sides: both sets of grandparents had homesteaded, as had our parents, so that "the homestead" was part of our basic vocabulary, a term we must have learned along with "mother," "father" and "bread." Our Irish-Canadian grandfather, Francis Graham, was even said to have been born under the wagonbox near Portage-la-Prairie, Manitoba, as his family trekked, in the early 1880s, from their home in Ontario to the West. Their original Manitoba farm was established in 1884, a Centennial Farm, a fact of which the family is inordinately and justifiably proud. On that side of the family our children are fifth-generation westerners.

This is how it was that my sisters and I grew up with the notion of the farm as a mythic paradise from which we had been expelled, by drought and bankers, and could never return. Basic as it was to us, though, having never lived on a farm much less a ranch, which belonged to some other tradition than our family's, we viewed the notion as city dwellers do, quizzically, with a touch of apprehension, possibly even a little distaste.

In the years since the summer I turned thirteen and we moved to the city, I had become so urbanized that I knew nothing about farming, or about the daily life led by people who made their living in agriculture. I thought of myself proudly as a sophisticated city woman, but even that first weekend with Peter, strangely, I kept having flashes of *déjà vu*. They were incomplete, vague and unformed, and yet carried with them a puzzling tug of recognition, of memories that were more visceral even than images or fragments of conversations. Bewilderingly, I felt comfortable when I should have felt ill at ease; I felt at home when I should have felt lost. The can of evaporated milk on the table we used for our coffee, the orange offered me for dessert, the denseness of the air, the smell, the feeling of being close to the earth in the log house where we stayed were all *just so* to me; I felt transported to a familiar way of being and to a familiar place. Yes, I thought, and then, but how do I know this?

Gradually, over the year of our courtship, I began to remember what I had deliberately forgotten how I had spent the first four years of my life in wilderness, living in log or hastily thrown together frame shacks in what we call the bush in northern Saskatchewan. I was conceived there, carried for nine months in my mother's body there, knew no other place for those first formative years. My earliest memories are of nuggets of sunlight glinting off shoulder-high, damp emerald grass, of playing in the roots of trees, of the ephemeral, terrifying beauty of the northern lights, of the soul-

stirring wail of timber wolves, of our mother setting coal oil lamps in windows to keep bears away, of mountains of snow and impassable, muddy or “corduroy” roads, boggy stretches which settlers covered with unpeeled slabs of trees for wagons or cars to bump over, and the richness of the texture, scent, the vibrant *color* of the air of northern Saskatchewan.

For a time my mother’s parents rented a farm somewhere north of Prince Albert or Nipawin: the feel of the hot sandy road on our bare feet as Cynthia, my older sister, and I whiled away the interminable summer afternoons while our grandparents napped, having been up since dawn, playing in our grandmother’s garden where with our cousins we built bowers and planted cities and made celebratory avenues out of plucked pinks, pansies, bachelor’s buttons and daisies, waiting for our mothers to come and collect us. And the violent northern storms where we sat indoors with our feet up off the floor as lightning cracked and thunder boomed all around the small log house, the swaying yellow lanterns, the feathery legs of our grandfather’s big work horses, their huge feet and their quiet steady air, our grandmother smiling and silent, as if meditating, as she sat moving the paddle of the butter churn up and down for hours in the kitchen, morning after morning spooning up the breakfast porridge from her blue willow bowls till the sad lovers and the weeping willow between them were revealed again.

In that setting at the hay farm, the color and feel of an orange in my hand, the can of milk on the table were suddenly freighted with meaning beyond the immediate circumstances, meaning that at first I could not quite decipher. I was now beginning to remember the early childhood I had chosen to forget as both valueless and unsuitable for the person I had been trying to become. As I remembered it, I began slowly to reclaim it in surprise and delight, for in this new context it was valued, something to be proud of, a treasury of meaning, facts, knowledge. I didn’t consciously think so at the time, but in some ways it began to seem that instead of coming to a new place, I had come home.

As time passed and I visited the hay farm occasionally, the rural setting with the Frenchman River running past the house, I remembered too the Saskatchewan River from a later time in my childhood when we’d lived in a village on its banks before the damming of it. I remembered the crash and roar of the ice going out in the spring, especially the spring it almost took the great black iron bridge with it, and our father (with the Mountie’s permission) bravely walking out onto it, just to feel the power of the river, I guess, as we waited, breathless and awestruck, on the bank for him either to be swept away forever or to return to us. The river’s great, wild presence came back to me, its spirit which hovered over it and around it and in it and which affected everyone who came near it touched me again; I could even recall its heavy, scented odor.

What I could remember about that natural world from which our family had been separated by so little was a combination of smells, the feel of the air, a sense of the presence of Nature as a living entity all around me. All of that had been deeply imprinted in me, but more in the blood and bone and muscles—an instinctive memory—than a precise memory of events or people. I remembered it with my body, or maybe I remembered it with another sense for which we have no name but is no less real for that. As I returned to the ranch and hay farm to visit, the sense of this memory grew; I found myself inexorably drawn to it although I did not understand this at the time, preferring to accept the obvious romantic scenario of marrying and living happily ever after.

If I could recover my powerful early connections with Nature, there was still the reality that as I became a town and then a city child, I had stopped thinking of Nature as people raised in it do and began to think of it as urban people do: as a place to holiday—the mountains, the seaside, a quiet lake somewhere in the country—as a place to acquire a suntan, have a summer romance, paint a picture or enjoy a change of atmosphere. For a long period in my late teens and early twenties, I actively avoided picnics, complaining bitterly that they were stupid since there were always dirt and bugs and leaves in

your food and insects to bite you, and although they were supposed to be a holiday, picnics were more work for us women than cooking a meal in the kitchen would be.

Besides, for a girl born in the bush into relative poverty who, for whatever reasons, had learned to aspire to a more glamorous lifestyle—at six, never having seen a dancer other than my father stepdancing late at night at a farmhouse party somewhere—I wanted to be a ballet dancer; I wanted to wear satin ballgowns, go to the theater, have movie stars for friends. I did not want to go back to the bush, a place so terrible that my mother, once we were gone from there, wouldn't even speak of it. When I asked about it when she was an old woman, she told me that she tried never to think of it, and on her deathbed, when I asked again, her response came in a distant whisper, her eyes dark and fixed on something I couldn't see: "It was so cold...the wind was always blowing...in the morning...the men would...put on their things and go out..." She fell into silence and I regretted asking her, and yet I wanted to know, I truly wanted to know.

There was indeed a whole other story, a narrative, our family history transformed into our family mythology, which was what I had grown into since the other—the compelling, intense beauty of Nature and our lives lived in the midst of it—was never spoken of, never even conceived of in any concrete way in all the years since we'd left. Our father said nothing; our mother painted golden pictures of her girlhood on the prosperous farm in Manitoba, which I at least doubted, although I never dared say so. (And a good thing, too, because long after her death, when I paid my only visit there, I saw that they had all been true.) We had come from better things—land ownership and wealth, ancient heroism, blood links to the aristocracy in Ireland and Scotland—our fortunes had fallen, but we as people had not fallen with them, and consequently we did not dwell on the hardships, the misfortunes, the demeaning struggles for survival, refusing to accept them as anything more than temporary conditions to be met with courage and disdain.

I think, in accepting about our family history what I was told, I was often confused by the contrast between it and the life I had lived. I couldn't doubt what my mother said, yet these ancient family memories were no more to me than fairy tales. (As I grew older, in fact, I persisted in identifying with my father's family.) I was too young at the time to have been able to keep clear mental pictures of my own of our life in the bush into which I was born, but from my own diffuse memories in combination with our few ragged black-and-white snapshots, and eventually our mother's mother's memoirs, the images I knew were not inviting. The family stories, not often mentioned, were about hardship: people hurt or ill or losing or having babies, doctors miles away over bad or impassable roads and stories about survival in the cold; about the hard, hard labor of the men to provide the most meager kind of existence for us under conditions that were often heartbreaking, the most instructive of these being how, according to our grandmother's memoirs, during the Depression when our families ran out of cash, our father and our mother's father would spend an entire day in the bush cutting a couple of cords of firewood which they would take to town and sell for one dollar and fifty cents a cord. And once our grandfather had to carry one hundred pounds of flour on his back a mile and a half through the water and bog that had swallowed the road into his and our grandmother's log house.

But there also had been much laughter. Our mother and our aunts sometimes talked, when we were young, about the funny things that had happened, the practical jokes, the visiting with neighbors; there was even much laughter about the hardship, trailing off into muted smiles and finally silence freighted with a painful and, it seemed to me, confused nostalgia.

Even though that past which had become somehow shameful was hardly ever mentioned—such as the fall it was for our mother and her family—as I grew up this was what I remembered. It had become f

more important than the other—the life lived so close to Nature—which also was never spoken of. (Although I remember our mother, in her seventies at the time, saying in a dreamy voice with a faint smile, how our father “used to shoot ptarmigan.” “Really? Ptarmigan?” I said. She looked at me, her distant smile vanishing, returned to her small house in Saskatoon where we sat together. “I think it was ptarmigan,” she said. “I think it was your father.”)

By the time I was twenty I had developed contempt for those who wanted to return to Nature, believing they were all romantic dreamers, nitwits from the city, people raised in the lap of luxury who did not know about Nature’s nasty side, who had never done a day’s real work in their lives and thus had no idea of the grinding labor a life in Nature demanded for mere survival. I liked to look at Impressionist paintings of Nature, having once harbored the dream of becoming a painter, and I was not averse to sunsets or moonlight on water, but I was just as happy to look at pictures of them while seated on a soft couch, with my feet on a thick rug and a well-insulated wall between me and the thing itself.

Yet driving home from some errand in Regina, late at night on a deserted and lonely highway, I often looked out my side window and saw above the hills a few small white stars, points of light in boundless darkness. Once, as I gazed up at them, my heart, a live thing in my chest, leaped, cracked and then hung there, aching. At that moment it seemed a thing apart from the *me* I knew, and it yearned with an intensity that was deeply sorrowful to go back to the immensity from which it declared itself to have come.

And, driving down for short visits in the year before our marriage, I used to wait for that first moment when I neared the ranch, when the country seemed to open up, and I saw again the wide fields of native grass cured, very quickly even after that wet, green spring, to a pale yellow by the sun, for with that sight came the much longed-for lifting of my heart, a metaphorical unfurrowing of my brow, the easing of my muscles, and the city life, my studies, my urban concerns fell away from me. It was as if in that magnificent spread of pure light across the grassy miles I could breathe freely for the first time since childhood.

Peter and I decided very soon after my first visit here that we would marry, but we both agreed, each for our own reasons, that it would be better to wait till the following spring. The winter was a long one, and at Christmas, leaving behind the round of parties and my long, silky dresses, I drove down with Sean to spend the week with Peter on the ranch.

It was my first lesson in the realities of ranching life. Although none of this made clear sense to me at the time, every winter the Butalas, on horseback, trailed their cattle the forty miles from the ranch northeast to the hay farm where there was shelter in the breaks of the Frenchman River and a winter’s supply of hay and grain bales. Every spring they trailed them back south to spend late spring, summer and fall on the ranch where the great fields of grazing land were. Each move took three days and sometimes four, since they were willing to travel at a pace comfortable to the cattle.

Peter took it for granted that I would do this without questioning it, and since I had no idea what was getting into, I naively didn’t. I got up one morning and soon found myself, with Sean beside me, driving the half-ton loaded with square bales behind a four-hundred-head herd of twelve-hundred-pound range cows and two- and three-year-old steers and heifers. Between the half-ton and the herd were four men on horseback, and out of sight up ahead, another led the way in the four-wheel-drive ton truck.

I had never seen anybody move cattle before, and I knew nothing about range cattle. Peter’s cattle were (and are) horned Herefords, beautiful, powerful animals whose strong white horns can kill with

one well-aimed thrust, but I hardly knew enough to be afraid of them. Except in the most vague sense I did not know where we were going—to a road allowance somewhere where we'd pen them for the night—or even very clearly why. I was in a kind of culture shock, at once bewildered, frightened, excited.

That winter there was an unusually large amount of snow which was in places, even out on the open and windswept plains, very deep. Since we were crossing uninhabited grassland that first day, our progress was slow because of it. All that first day, I drove through that frigid air, in the middle of what seemed to be nowhere, far from houses or barns or people, picking my way carefully through the deep snow, getting stuck occasionally when, recognizing by the roaring motor I was in trouble, Peter would ride back, dismount, and drive the truck out for me. After three or four rescues, I learned from him how to do it myself. It had been cold when we started out in the morning, but as the day wore on the temperature began to drop and it got colder and colder.

Darkness came in the late afternoon and we hadn't yet reached our destination. The wind had begun to blow, and snow drifted across the backs of the cattle and the hood of the truck and swirled up around the riders hunched on their horses, sometimes blotting them from view. I discovered that if I stayed too close to the back of the herd—they had never "strung out" that day, but moved in a clump—my headlights would throw their own shadows over the cattle, which would frighten them and make them run, bad for their lungs in that intense cold. I tried to keep far enough back to prevent that from happening, but in that directionless, timeless darkness and that inexpressible cold, if I could not see the riders between me and the cattle, I grew frightened. I struggled to keep the truck neither too close nor too far away.

By now it was about thirty below Fahrenheit, completely dark, and we had still not arrived at wherever we were going. Picking my way carefully so as not to get stuck, I shone my headlights on what looked like a safe, flat spot and drove through it only to discover that the level snow hid a deep depression. I was stuck. I shifted into first and tried to roar ahead, and then through neutral into reverse, then back again, till I'd set up a rhythm, the old prairie trick of "rocking" my way out. But we were in too deep, and in a minute I'd stalled the motor. The riders kept moving on into the blackness out of the range of my headlights and were gone from view. Sean and I sat helpless, alone in the stalled, cooling truck in the darkness.

Before I had time to feel fully the fear that was threatening to swamp me, out of that blackness Peter came riding toward us, icicles hanging from his horse's mane and muzzle and clinging to his own eyebrows, lashes and beard. When he saw how deeply we were stuck, he told us to wait and he'd get the four-wheel-drive and pull us out.

"We're there," he added, as he rode away. I peered ahead and, at the place where the truck lights melted softly into moving, black emptiness, I saw a fence corner. How the men had found a mere fence corner, and the right one, in the blackness and blowing snow, I had no idea. I imagine there'd been consultations between them I hadn't heard, about how the fencelines ran in that field and, relative to them, what our location at any moment must be.

Peter was back in a minute in the four-wheel-drive and pulled us out. All the riders but one piled into the two trucks, while Peter and the remaining rider, using the trucks' headlights, held an intense conversation about what to do with the four horses, which were tired, hungry and very cold. The image is forever imprinted in my mind: sitting in the cab of that truck in that black and frigid winter night with snow all around us, far from succor of any kind, watching Peter and the other man unsaddle all but the lead horse, throw the saddles on the back of one of the trucks, and change their bridles for halters.

Then, as we watched, one by one they tied the tails of each of three of the horses to the halter of the horse ahead of it, till there was a line of four horses tied tail to halter, together. The other man mounted the lead horse and leaned down from his saddle to hear better while Peter gave him precise, careful instructions about how to find a ranch house almost three miles away across the frozen fields and through the blowing snow that obliterated landmarks. All of us knew, even I, that if the rider got confused in the darkness, or if the fences which he would be following had been changed from the year before, there was a good chance he might pass that shelter by and freeze to death.

The men closed the gate on the cattle, threw off the feed for them, settled them down for the night in a low spot out of the wind, and we went around by a prairie trail, with Peter driving my truck to the ranch house where we found our rider had reached safely. The horses had already been fed and stabled, and the woman there invited us in for coffee. Not even trying to hide her surprise and what might have been a touch of awe, she said, "We expected you through one of these days, but we sure didn't think it would be on a night like this."

It was an overwhelming experience which afterward I could hardly find words to describe adequately to my friends and family. My mother must have been alarmed, although she was careful not to say so. Her memories of her hard years in the bush must have been strong, and I think she wanted to advise me to give up the idea of marrying Peter because of the hardship she was sure I would have to endure. On the other hand, if the Butalas were far from rich, having succeeded in wilderness where we had failed, it was clear they had at least a considerably more financially secure life than we had had when we were enduring those years of privation in the bush country, and this would make my life much easier than hers had been. And she must have seen in Peter the same qualities I saw: his strength of character and physical strength, his stability, his integrity and his quiet competence.

The draw was powerful and it was not mitigated by the obvious physical danger of such a life; it may even have been enhanced by it. I saw nobody in my city life doing anything more physically dangerous than walking to work, and in Saskatoon that wasn't much of a risk. I'd had enough of my windowless office at the university and the endless maneuvering for advantage, not to mention the incredibly hard work people of my lowly rank had to do for distressingly low pay; I'd had enough of the men I was meeting, each one of whom seemed to be more insecure, convoluted and uncertain than the last one; I couldn't wait to put it all behind me. The winter cattle drive had been more than memorable—it had been invigorating, simple, firmly tied to a physical reality that I had been missing and, without even realizing it, longing for.

I put my faith in Peter. I was in love. If I was giving up what had turned out to be a fantasy of a closetful of satin ballgowns and the life to go with them, if I was giving up men with doctorates and fancy cars, it was for a second chance at a meaningful life and for a man who clearly was what he appeared to be. I saw myself merely as escaping into a simpler, more pure and more ethical life, a life that made clear sense as the one I was living had ceased to do. Despite the powerful feelings surfacing in me, it really didn't occur to me that when I married I was going into a life in Nature. Nature entered into my picture of my future merely as an unavoidable background, desirable chiefly because of its—oh, unexamined cliché!—peacefulness and beauty.

Peter and I were married in late May, and since there was no new house on either the hay farm or the ranch—where there were only two settlers' shacks pulled together around 1934 and sided over to form one house—for the first two and a half years we moved back and forth between the two places with the cattle and the seasons. It was awkward and sometimes confusing, but I didn't care. There was

something freeing about having two “camps,” as Peter often called them, instead of one home. And I loved both places despite the fact that both houses were too small, dilapidated and lacking in amenities that for years I’d been able to take for granted. On the hay farm we lived in a log house that had been built there before 1912, though we don’t know exactly when or by whom. We had electricity and running water in both places, but no bathrooms, especially no indoor toilets of any kind. Often I had to get up in the middle of the night to go outside to the toilet, something I had done until I was thirteen years old.

In my first year of living that way, rising in the night to go outside, wending my way down a footpath under the stars, sometimes being startled by the distant drumming of horses’ hooves growing louder as they approached and by the rush of wind as they swept by me in the darkness, hearing, but not seeing them, I had a dream.

I dreamt it was night and I had stepped outside the door of our log house into the deepest winter. There were mountains of untouched snow everywhere, great high drifts of it banked up around the house to its roof and there were thick, long stalactites of ice hanging from the eaves. I was wearing a nightgown—strangely, the one I wore on my wedding night of my first marriage in 1961, white with white lace trim on the bodice—but I wasn’t at all cold.

A white coyote appeared from out of the darkness on my left. It trotted slowly past me only three or four feet away, and as it passed it turned its head to stare straight at me into my eyes. It limped on three paws, holding up its right front paw to its chest as if it had been wounded. Even then, knowing nothing of these things, I knew by the silver-white color of its thick coat that it was a spirit animal. It was clear I was out of the realm of everyday life; I was in an archetypal realm, a limitless, timeless world of pure wilderness.

I cherished the dream and told Peter about it, but what did it mean? I puzzled over it for days without making any progress in its interpretation. I knew nothing about the whole study of dreams, and any significant dreams I’d had before had always involved people and were clearly about problems in my daily life. I knew that this dream was a product of this perfectly unnameable *thing* I felt stirring inside me from the time of that first weekend I’d spent in what became my new home; I recognized the intense, rich mystery and beauty of the dream. I was fascinated and at first could think of little else, but as the months passed, I thought less and less about it, believing that one day its meaning would come to me and in the meantime it was useless to keep puzzling over it.

But the dream caused something else to happen: the memory of a childhood experience came flooding back to me—something that happened when I was eight years old and making my First Communion. We had been told in catechism that, after having been purified by confession and penance, when we received the Host for the first time in our lives, the Holy Spirit, conceived of by the artist in our catechism materials as a shining white dove, would enter us.

I had—sometimes I think I was born with—a powerful sense of myself as a sinner, as unworthy, as always guilty, which a Catholic upbringing presumably did nothing to alleviate, and the source of which, though I have some glimmerings of it, will remain untold on these pages. But I was, in the way of children, especially those kept close to their mothers, an innocent. I believed what I was told; I believed it with all my heart, wholly, without question.

In my new white dress, white stockings, shoes and veil, I knelt at the altar of that small wooden church on the edge of the town, surrounded by wild grass and beyond that by wheatfields. The priest approached and, murmuring a prayer in Latin, put the Host on my tongue. I rose with the other children and began the walk back to the pew where my parents and sisters waited. And then I felt it: something, though this was all so many years ago I barely remember, but something I perceived as a

cloud of white light lit inside my chest, swelling till it filled it.

~~But those words fail to give the miraculous sense of it. It was *not myself*, it was both within me and bigger than me; it was, when I tried to tell my mother after as we waited in the car for our father to come from his chat with the priest and drive us home to Sunday dinner, as if the Holy Ghost had come as was foretold and filled me with its whiteness and purity. I had no idea beyond that white dove, what the Holy Spirit the priest talked about was. If I was merely incarnating the priest's description through the power of his suggestion, I had forgotten the rushing of wings, the cooing, the wind.~~

My mother was an unwilling Catholic, having converted from Anglicanism to marry our father. "You're only lightheaded from fasting," she snapped angrily, wanting, I suppose, nothing to do with pagan Catholicism, and detesting seeing it in her own child. Or, given her background, perhaps it merely struck her as unutterably vulgar.

Yet both of these, the dream and the numinous experience of my First Communion, served to remind me of another puzzling yet profoundly moving dream—if indeed it was a dream; vision better describes it—I had had at another significant moment in my life, this one three months after the birth of my only child.

In the early evening I had gone into the bedroom to try to catch up on my sleep. I lay down, closed my eyes, and then I was transported into the same realm that all these years later I had visited in my dream of the white coyote. There was my infant son asleep in his carriage where I put him each day, in the backyard of the house where we lived in the small town where I had taken a job teaching school. The carriage was sitting on the grass. Beside it a narrow cement sidewalk ran from the gate into the yard to the kitchen door. Everything was as it was in real life, including the tall old poplar trees that formed a border around the small yard. In the dream nothing happened, nothing moved or changed. The child slept on, motionless, lost in his infant world.

What was extraordinary was that I saw clearly, indisputably, finally, that the child, the grass, the trees, the sky above were all woven of the same material, were all part of the same fabric, which was the fabric of which the universe is made, and that this fabric *lived*. As pointed contrast, the cement sidewalk lay ugly and dead, a scar in the picture; except for it, the whole scene was transcendent with beauty, the colors had an intensity, a purity not present in real life, and the dream was imbued with a feeling of the perfect peace and benevolence of the universe.

I came to myself and the darkened bedroom, the furniture bulky shadows along the walls, an arrow of light below the door into the next room. Bewildered, I called my husband and asked him how long I'd been asleep. "A half hour or so," he said. "Why?" I told him about my dream. "If it was a dream," I said. Then, "I don't think it was a dream."

I had to understand what had happened to me. My husband thought he knew, having read about just such experiences. He found a book—at least, I think this was what happened—by an important East Indian philosopher—Radakrishnan? Krishnamurti? Or was it someone else? I no longer remember—which described this very experience, calling it "Universal Oneness," and endeavored to explain what it meant. I looked further and found that experiences having just the characteristics of mine had been recorded over and over again in cultures around the world. It seemed that in Eastern philosophies/religions, at least, it was the basic vision of the universe, the deepest and most meaningful spiritual experience one might have.

Even though all these descriptions in books validated it intellectually and gave me interpretation to mull over with awe, what little I understood of the vision was the ambience that permeated it. Meaning had not been given to me in words and the words I was reading seemed trivial and

disconnected in the face of the magnitude and beauty of the vision itself. All I really knew was that I had been given an insight of profound importance, but read about it as I did, it was one I couldn't make sense of in a personal way. Although I was sure it should, I couldn't figure out how it was supposed to affect my life.

For days nothing in the real world looked the same. Every fork on the table, every bar of sunlight slanting across a room, the eyebrows and lashes of my baby seemed more beautiful and more puzzling, and yet more real than I had dreamt or imagined. All this *meant* something, it seemed, something I had never guessed, had never conceived of myself or been told of by priests or teachers or had read in books. The world was deeper and more baffling than I knew, but how I should fit this vision into my life, I had no idea.

For long periods of time after that I didn't think of it at all, but every once in a while in the many intervening years between its occurrence and my marriage to Peter, it would come back to me and I would once again puzzle over it. I had relegated it to the realm of never-to-be-solved and seldom-remembered mysteries, when the dream of the spirit coyote brought it back to me with something of its long-lost, original force. So many years had passed, fourteen or so, and I still didn't understand. Yet, in pondering these dream-visions—the white cloud, the spirit coyote, the dream of universal oneness—I saw that in the latter two I had returned to my archetypal world, the world of my first introduction to this star-ridden, green and scented universe, to the world children inhabit—innocent even in its danger, edenlike in its dark, rich beauty. Puzzling over them, surrounded as I was by miles of prairie still in the state it had been in since the glaciers had melted back ten thousand years before with mirages hovering in the distance, the nights filled with the distant wail of coyotes, and with the canopy of stars, and the wind a constant, whispering companion, I began to have the first intimations that there was in Nature, much more than met the eye, something that existed in back of it. I did not know what that something was, I didn't even expect ever to know, but nevertheless I strained every day to catch a glimpse of it. I thought if I could just see it, maybe I would understand it and that understanding would show me how to live.

I was so overwhelmed by the dream of the spirit coyote that more than a dozen years later, when I had become a writer, I gave it to Amy Sparrow, the heroine of my novel *The Fourth Archangel*. I was trying to express something; I am still trying to say it, which means to understand it. This book is my response to that emissary of Nature, the dream coyote, and to what I think was his message to me, for through understanding his message I might also come to know what the larger vision I had had as a young mother meant.

BELONGING

Often at the ranch Peter would get up at dawn, catch one of the saddle horses in the corral, groom it, give it hay, and come in for breakfast while his horse fed. Then he'd saddle it and ride off into the fields for a day of looking for calves which had lost their mothers or vice versa, for mix-ups of various kinds, for illness or accidents, and inspecting fences and waterholes and the state of the grass in each field. It was not unusual, during those summer days of seemingly endless light, for me not to see him again till darkness had crept up the hillsides, turning them black against the luminous night sky. His father and mother had told me, each in their own way, not to worry when he didn't return: his father sagaciously, "This is the way of cattlemen, of cowboys," said his mother wryly. "They always come back eventually, none the worse for wear."

When the other women of the community were visiting each other, I knew nobody; while they were raising children, I had no young children left at home; while they were growing gardens and preserving food, I had few people to cook for, no garden yet, and the tiniest of houses which took no time to look after; while they were sometimes driving to part-time jobs, there was no real need for me to get a job and we lived so far from the nearest town that any full-time work was impracticable; while they were driving tractors and farm trucks and occasionally running to town for parts, Peter, used to doing everything himself or with hired help, didn't ask me to help, at least partly because I didn't know how. At the advanced age of thirty-six I was just learning to ride a horse.

I began to go for walks. Sometimes I would carry a lunch out to where I knew I would find Peter and the hired man fencing, or I would walk the fenceline to where the herd of horses were grazing and spend half an hour talking to them across the fence till they grew bored with my company and wandered away. I would walk to the places I had seen from the truck where the view was especially distant or beautiful and sit on the stiff, dry, prairie grass and try to assimilate the stunning, bare sweep of land.

East of the house about a mile was one of the highest hills on the ranch—you can see its silhouette blue against the horizon from miles away—and in those early days before I dared to venture too far from the house and yard I sometimes chose it for my destination. More than once from the crown of that hill I'd spotted Peter on horseback, a black stroke against the yellow grass a mile or two away, moving slowly among the cattle, disappearing almost at once between hills. If I felt lonely I'd sometimes walk out and climb that hill in hopes of catching a reassuring glimpse of him.

On a hot summer afternoon, having been alone since dawn and bored with the pursuits I'd been toying with for the last few hours, I wandered out to that hilltop, my head down, thinking. In those early days, as my old life began to waver and dissolve and the new one still had no firm shape, I was always deep in thought.

The side I was approaching the hill from slopes gradually up to the crest; on the other side it drops off abruptly a hundred or so feet to the prairie below where the spring run-off sometimes pools to form a shallow slough. By this time of the year, July, the water had long since evaporated, but it had left behind a stand of grass richer than the surrounding prairie, where there were always a few animals to be found.

On that day, on the far side of the hill in that slough-bottom, twenty or so cows stood grazing or lay with their calves beside them peacefully chewing their cuds. In their midst Peter's saddle horse, reins dragging, browsed lazily too. And far off at the edge of the cluster of cattle, a couple of antelope

stood, noses down in the grass. All of them were oblivious to my presence and paying no attention to each other, as if they were all members of the same contented tribe on that still, hot afternoon, under that magnificent dome of sky, and in the midst of those thousands of acres of short, pale grass. About a hundred feet out from the foot of the hill, in the midst of his animals, lying facedown in the grass, head on one bent arm, hat shielding his eyes, Peter lay sound asleep.

I stopped dead in my tracks, overcome with an emotion I couldn't identify: that I had caught him in a moment so private I felt I had no right to be there; that something was happening here that was beyond my experience and my understanding, but that meant something—something significant; I could feel it in my heart and in my gut—which my brain couldn't grasp, couldn't name or classify.

I backed away quickly before I was seen; I hurried down the long slope of the hill and full of silent wonder walked back across the fields to the house. I never breathed a word of what I had seen to anyone.

On her deathbed our mother had dreamt, she told us, that she was back on the farm in Manitoba and the five of us were little girls again. We were in the summer kitchen, she said, and outside it was raining. A tent was pitched in the yard and a family of children were in it. The five of us were begging her to let them into the house with us, but she wouldn't because, she said, they'd track in mud and she had just washed the floor. "I should have let them in," she said, terribly upset, as if it had really happened and wasn't just a dream. "I should have let them in. I shouldn't have worried about the mud."

I knew at once it was a dream about how she had watched us too closely, how she had held firm in her determination to protect us from a world she was herself afraid of, and how she now saw she had been wrong. I grew up timid and afraid of the world as a result of this watchfulness, and any need I had for adventure I had always stifled or fulfilled vicariously. Now, in my only act of real daring, I had turned away from the world I'd been raised for and understood, had thrown away everything I had worked for, in favor of a world about which I knew nothing and for the promise of which I couldn't even read.

If I had had stirrings of memories powerful enough to draw me back into the natural world in which I had spent my first years, I was mistaken if I thought I knew anything factual about how to make a living in it, or even how to live in it as my husband did. Whatever it was or would be, I had not imagined beforehand, and even though I was now living in it, it was an uneasy kind of living, laden with a sense of waiting, of discovery and possibility, but without any firm shape or structure. In the back of my mind I must have thought that only the form and the daily activities would be different than my old life, that the mental and emotional texture, the fabric of it, would be just the same. Not having any experience as an adult of any other way of apprehending and of being in life, how could I imagine it in advance? Or expect it? Or prepare for it?

In the city I had had an identity, or rather several identities: divorcée, single parent, career woman, graduate student, future academic. If the day-to-day living of it was hard, and it was sometimes terribly so, as any single working mother will tell you, it had had its rewards, chiefly that, having gone from the daughter of a rather strict and formidable mother (at least I found her so although my sisters, I think, would describe her otherwise) to the wife of a man I had somehow wound up trying to please but never could, I had had for the first time in my life a degree of personal autonomy. I earned my own money and could do with it as I chose; I could paint the walls of my house any color I liked; I could cook food I wanted to eat; I could invite over whomever I chose.

At first after my divorce I realized that I had been so demoralized over the years that I didn't even know what color I might want for my walls, or what I liked best to eat, or whom I wanted for

friends, or even what kind of a person I was. But as I slowly recovered from the wounds of my marriage and the trauma of its end, these matters gradually began to fall into place. I had begun to remember the person I'd once been, or was becoming, since I was only twenty-one the day I married. I had begun to remember myself as competent, with certain gifts: I had been a visual artist, a good student, a woman who loved to dance. I had been someone who was capable and who had certain dreams of her own of what her life might one day become.

I had, too, a community I knew well and a place in it. I had lived altogether seventeen years in Saskatoon and I knew its corners, its ins and outs thoroughly. Everywhere I looked I saw familiar faces, people I saw on the street every day, even when I had no names for them. I had spent a total of nine years on the university campus and could remember when it had had only two thousand students and half the buildings it had when I left. I was a member of a large family, with cousins in the city, and nieces and nephews, and not far away aunts and uncles on both my mother's and father's sides, and until their deaths, grandparents too. I had never been without that sense of being part of a family, not even when I'd lived in other provinces; it was not something I'd ever given a thought to.

It's true, though, that I often found the day-to-day living of this life of freedom in many ways terribly hard. I had been raised expecting to be supported by a man and had been trained to be a good wife and mother. Although I'd always worked, I'd never before felt the real burden to succeed in order to support my family in quite the way men do, as a burden they are raised to shoulder, even do with some pride and eagerness. In my career I had to learn all the skills men are so good at, like taking full responsibility, standing up for myself, expecting without thought to take care of myself and my child.

Still, the benefits seemed to me to outweigh the problems, and the most wonderful benefit of all was my women friends. I'd been one of a group, some of whom I'd known for twenty years and others whom I'd just met, who were companions, confidantes, intellectual peers, colleagues, people to go to for parties with and plays, concerts, movies and for walks in the park, to eat lunch with, to have over for dinner and who had me to their houses, women to whom I could go, and they to me, when we had to talk to someone, with whom we would trust our deepest secrets. My dearest friends from those days are still my dearest friends, even though they are scattered across the country now, and I see each of them perhaps once a year. Together we were inventing a new world, and that resulted in ties so deep with each other that they'll never be broken in this life.

We were part of the ferment of the new wave of feminism that had risen in the sixties and peaked in the seventies. We were meeting in consciousness-raising groups, whether formally constituted as such or not; we were speaking to each other, for most of us for the first time, as sisters, even though we were not blood relatives and often not even intimate friends. We were breaking down some of the barriers that had existed between individual women as far back as we could remember or had heard about from our mothers, and were seeing that we were a race, a tribe, a nation of people, when we had thought each of us belonged to our mothers and to men.

We were exploring womanhood too, well beyond the stereotypes we'd been raised in: what it is to be female, to be wives and mothers, to approach the world as female beings. We were searching for and finding our power through deliberately trying to tear down the walls of fear society, we had believed, had forced us to erect between us.

So our friendships were wider, deeper, and there were more of them than most of us, at least of my age, had had since we'd graduated from high school and left childhood behind. They also held a more important place in the lives of each one of us. We supported each other at work and in our private lives; it sometimes seems to me that we lived in a sense collectively. It was, I see now, a wonderful time to be a woman, even though what united us primarily, beyond our femaleness, were

our common struggles and suffering in a time when, on the one hand, we were being told and telling each other that women could do and be anything we wanted, and on the other, nobody was admitting how very hard that was turning out to be.

But we were also having a lot of fun; it seemed every weekend one of us gave a party where we danced and talked and ate and danced some more, not going home till the sun was rising. We were nearly all divorced, separated or otherwise unmarried, many of us products of the fifties with our overdeveloped superegos, and in our newfound feminism we were experiencing for the first time in our lives a sense that there were endless possibilities to our own lives, not just the single, precise picture we'd been raised to believe was the only possibility: a husband, several children, a house, a car, a lawn to mow, rugs to vacuum, dishes to wash. Although men were also present, it was understood that their presence was great but not necessary, and that we were a gang, not a group of couples, for we were realizing that—oh, most amazing fact of all—we could have fun with each other and as a group, we didn't have to wait around till an individual man invited us. And that realization alone gave us back some of the power we'd lost.

All of this is to say that my women friends had become so firmly woven into the fabric of my life that they were as vital to me as breathing, that I knew I would miss them as much as I would miss the blood sisters I was leaving behind. It also meant that I took it for granted that in time I'd find a new set of women friends with whom I could share my life in the same way I had with my friends in the city, and so I approached the women I was meeting in my new community blithely, eagerly, wholly unaware that things worked differently in the country.

One of the things which I am constantly having to correct people about is the urban perception that rural life is the same whether it's small-town life, or farm or ranch life. Farm life is very different from ranch life although there are similarities, especially for people who do mixed farming. But on a true ranch the primary business is the care and feeding of cattle, big herds of them, who lead a semi-wild life out on the range and whose care necessitates for the ranchers a life lived out in the wilderness in all kinds of weather, and it is true, the worse the weather, the more the cattle need you. Farming means growing grain and that is a spring-to-fall job with a free winter, and it takes place on land that by definition, is no longer wilderness.

Also, when urban people want to describe me as living in Eastend I always correct them, pointing out that I live out in the country. This distinction appears to seem to them irritatingly trivial, as if I am merely nitpicking. But town life, too, is a different kettle of fish than true country life.

Because I'd never lived on a farm before, and because Peter's main interest and daily work wasn't farming, often I didn't understand even the simplest remarks about what everybody's husband was up to at the moment, much less could I contribute any of my own. Not that it would have been any easier if the women were all married to ranchers, since ranch women tend to be horsewomen, real outdoorswomen, with the same practised eye for cattle as the men, and many of the same hard-earned skills, none of which I had or, to be truthful, wanted very badly.

How the women worked! I'd never seen anything like it. They kept enormous gardens and canned or pickled or froze everything in it, often at the same time as harvest when they had a crew of men, albeit a tiny one compared to the days of threshing crews, to cook for; they knew how to handle every piece of meat from a side of beef, even how to can it, as well as lamb and pork, and how each had to be butchered although the men did the butchering. They understood the mysteries of keeping a milk cow, milking her and using the separator and cleaning it, and raising chicks up to chickens without the coyotes getting them, and of gathering the eggs without being pecked; they could make cottage cheeses

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