

Home Away: A Thematic Study of Some British Columbia Novels

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In *Survival*, her popular "thematic guide to Canadian literature" (1972), Margaret Atwood began with what she called a "sweeping generalization," that "every country or culture has a simple unifying and informing symbol at its core" and that it will be discoverable in that culture's literature. She suggested that for the U.S., or, as she called it, "America," the symbol is the Frontier, that for England it is the Island and that for Canada it is Survival. Leaving aside argument that these assignments might be acts of fiction themselves — that Survival, for instance, seems as important to Australian literature as to Canadian — I would like to take up the amusement for a while and say something about my choice for the unifying and informing symbol for the culture (dare we say country?) of British Columbia. The symbol is Home, or, more specifically, the attempt to find or make a home.

Home, of course, means family, means a place where people have interpersonal rather than societal rituals, means, literally and etymologically, a place where one may lie down. The common way to symbolize it in art is to construct the picture of a house. The main livelihood of the province of British Columbia is the harvesting and processing of house-building materials. But the houses that the families of the harvesters and processors live in most often seem temporary and unstable.

In *Survival*, Atwood has this to say about the literary meanings of families: "if in England the family is a mansion you live in, and if in America it's a skin you shed, then in Canada it's a trap in which you're caught." Like a lot of the things in *Survival*, this notion is likely feasible in the imaginations of central and eastern Canada but not easily applicable to the situation in B.C. and its literature. People in B.C. are less likely to feel trapped in their families than to be several thousand miles from them or working with them on a patch of land out of sight of the next family.

A typical home in eastern literature might be stone Jalna, built in 1850 and named after a British enclave in India, or one of Timothy

Findley's family mansions, hoary with gothic family history. British Columbia novels often offer tents, brush shelters, shacks and boats for their characters to pass short times in. Most towns (or should we say settlements) in the province are not much older than the writers who have built novels here.

Adherents of thematic criticism, of course, propose that conditions of territorial living will be reflected in the arts of the territory in question. Perhaps the predominant condition for people brought up in the territory of British Columbia is that they are brought up all over the territory or that they were brought to the territory to be brought up. Fiction writers here do not often tell the story of the youth who feels impelled to escape the old home town, because the youths' parents were always hauling them from home town to home town.

Workers in B.C. have tended to be the kind who move around for their work — loggers, miners, fishermen, cowboys, fruit pickers. B.C. has since it became a province had Canada's highest rate of internal migration along with other indicators of instability — suicide, family breakup, lunacy. In addition, B.C. has Canada's highest numbers for immigration from other provinces and other countries. Net migration here easily outpaces natural increase; in fact B.C. has Canada's lowest rate of natural increase and highest rate of population increase. Since 1921, at least, 60 percent of B.C.'s population increase has continued to be due to immigration. In the quarter century after World War II, ten thousand families per year moved to British Columbia.

So B.C. families are not really traps in which protagonists are caught. Traps sit still. We do not. I am probably a typical case, having been brought up in or near several towns in the B.C. interior. When people ask where I'm from, I reply, "which year?"

Looking for a home. I can think of two reasons why our writers write about it. One: that is why most of our people are here. Two: so far, nearly all our novelists have come here from other provinces and countries and have written about people who have done likewise. Some of these novelists, such as Hubert Evans and Audrey Thomas, have stayed. Others, like Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro, have gone back east. In most recent times we have been seeing novels by writers who were actually born somewhere in the province, as for instance Jack Hodgins and Robert Harlow. But most of the time our native novelists are abjuring Northrop Frye's famous Canadian question, "where is here?" in favour of the B.C. question, "where can I lay down my head?"

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The question of home has been handled in most of the manners that have been used to handle other questions in fiction, at least those we have witnessed over the past century: cause-and-effect naturalism, romantic myth, psychological realism, propagandistic documentary, existentialism and postmodernist illusionism. We have seen immigrant writers trying to bring their myths or their images of B.C. with them — the forest as magic, the island as Eden, the Coast as a realm of weird fads. But the serious writers have usually come to show the people on the land (and water) in continual motion, trying to come to rest.

M. Allerdale Grainger, born in 1874 in London, travelled around the world, taking jobs on various continents. After spending some time among the logging camps of the B.C. coast, he found himself getting married in England. There he wrote *Woodsmen of the West* (1908) to raise passage money for his wife (first class) and himself (steerage) on a ship bound for Victoria, where he would eventually become Chief Forester of British Columbia. Thus we see a tidy relationship between biography and literary composition; in a reversal of the usual procedure, a book is the resource used to create a life.

The novel is the work of a gifted amateur. Description of turn-of-the-century logging life, and dialogue among the immigrants who partake in it, are deft and amusing; but readers will be aware that there is no satisfying balance in the overall structure of the story. Chapters veer away from the mounting conflict, and main characters disappear just when we need them. But the moment-by-moment observations of the narrator, Mart, are satisfyingly real, both as to things observed and as to the attitude of the observer.

The strengths and weaknesses of the novel are related to its purpose. It was intended to be both a *divertissement* and a documentary, a report to English readers on daily life at the edge of the Empire. For our purposes it does something else — its structure shows the narrator moving gradually from his position as observant outsider, to participant in the forest industry, to settler. In fact the story ends with a little bit of gentlemanly doggerel that does not fairly represent the quality of the book but nicely insinuates my theme:

Farewell, then, to wrenching and tearing and intensity
of effort; to great fatigues and physical discomforts; to
sweaty work with simple tools; to trails in far-away
mountain places; to rest and warmth beside log-fires
in the woods!

Farewell to loggers and my youth!
 Farewell to it all: marriage is better.
 And now I must go and scrub the kitchen floor of

The cottage next to Mrs. Potts',
 in (what will be) Lyall Avenue,
 (outside the city limits of)

Victoria,
 B.C.

Such pioneer domesticity describes the settled role of the changed Brit and suggests the future of a changing land. All the way through *Woodsmen of the West*, wherein "West" is not a space but a concept, Grainger compares English city life unfavourably with the coast forest, where people work with "visible result" and "obvious importance," where "by the light of Nature" they meet problems head on and where a living place, a camp, is made quickly from cedars at hand, upon which the sunshine then produces a "homelike gleam."

But Grainger returns often to the theme of loneliness, or rather isolation, the opposite of home-life, and introduces us to a concern felt in many of the novels and stories written about existence in British Columbia. For Grainger it is an ambivalent feeling; he is fond of a kind of Darwinian self-reliance, but in one of his evocative descriptions of life in the woods, his narrator says, "I hate isolation. . . . Making camp by oneself in bad weather, in a bad country, is a dismal thing to look forward to" (p. 119).

Looking back on it is a different matter; rugged settlement, in a huge tract of primary resource, is a necessary precursor to suburban settlement. In B.C.'s logging history, communities grow from logging camps all the way or part of the way to metropolitan districts. Logging camps are isolated, almost totally populated by male employees of the logging outfit. If the camps last long enough, they become company towns, with road links, doctors and schools. (More recently industry and government have made instant towns in the bush, serviced by air.) Sometimes company towns become real towns, like Powell River. Sometimes towns grow out of unincorporated communities, clusters of outgrown camps and volunteer development. Somewhat older than company towns are single-industry incorporated communities, with government and business services, but in times of industrial flux, these are in danger of disappearing. More secure in this regard are multi-industry incorporated cities. When they get large enough they contain "skid roads," where loggers and others pass weekends or lifetimes that are the dark holes of their camp

life. In all these communities it is possible to encounter isolation and feel loneliness. Logging is only one of the primary industries that know such development.

Mist on the River (1954) by Hubert Evans has been, like *Woodsmen of the West*, praised as "an historical document as much as a work of art" (William H. New, "Introduction" to the NCL edition). Whereas Grainger wrote a realistic account of Canadian logging for the people back in England, Evans wrote a piece of social realism for Canadians, and especially readers in B.C., to show to them the problems for Indian villagers whose habitat is being encroached upon by White industry. The story employs as its central character a young Native man, Cy Pitt, who encounters a conflict between the pull of culture, security and spirituality in his village up the Skeena River and the temptation of opportunity, progress and deracination at the fish cannery in Prince Rupert. Put another way, the choice is home vs. isolation. Almost every page of the novel contains the word "home," and almost every kind of home and house is described. Usually, as the title of the novel would suggest, the conflict and its integers are portrayed in terms of what is called in realism landscape:

His feeling of being out of place came partly, he supposed, from the contrast between the surroundings here and those he was accustomed to. At home there was the wide and sunny freedom of his valley, with birches and white poplars between the belts of jackpine. The woods were stippled through with shifting light, while here the hemlock and cedar forest was dark and choked with undergrowth. These mountains, towering above the bay, lacked the soaring, shapely grace of those at home, where one could travel through many summer days or over the dazzling snow and never feel shut in or limited. (p. 19)

Thus isolation for Cy, as for other Natives, is dangerous. The isolated individual can be picked off on the White man's temporary payroll or on the streets of Vancouver's skid road, where Cy's sister Dot is doomed. Even at home, when Cy feels called upon to defend the wisdom of taking a seriously sick village boy away to a modern hospital, he is assailed by the gloom of isolation, described by Evans in terms of landscape:

His hints and attempts at persuasion would not help; they were no more use than piling stones to overcome a mountain. Now he stood under its shadow and he felt himself in a dark and lonely place. (p. 143)

The central fact of White-Indian relations has been, historically, that the Whites came here, and before they came here the Indians were here.

The Indians were not in a new land; in a way of speaking (a way that Evans speaks) the Indians were part of an old land being threatened with change by a new people:

“... Not a stream or mountain, pond or draw, which does not have its ancient name and its ancient story. We are part of this valley and it is part of us. Separate the two and the life sickens and goes out.” (p. 152)

Thus while newcomers to the coastal province came looking for a home, what they came looking with, a sense of change, was to the Natives a threat to their home. Home, as a mind's archetype, suggests a refuge from change, the opposite of change. The Whites, with a humanist religion, a resource-oriented expansionist economy and transportation as freedom, wanted the Natives to redefine home.

So two major symbols in the novel. Cy, who wants to go “my own way” between the cultures, plans to get hold of an old truck, to gather wood at a distance:

The grounds had been held by his family for many generations, long before the first whites came, and it was hard to imagine never seeing them again; but more and more the truck was becoming a symbol of liberation in his mind. (p. 179)

But there are the salmon you do not have to go distant for. Somehow they elude the canneries on the coast and swim home, up the Skeena, where Cy's people join them at the river. “His people were like the run of salmon. They were strong because they stayed together; they did not scatter and die out” (p. 202). The salmon are our most amazing home-finders, non-changers:

The salmon were born here, the people were born here, and no matter how far they travelled they always came back up river when their natures called them home. They had to; that was the way it was. (p. 229)

It is a joining of fish and villagers that begins to settle the question for Cy. The young Mirriam, an old-fashioned girl, takes Cy to the river, and in a scene that would make mythic D. H. Lawrence smile, they plunge into the coursing water to grab fish out of the nets. When a twenty-pound salmon tries to escape, “she threw herself astride of it, squeezing it between her knees to capture it. Its thrashing tail showered her with spray. . . . As he turned to cast off his line, his hands were trembling” (p. 215). That night Cy moves to her family's house, and eventually to the chair at the head of the meeting room, where he will be at home, agreeing to seek change in his people's ways only when it will ensure the preservation of their community.

A later generation of White people would, rather than trying to make Indians redefine home, go to them as teachers on the subject. Matt Cohen, like Evans an Ontarian, published *Wooden Hunters* in 1975. Its setting is an island not far from Prince Rupert. All the Whites on the island have run away from home for various reasons. They are what John Moss in his Introduction to the novel calls "urban fugitives . . . in an intimate alliance with native people." The central figure is a young woman named Laurel, whose parents were killed, leaving her as a teenager in the home of an insufferable aunt. She escapes northward, meets an older Indian man named Johnny Tulip, and lives for some time in his family's house. Johnny introduces her to sex and, more important, perhaps to a confidence that she can make a home in the forest, without a market nearby.

In the first chapter she demonstrates to Calvin (a nice inter-religious pun on Cohen), with whom she now lives, how to shoot a deer at night and how to hang it, gut it and pull its skin off. On her first arrival in the north she had been unable to light a fire beside her tent, but Johnny Tulip showed her how to do everything, especially how to make a home.

Why did Laurel leave Victoria for the rainy island in the first place? Laurel is a big drinker, a dope-user, in pain with an injured back, but Calvin says that there was "something she needed that she couldn't eat or drink or smoke or even get from other people" (p. 58). The need led her to the accidental finding of an "abandoned cabin, with a lock that was easy to break," a kind of second-growth pioneer home.

Meanwhile, the old Indian village, including its burial ground (the word "home" shares an etymological history with the word "haunt"), is being threatened, as in Evans' novel, by White industry, this time logging. In contrast to Laurel's home, the logging management people live in an instant suburb of the nearby town, in bungalows ferried to the island and set at the end of a street, in a circle like a wagon train garrisoned against the Indians or the forest.

That sense of confrontation is offset by the non-technological attempt by the young Whites to live Indian-like in the setting that does not look quite the way it did before trucks and saws arrived, but which disresembles the successor to Grainger's Victoria even more. As in *Mist on the River*, a choice of home is joined with informal, symbolic, natural marriage. In the last chapter of *Mist on the River*, we are told this:

The smoke-houses on the river flat were closed, the hay and potatoes in, wild berries gathered, cured salmon stored for winter use. The fattening snow was on the mountains and when the last families returned from fall

fishing, the cycle scribed by thousands of years of communal living would be rounded out. (p. 268)

In the last chapter of *Wooden Hunters*, Laurel has this thought:

It would be good to get home wet, the cabin cold and wet too, so they would have to start a fire to dry out everything. And by the time they were warm, by the time they had eaten and cleaned the dishes, the cabin would smell of smoke and dry cotton, and they would sleep to the sound of rain and burning wood. (pp. 217-18)

Besides peacefulness and security, there is hope, perhaps hope of redemption, as Laurel is pregnant. She may be carrying the child of Johnny Tulip, or she may be carrying the child of Calvin. The most hopeful thought is that it doesn't make any difference.

A child half-White, half-Indian, grows up to become a legend with no home but the grave in our most respected novel about Indian-White relations, Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939). Unlike Grainger, whose novel began as letters to his fiancée and became a documentary of daily life among the timber, O'Hagan perceived a legend of the Yellowhead and wrote the story of a myth as it meets the reality of the White advance on the mountains of eastern British Columbia. Tay John's father was a White man from Alberta (as was O'Hagan), who burned his possessions and moved in with a band of Shuswap Indians, where he was accepted as the foretold flame-headed man who would lead them to a new home. But the newcomer is eventually executed by the people for taking to his brush-house a woman who belonged to another man. The pregnant woman dies, but soon her child emerges from her grave.

This is Tay John, whose resurrection is seen as a sign that he will take the Shuswaps home. As he grows up, he lives slightly apart from his people, going away and returning at intervals. As Cy Pitt wished to do, he goes his own way and is fated to both isolation and a bond, never a redeeming marriage. It is said that "other men must marry. The woman of Tay John is the people. He is a leader of the people and is married to their sorrows" (p. 67). When he is prevented from repeating his father's sin, he divorces his people and leaves home.

During the rest of the novel we see Tay John as he appears at the edge of the White man's world. The White men have come west for exploitation, seeing the mountains not as home but as opportunity, even as access to markets in Asia. There are the usual trappers, loggers and prospectors; but the most ominous of all is an American named Dobble, who wants to build a tourist (and immigrant) trap in the form of an imitation Swiss

town, which he will name, according to his posted sign: "Lucerne — in the Heart of the Canadian Rockies, Alf Dobbie (formerly of Colorado) Proprietor." The narrator of the novel, a remittance man named Denham, tells us that "possession is a great surrender" (p. 113). Throughout, he lets us know that those who stay closest to nature are better than those who try to impose their will over it.

O'Hagan is not, therefore, much in sympathy with human ideas of progress and personal advancement. In a recent interview with immigrant writer Kevin Roberts, he said, "I believe in the doctrine of eternal repetition. . . . I think man has eternal life now whether he wants it or not" (*Event*, V, 3, pp. 42-48). In other words, we are not passing through this world on our way to a heavenly home. Tay John, born without a shadow, born from the earth itself, is a true chthonic god, or at least a chthonic hero in a tragedy that foresees the eviction of his own people from their estate. Born of the earth, he returns to it, not after his death, but as his death. Or so, at least, is an eyewitness's legend-making report that ends the novel: "He had the feeling, he said, looking down at the tracks, that Tay John hadn't gone over the pass at all. He had just walked down, the toboggan behind him, under the snow and into the ground" (p. 264). He did not take his people home, but he showed them where they lived.

Tay John's story is told again in the life of Donal Kenneally, the mad Irish pilgrim of Jack Hodgins' first novel, *The Invention of the World* (1977). Kenneally, a demi-god, magician, despot, hypocrite spiritual leader, was reportedly sired by a bull and born out of the earth on a hilltop in Ireland. After leading a gaggle of impoverished peasants to his communal Eden in the forest near Nanaimo, he satisfies his gigantic appetites, both spiritual and physical, till his overthrow and finish. Just before the latter he begins to dig his way back into the earth and is imagined drilling his chthonic body deeper even after his putative death.

It is common knowledge that Kenneally the "messiah-monster" is based on Brother Twelve and other charismatic leaders who have led cults to idealistic homes on Vancouver Island and the nearby gulf islands. As wildly imaginative as Hodgins' story-telling is commonly said to be, it is also generally considered to be related to pretty peculiar versions of community on that lunatic-fringe western edge of the country, so far from the United Empire Loyalist graveyard in Saint John, New Brunswick. In recent times, and indeed currently, the Island is the setting for unusual therapy camps, whacko diet enclaves and hideaway family

experiments. In *The Invention of the World* Hodgins tells about some of them, too, as (dis)harmonic accompaniment to the saga of the Revelations Colony of Truth or, as it has become, now that Maggie Kyle has taken it over, the Revelations Trailer Park, run for those latter-day colonists, the U.S. tourists with their fish-canning machines.

“World” literally means the age of the earth’s occupation by human beings, the time that a place has been settled, made a people’s home. So “invention of the world” means, literally, the coming in of home-making. Strabo Becker, the writer-historian Hodgins figure of this novel, “has chosen to nest on a certain piece of this world and to make a few years of its history his own” (p. viii). Maggie Kyle, her childhood spent with brawling parents “in one shabby gyppo logging camp after another,” her adult experience a series of abandonments by men and her children, fixes up the ruined Colony and collects odd refugees who now live in its cabins. Why? Because “there was something *home* about it all” (p. 21). Meanwhile her boyfriend Wade Powers has built a phony tourist fortress cum museum, a bit of Dobbetry in what Hodgins has called Canada’s hillbilly country. The novel is wholly concerned with attempts to find a home, to make a world. One of the questing figures is Madmother Thomas, an old woman who drives a donkey-pulled manure-spreader with a tiny shack on it, searching for the vanished village of her birth. No one has ever accused Jack Hodgins of restraint when it comes to pursuing a theme.

There is another fine novel that is wholly concerned with the search for a home and tells the story of pilgrims coming to the Nanaimo area in hope of finding an Eden. (The first Eden, one remembers, was for a while the only world.) That is Malcolm Lowry’s *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1970), published thirteen years after his death. Lowry teachers usually speak of it as a flawed book, and some of them say that it should never have been published. But it is my favourite Lowry text; in fact I have come to think of it as the apotheosis of B.C. fiction, not only because of the subject matter, but also because it was written by a world-roving immigrant to our coast, and written in defiance of the principles of the well-constructed novel admired in London and Toronto and most university departments of English.

October Ferry is the longest telling of a story that obsessed Lowry in his writings after *Under the Volcano*, a story of a married couple in penury being evicted from their tenuous domiciles or burned out of them. Here the two wanderers, Ethan and Jacqueline Llewellyn, who from the

first were "completely at home with one another," have to leave homes in various parts of Ontario, to take up temporary havens in Vancouver's west end and the squatters' beach on the north shore of Burrard Inlet. In his usual manner, Lowry knits a busy fabric of images and symbols to wrap around his theme, filling the text with images of evictions encountered in the movies, books, music, newspapers, street signs and classical mythology. When, as he often does, the protagonist goes to a beer parlour, he sees "a lonely home away from home." He is pursued by the memory of his suicided school roommate and his own feelings of guilt, memory kept alive by associated billboards offering Mother Gettle's soup as a bringer of "Homes to the Homeless."

In a 1951 letter to his agent, Lowry had this to say about the theme of his novel: "... it deals with the theme of eviction, which is related to man's dispossession, but this theme is universalized" (p. 335, in the editor's note). It may be universalized, but it is attended by a story of westward movement. The Llewellyns move constantly toward the west, hoping to leave behind the corruption of modern mercantile order, but the latter follows them, westward too. At the end, when the couple is arriving in the falling darkness at Gabriola Island, Ethan feels the pessimism provided by the continual earlier dispossessions, but also a (perhaps desperate) hope that this Canadian western edge will furnish a lesson in living to redeem the world east of it:

Quite against his better judgement he believed that some final wisdom would arise out of Canada, that would save not only Canada herself but perhaps the world. The trouble is, the world never looks as though it's going to be saved in one's own lifetime.

— In Gabriola perhaps. (p. 202)

It is a fugitive hope that is expressed by the quasi-autobiographical figure in other Lowry fictions. In "Through the Panama," for instance, he espies the hope under the

appalling sights of despair and degradation to be met with daily in the streets of Vancouver, Canada, where man, having turned his back on nature, and having no heritage of beauty else, and no faith in a civilization where God has become an American washing machine, or a car he refuses even to drive properly — and not possessing the American élan which arises from a faith in the very act of taming nature herself, because America having run out of a supply of nature to tame is turning on Canada, so that Canada feels herself at bay, while a Canadian might be described as a conservationist divided against himself — falls to pieces before your eyes. Report has nothing to do with navigation. Instead of ill this very extremity in

Canada probably presages an important new birth of wisdom in that country, for which America herself will be grateful (p. 95)

Curiously, or, for my purposes, happily, Lowry's protagonist always accompanies such observations with attacks on realist prose, calling for a new invention from west coast writers who have been evicted from the parental house of fiction. "The only haunted house," says Ethan, "is the human mind."

British Columbia may not be Heaven, but as a dwelling place it was haven, for a time at least, till it became a new Pompeii under the fires of "development." Lowry's refugees have constantly to sift through the ashes of their previous homes, whether ancestral mansion or waterside shack, and to listen to fire engines in the night. Which brings us to another of Margaret Atwood's remarks in *Survival*: "English Canadian Literature is not overly-disposed toward fires" (p. 228). Atwood mentions *The Double Hook* as one relative exception, but I would like to point out that most of the books I am here looking at treat of house fires or the fear of them (as do books by prairie novelists such as Kroetsch and others). As houses in Ontario are generally not made of wood, I rather expect that Atwood's remark expresses again a central-Canadian viewpoint.

That house fire in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* (1959) is, as Atwood notes, redemptive. Watson's book satisfies Lowry's call for a non-realist fiction, for a mode of creativity that would itself resemble the elemental story of renewal it has to present. The events occur largely in an isolated valley of the southwest Cariboo, among a few families whose houses are scattered along a creekbed. In the preamble to a first public reading from the text, Mrs. Watson said: "there was something I wanted to say: about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either toward violence or towards insensibility. . . ." (*Open Letter*, Third Series, No. 1, Winter 1974-75). She is talking here, it seems to me, about a condition of homelessness; home is a place in which one feels less individual and isolate, where without consideration one participates in the tradition.

The figures in *The Double Hook* are puzzled by one another, each feeling isolated and thwarted, as if the sense of community were something lost in the inadequate usages of time. One of them, Felix (*Culpa?*), remembers but does not understand fragments of the Catholic liturgy. The native spirit figure Coyote is a ghost whose purpose is forgotten. But

the landscape is intentional, and the domicile is elemental. It is the human imagination that is missing, the spirit of *polis*. Most severely cut off is the dreadful arsonist Greta Potter; of her brother James "she could not imagine the life he lived when the door closed behind him" (p. 30). This is a place in which for all surviving memory a livelihood has been cutting hay and fencing horses.

As if looking for some bond, the narration of the text, our borrowed eye, goes paragraph by paragraph from house to house. Over and over we see them in their separateness, and between them we see the aridity of the cursed earth. The varieties of domestic failure are spread before us, and their rapid succession is proof of an abiding absence.

In a paroxysm of violence, James Potter slays his fearsome mother, blinds the young witness Kip, flails about with his whip and, abandoning all, rides down out of the hills to the railway town. In his absence his mad sister burns their garrisoned house down, her naked body inside it. As the girl Lenchen nears the hour when she will give birth to James' child, almost all the community converges clumsily to attend. Unlike Tay John, James destroys his chances in the mercantile world, gives his horse its head and returns to his people, as, for the first time, thirteen pages from the end of the book, the operative word is allowed: "Freed from the stable, his horse turned its head toward home" (p. 121). I am saying that in that action of turning his attention back to Lenchen and the rest, James Potter is inventing the concept of home. His decision is like that of Cy Pitt in *Mist on the River*, but its taking is not a statement of faith in the human heart; it is a glimpse of hope in the universal order.

Thus it is attended by magic. On his way to the birthplace of his issue, James passes a field grown moist, and later he sees a spring of water oozing from the ashes of the Potter house. He vows to build a new house, holds the baby Felix in his hands and stands surrounded by a community that without thinking has converged, as if for a cultural ritual. "By some generous gesture he had been turned once more into the first pasture of things" (p. 131). The gesture is grace, and the pasture is a new world, of nourishment. The place is not British Columbia — Mrs. Watson has insisted that she is not interested in regionalism. But the book was written with this place under Coyote's eye. The imagination converged here. Many eastern critics, whose sense of home runs otherwise, say that this book is set in the Rockies. Mrs. Watson said that she was not offering characters in a landscape but figures in a ground. The figures are in the art and the ground is your imagination, wherever you are reading, isn't it?

The idea of grace is more homely in a realist novel or a romance. In the former it is usually related to human character, and in the latter it is generally bestowed by a relenting author who has made her central figures go through enough punishment. Patricia Blondal's *From Heaven With a Shout* (1963) is a romance about a London widow who strikes a deal with a wealthy man from southern Vancouver Island. He will see that her son is provided a comfortable home with her relatives, and she will come to the Pacific Coast as the new Mrs. Alex Lamond, where she will be condemned to a life of luxury and family intrigue. The Lamonds are timber barons, and their home is a mansion among the trees, though the Lamonds go sometimes to Victoria on shopping sprees.

Ardis the young wife finds herself among the usual gothic romance family — her cold husband with his physical and psychic wounds, his twin brother who has given his life to literature rather than lumber, their flinty mother, their libertine sister, and Alex's ex-wife, a lawyer in the nearby town. So Ardis has to come to terms with the new place and work her way through the twisted past and violent present of the family, before she is able to call her place home. Hope is held out in one early conversation with matriarch Avis, who allows that she has not "been home in twenty years." When Ardis asks whether England is her home, Avis replies, "No, it's just an archaic way of talking" (p. 53).

The Lamonds, Ardis is told, treat their dwelling at the Big Place as a destiny. A turning point for Ardis comes after a sordid night in Victoria with her sister-in-law. When the latter urges that they go back to the Big Place, Ardis asks whether it is an instinct for the Lamonds. Nona replies simply that it is home. When Ardis says that she has "never felt that way about a place," Nona predicts that she will. And indeed it is only a few pages later that Ardis first calls the place home. Destiny is important to romance.

Ardis' pursuit of a home is related here to a theme of the hopelessness of postwar England and the necessity of remaking a life on the frontier of the Empire: "Where hope is stifled youth must go" (p. 133). But the focus is on the elements of romance. Ardis, of course, is fascinated by her husband's twin, George; and after the grand guignol of her husband's suicide, the death of the old lady and Nora's fortunate marriage, Ardis wins her place:

two men walk, one on either side of me, now where none walked before, one is death and the other is life and both desire me. And when I die I shall rest in Brynton where I found a home. Up past the Meadows where the

cliffs overlook the sea I shall be like this, my husband to my right, my husband to my left. (p. 180)

We are reminded that the word "home" can be traced to the Sanskrit and ancient Greek words meaning "he is lying down."

A less gothic romance is Ethel Wilson's first book, *Hetty Dorval* (1947). It tells the teenage years of a girl named Frankie Burnaby, who leaves her home on a ranch near Lytton, and goes progressively to Vancouver, London and Paris. Each place she goes she has a chance encounter, such are the ways of romance, with Hetty Dorval, the exotic and mysteriously scandalous woman who had aroused small town feelings by taking up genteel residence in a bungalow just outside Lytton.

Hetty and her enticing bungalow are, naturally, important to the innocent girl on the edge of her small-town teens. Frankie spends only her weekends at her secure ranch house, because she has to go to school; she boards in town, a long way from other towns, her weekday world the confluence of the Thompson River and the Fraser River, which is always described as "sullen," which means solitary. She thoroughly enjoys the local environment but is entranced by the idea of Paris, where her mother was educated and where she is expected to go to finish her schooling. But she first follows the Fraser River to Vancouver, to another boarding school. We are reading the story of a girl's maturing, and that story involves her growing knowledge of Hetty Dorval's nature. Finally, as Frankie becomes a woman, that story will be told in the confrontation of the two females in Europe, as Frankie learns that an adult's home must be earned or lost with effort.

Hetty is a drifter, crossing the world, gathering men, from China to Vienna, in search not for home but for comfort. She can leave situations with equanimity, a foreign element passing through, even through a place such as Lytton, a life such as teen-age Frankie's. Called "The Menace" by Frankie's parents, coincidentally appearing and disappearing in Frankie's expanding world, she is something more than a single exterior figure. She is something the girl has to assimilate into her experience and then let go. She is the opposite to another influence (literally, the Thompson River influences the Fraser) that holds Frankie back from a similar drift:

The genius loci is an incalculable godling whose presence is felt by many people but certainly not by all. . . . The thing goes deeper than like and dislike. It is the genius. To some the genius of place is inimical; to some it is kind. (p. 55)

In the climactic scene Frankie throws off the spell of the enchantress, fights with her for a young man, allows her one last night of comfort in Frankie's London bed and stands looking at the sleeping female. She wonders, "What is Hetty?" — a critic's question — and is called to again by her source:

I remembered the yelling of the coyotes in the hills, and the moon shining on the hills and on the river; the smell of the sage; and the sudden silence as the coyotes stopped for a moment in their singing all together. I remembered the two-coloured rivers. And my home. What a strange Hetty, after such an evening, calling up this magic — for it was a disturbing magic to me, the genius of my home — (p. 88)

It is a genius that Frankie will carry within her, "as real as ever in British Columbia while we looked at each other in London." Having come from a country wherein the pioneer's fence posts are still standing, Frankie Burnaby cannot think of the words about home as "an archaic way of talking."

A romance allows itself to invoke the genius of place and talk about magic. The realist's novel has to find the details of interplay between environment and a human mind; what is it in the environment that causes the mind to react as it does, and what is it about the mind that makes it see the environment as it does?

In *A Jest of God* Margaret Laurence entered by way of the present tense into the mind of a thirty-five-year-old Manitoba virgin who has stayed home with a mother who will not allow her to grow out of adolescence. She resents her sister, who abandoned her to her mother's care and went to Vancouver, to freedom and the raising of her own children. In *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) we see that sister, Stacey, as she approaches her fortieth birthday (these milestones are always important to Laurence's system of examining life). Laurence the realist wanted to show an ordinary person, a middle-aged salesman's wife, trying to cope with a world that seems to her increasingly "violent and indeed lunatic." Those words recall Sheila Watson's discussion of violence and insensibility.

The book begins with a rime present in Stacey's mind:

*Ladybird, ladybird,
Fly away home;
Your house is on fire,
Your children are gone.*

Stacey is living in the place that Malcolm Lowry saw as hell. Like Lowry's novel, this story is haunted by fires — real house fires, imagined

ones, and fiery images carried by the television's Vietnamese war. In the late 1960s British Columbia, or at least the southwest corner of it, can be reached easily by the sickness and horror in eastern places. In fact the fears of the present, whether sexual or mortal, are countervailed by memories of innocent lakes in central Manitoba youth. It is too late to dream of finding a home on the coast; Stacey feels her home, and the idea of it, assailed from all sides: "It's all I can do to cope with what goes on inside these four walls. This fortress, which I'd like to believe strong" (p. 15).

The theme of Armageddon, fitted with Stacey's images of the city charred by nuclear flames, is joined by the old theme of solitude. Here we see every adult lonely, the single and the married; so it is not the landscape's fault, and parenthood is not a salvation. Self-reliance is not the key to survival and living on the edge of the nation. Stacey's husband is failing. His best friend is a suicide. Hometown acquaintances are whores and charlatans; Stacey's sexual fantasies are set on other planets. "I live alone," says the ordinary housewife, "in a house full of people" (p. 169). And a house full of guarded secrets and protective verbal formulae. Realism is usually sad. Stacey comes to understand middle age as a time to cope with an unsatisfactory world: "Why did I ever once feel that to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth would be a relief? It would be dynamite, that's all it would be. It would set the house on fire" (p. 282).

So she learns to accommodate herself to the real, to see not her house, not even the city, as home. One lies down in one's mortal imperfect body in a trap called the world. One makes the best of the worst, hoping to communicate with one's family a little more than one does, when "temporarily, they are all more or less okay" (p. 308). Home is not a dream; it is a place in which you lie down to close your eyes and hope that you don't wake up to a nightmare.

The time of the American-Vietnamese war was characterized by the wandering away of American and other youth from their family homes. Refugees from the military situations in the United States have always formed an important part of Canadian immigration. In Jane Rule's *The Young in One Another's Arms* (1977) American refugees join some Canadians to try to invent a new order of home for survival of the times suggested in the visions of Lowry and Laurence.

In a conventional anecdotal realism, the novel tells the story of Ruth Wheeler, a woman like Hodgins' Maggie Kyle, who has suffered home-

lessness in her childhood and her relationships with men, and attempts to assemble similar home-losers into a new kind of unit. Into an urban commune made of her house she gathers various evictees and runaways, trying to overcome their various isolations. There, and later at their island retreat, she wants to "invent a world for them all to live in again" (p. 124). Thus Rule employs the term that Hodgins used in the same year, and perhaps described the main preoccupation of British Columbia fiction.

The fictional conflict is the usual one: trees against bulldozers and concrete, home versus real estate developers; here the idealist argument of the time when incomers have proven their ability to dominate the land — home versus ownership. The sexual plane of that conflict is shown often, for instance during the visit of Ruth's estranged husband, a bulldozer man: "he cupped a hand under her buttocks and squeezed, the sureness of ownership in his gesture" (p. 50). Throughout, the threatened refugees are identified with trees, and that makes a lot of sense for people in this province. In real life as in fiction, one understands people's values concerning the meaning of home by observing their treatment of trees. B.C. people have always known this. In the novel a Black American youth called Boy comes to join the commune, and speaks of his refuge as a kind of Cheetah tree: "this here is a tree I can swing in. They cut all that kind down by now in my native land, and that's the truth" (p. 86).

The city haven is violently defeated by the urban redevelopers, so the commune moves to that refuge common to the imaginations of people who perceive loss of a battle on the mainland. They go to one of the gulf islands, as Lowry's couple hoped to do, and they set up a working commune there, gradually winning the trust of the islanders. As in other novels we have looked at, a baby born into the community brings it together and offers at least a literary kind of optimism to the situation. The island's fragile ecological balance will make people live thoughtfully with the environment and each other.

But of course history suggests that what has happened to Canada's remotest province can happen to the islands just off its coast (as citizens of those islands have been trying to tell the provincial government). "Urban sprawl might not be permanently daunted by the twenty-mile barrier of water, but it could be postponed," thinks Ruth (p. 131). That sentence proposes the kind of holding-action resolution in the last page thoughts of Laurence's Stacey Cameron. But it also holds out a little hope, that there may be time for the birth of Malcolm Lowry's faintly

hoped-for alternative society. Jane Rule is not a visionary, though. She will not be apocalyptic, because she is interested in reform, or at least recovery of original innocence still flickering in us as we are. Throughout her novel runs the idea that we must live by choice rather than accident, that home is something people must decide to make. As Tom, one of Rule's Americans, says when asked whether he wants to go home after the war: "No. This is home now, and there's plenty to do here" (p. 173).

There are probably American refugees in Australia, and middle-aged housewives fearful of Armageddon, aborigines caught between village and industry, evicted dreamers looking for Eden. Surely in Australia there were legendary pilgrims and remittance men hoping to change fearsome wilds into dwelling places. To learn that home-seeking is the preponderant theme in British Columbia is not to deny that it might also prevail in the literature of other edges of empire.

Even in Nova Scotia and Quebec and Ontario there are probably novels written about people with a longing or an expectation of finding or inventing a place to lie down. But when I think of the homes in eastern fictions I think of the operations of memory, the importance of the collective past and its influence on the present in those books. I think of the family chronicles of Hugh Hood, Timothy Findley, Robertson Davies, Charles Bruce, Ernest Buckler, Alice Munro, Graeme Gibson; and of Matt Cohen. I think of family farms and the ghosts in their fields and upper storeys. When I think about home in an eastern novel I think about weight and memory, about chronicle and gothic plot. I think that the paradigm of eastern fiction might be Anne Hébert's story, "The House on the Esplanade," in which a desiccated old woman barely holds on to life in the ancestral home, where the rooms have been closed as family members died. Her brother, coveting the place and hoping bitterly for his sister's last thin breath, comes ritually to her table:

Perhaps he sensed the presences that were hidden in the shadows, the invisible spectators at this singular repast, and feared to discover, at any moment, that the spectres haunting the upper rooms would come down and take the empty places at this great table, over which presided this little old maid. No bigger than a kitten, and as white as linen, she seemed already to belong to the world of the supernatural. (p. 84)

It is no Eden that the brother desires to enter and own, but rather a stone monument to death. It is the past, where ancestral dust evades the hand of the sister's gothic servant.

British Columbia's fiction may come to this sometime, after the human beings outnumber the trees. For the present the figures of our fiction, literary and nonliterary, are restive, desirous, like Ethan Llewellyn smart enough to know that the bulldozers and lawyers are just the other side of that stand of Douglas fir; but like Ethan Llewellyn they entertain a sun-shaft of hope that a people who have left their ancestral plots may invent a new way to make a home west of the Rockies.*

* I have decided to make this one note, to inform the reader of the books I have referred to and clarify the question of which edition I have used.

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