

CHASING PEACE: A MEMOIR

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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Date 22nd August 2021

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This book is dedicated to the Bigs and the bigger Littles, who were the world I was lucky to grow up into.

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Pilgrim, friend, where have you traveled, that you prepare so for lack?

– S Lee
Vancouver, 2002

Contents

ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHASING PEACE: A Memoir.....	2
I. Dialogues with My Mother	3
II. Nineteen Seventy-Nine.....	20
III. Dialogues with My Daughters	23
IV. Dialogues with My Therapist	Error! Bookmark not defined.
V. After Talking.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS on CHASING PEACE: A Memoir.....	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY	78
APPENDICES.....	83
Appendix A: Abbreviations and Pseudonyms Used in <i>Chasing Peace</i>.....	84
Appendix B: Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Mayo Clinic).....	85
Appendix C: <i>Writing My Father</i>.....	86
Appendix D: <i>Our Lady of Perpetual Surprise: Reflections of a Recovered Concussive</i>	93

ABSTRACT

Chasing Peace: A Memoir is an auto/biographical prose work of literary non-fiction. At root, it is a trauma memoir, exploring both long-standing family trauma and its intersection with the narrator's singular experience of having been abducted and sexually assaulted as a teenager. The work's five-part structure braids together a superficially chronological rendering of the narrator's life, from early childhood in the 1960s to present day, with intrusive, often repetitive strands of story that disrupt and frame this surface linearity. The intrusive strands foreground the narrator's search to understand the traumas that shape and often limit her life as an adult woman diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); they also foreground her decades-long struggles with competing impulses to disclose and examine her condition, on the one hand, and to mask and avoid her symptoms, on the other. These struggles are explored in family, social and professional contexts, where themes of silence and disclosure figure prominently: the silences are sometimes voluntary, sometimes imposed, and not always conscious; the disclosures are, in the earlier years, often thwarted, displaced and/or masked, but with time and practice become more confident and intentional. Because of the significant attention paid to the integration of early family story, including intergenerational trauma, *Chasing Peace* is not a conventional trauma memoir; rather, it straddles the genre line between this sub-genre and the more comprehensive coming-of-age auto/biographical story. In this, as well as in its literary voice and craft, it reaches for a broader readership than the narrower trauma story might typically enjoy.

The critical reflection following the creative thesis comprises four sections: an account of the genesis of the project; an account of the iterative writing process, including significant developments in structure, theme and craft over multiple drafts; a discussion of trauma narrative, in both the psychotherapeutic and the literary sense; and a discussion of comparator texts in the publishing field to which this thesis would contribute. This last section positions *Chasing Peace* among sixteen auto/biographical works, ranging in content from graphic, narrowly focused rape memoirs through more comprehensive and literary coming-of-age stories, all of which feature trauma, and ranging in style from academic argument through journalistic realism to allusive, literary text. The evidence of these works confirms that the market for memoir in general continues to thrive, even more steadily so for trauma-based stories, thanks in part to the 2017 viral reckoning of the #MeToo movement.

CHASING PEACE: A Memoir

Note: There University has agreed to place a bar on publication of this creative writing manuscript. What follows is an excerpt by way of sample only, followed by the critical reflection and other apparatus (e.g., bibliography) in their entirety.

I. Dialogues with My Mother

Dialogues with My Mother, 1

Vancouver, 1968. In one of those weeks after Thanksgiving when late afternoons are shrinking towards Christmas, my mother Judy walked out on her husband, three young children, three stepchildren, three cats (one nursing kittens), three guinea pigs, a pair each of dogs, turtles, Douglas ground squirrels and rabbits, one chameleon, rapidly reproducing mice and, owing to the cats, a parade of replacement budgies.

In 1994, Mum and I are settling in at an Italian restaurant on Vancouver's Commercial Drive. Bread has been served, wine orders taken.

I've never asked my mother out to dinner before. She is suspicious.

"What do you want to talk about?"

I hear not a welcome but a warning.

I HAVE A “GOOD” memory. I’ve been aware of this, believed this, most of my life—except for a period in my forties when I suffered a concussion and had little memory at all. My recall can be vivid, more precise and detailed than that of some of my siblings and many friends.

A colleague recently commented on this. She went on to describe a radio interview she’d just heard: a memory researcher suggested that adults with highly developed memories—particularly those with rich, complex memories of childhood—turn out to have moved often in their early years. This feels true. My memories are frequently place-specific, I place them in time by recalling where I lived *when*. The researcher’s hypothesis had something to do with the sequence *stimulus—upheaval—response* fixing details in the mind.

An anxiety-induced reaction against loss, I wondered?

Dialogues with My Mother, 2

In 1994, I'm grown, with two daughters of my own, yet I can't talk straight with this woman sitting across from me about any subject that touches me, for fear she'll make me bleed. For years I've kept things surface, breezy, avoided fraught topics. Now I am hungry for information that matters to me, and I'm struggling to ignore my stomach, roiling with nerves, warning me off. There's a rush in the back of my throat. My fingers are beginning to tingle. To push on, to press for answers I need, I must overcome years of practiced evasion.

And I must violate Mum's unspoken terms and conditions for maintaining contact. Some topics are simply off limits.

"I want you to tell me about when you left us, at Maple Street. About how I reacted."

Whoosh!

Mum looks at me. Our wine arrives and she sips hers. As she puts the glass down, she sighs.

"Oh, Meggie. Why do you want to hear about *that*?"

TEN YEARS EARLIER, I'D asked my sister Martha the same question. Martha is eight years older. In the brief period when we were both in our twenties and living together, I'd asked her to tell me the story of the break-up of our family home, when I'd been in kindergarten and she, at thirteen, already in high school.

Collectively, my big brothers Erik and Griff and I were the Littles, the offspring of what would turn out to be the second of three marriages each for Don and Judy. Dad was an aspiring fiction writer with a clichéd flair for fedoras and scotch. He made his living as a newspaperman. We moved frequently, partly to follow his jobs, partly to accommodate the family as it grew and shrank and grew again. Dad's three older children, the Bigs—Jill, Martha and Jon—came and went from our homes depending on the health of their mother, a woman suffering with both debilitating alcoholism and schizophrenia. Occasionally, briefly, this blended family was also joined by Grandpa Gibson, my maternal grandfather—another alcoholic and what was then called manic-depressive. The police would deliver Grandpa to us when he was found drunk, or suicidal, or the asylum would release him into Mum's care on condition that he live with her, his only child. Like her father, my mother cycled through moods unpredictably. Within a few weeks, she could be playful, then violent to us kids, then withdrawn, even threatening suicide, and then back up, lifted into a fit of high-functioning exuberance. We just never knew.

Somehow, when I was not yet three years old, we came to tumble all together, one big heap, into the house on Maple Street. According to Mum's list—reconstructed at my prompting more than thirty years later—this was my ninth home. And while we lived there less than three years, this time forged in me the unshakable conviction that I was the baby of one big family. I could always tag along, always find someone to play with or someone to read to me. Happiness came from being part of a team, preferably one with at least as many animals as humans.

All this changed that one afternoon, late on a school day—during those pre-supper hours when Mum might have been cooking supper or helping Erik practice his grade 3 spelling words—when she put on her coat. Saying she was going to the store, she slipped from our lives.

In 1983, for the first time, I had pressed my older sister for details about Mum's disappearance. About how it had affected *me* especially.

Martha shrugged.

"You did have five older siblings, and the pets." She paused. "Jill and I took care of you. And Dad hired a string of housekeepers."

"But did I cry? Was I scared?"

I HAVE DOZENS OF memories—snapshots more than moving pictures—from our time blended together in that house on Maple Street.

A few of them, from the months around the time Mum disappeared, I have trouble dating precisely. They seem to straddle the line—are they *before* or *after*? Like when Dad took me to visit Mum at the hospital, only we stayed outside on the downhill-sloping sidewalk, and she waved to me from her open window high above. I remember the hospital curtain like a nightgown, blowing outward, as if it were waving at me, too. I wanted to go in, but Dad said that wasn't allowed. I cried so hard.

That must have been *before*?

In later memories, those more clearly from *after*, there is always a housekeeper—and in many, my eldest sister Jill has become a parent. It's Jill who climbs the tree Erik has set on fire, the one outside the dining room window, to pull me off the clubhouse platform high in the branches before the small flames grow up to reach me. It's Jill who oversees my supper. She makes me sit at the dining room table until I finish—even if everyone else has gone to play or watch TV—and she catches me every time I scoop mushy peas off my plate and dump them at the corner of the table for one of the dogs to lick up.

One of my rare memories from this period that plays out like a short film starts with Dad and most of us kids around the dinner table. I don't notice that Martha isn't there until she comes in through the French doors, crying, wailing. Thursday, the mother cat, has eaten a whole litter of newborn mice. My big sister is inconsolable.

In a flash, Dad snatches Thursday up and slams out the front door. Inside, there is more crying. Outside, briefly, the sound of a cat in pain, and thumping noises. Then Dad is in the front hall, kneeling down to Griff and me, the two youngest—we are five and six—and he is explaining that he's killed the cat because it killed Martha's mice. As I look into my father's face, I see Jill over his shoulder—slipping in through the door behind him, cradling Thursday's mangled body, blood and fur and one bulging eyeball. She is sobbing over the bleeding mess.

“Daddy, she's...still alive.”

My father takes the cat—my mother's favourite—back outside. I hear a metal clatter and clang as he slams the lid down on the trash can.

1994. AS I'M DELIVERING my daughter Erin to kindergarten, a car speeds toward us in the school zone, lurching to a stop against the curb, nose against my car. The driver's door is flung open.

Someone screams.

"Run!"

A woman leaps out, rounds the front of the car, barely gaining the curb before a second car speeds up from the opposite direction. A school-aged child jumps from the first car to the sidewalk and begins running, the screaming woman on its heels, heading in the direction of the office. The door of the second car opens and a man flings himself out, running after the woman. A third occupant is emerging from the woman's car, toes just touching pavement as the man whips by, closing in on the woman. The last one out is a smaller child, perhaps two or three. He hesitates, falters as the man lunges past, rights himself, looks back at the cars and then toddles after the adults.

I rush Erin inside her classroom and tell the teacher she must keep the children safe. I return to the sidewalk—the toddler is gone—and I take down the man's license plate number. Then I go the long way around the edge of the property to the office, where I find the woman and children huddled together behind the staff counter. All three are crying. The Principal tells me the man has just left. She takes the plate number for the police.

On the short drive to the college where I teach, my own tears start to flow. When I reach the campus, I head for a counsellor's office. I need to talk. Even as I tell the story the first time, I'm aware of a gap between what I have witnessed and what I am re-experiencing as I speak. I weep openly when describing the smallest child's hesitation, his confusion, hovering between two powerful adults, one murderous, the other incapable of protecting. I hear myself trying to excuse the woman, this mother who did not pause to scoop the little boy into her arms as she fled. I want to believe that she might have been more cunning than she appeared to be—that she wasn't abandoning her child. No! Perhaps she was astutely acting as decoy, sacrificing herself even, luring the violent man away from her youngest, her most vulnerable? I begin sobbing as I describe the boy spinning like a top between adults, as exposed to likely death as any babe on a hillside. I become aware I'm imagining him cry out words I know I did not hear:

Mummy, take me with you! Mummy, don't leave me!

Bewildered, terrified, I don't understand.

Where have the big people who love me gone?

I use up the counsellor's entire box of tissues.

Over the next few days, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, I am gripped by the need to re-tell this story. My husband hears it, my co-workers, my neighbours. With each re-telling, my fixation on the young toddler is clear to me. It's when talking with my friend Barb that I first comment aloud on the power this image has over me. With her prodding, I admit that my empathy is crippling. I relive the scene each time I describe it—I become that small child caught in the crossfire of her parents' rage.

"This boy," I hear myself repeating to Barb, "was just spinning there on the sidewalk, abandoned by the very people who should have protected him!"

Knowing my history, she prods,

"Would you describe yourself as having been abandoned as a child?"

I LOVE MEMORY, THE act of laying it down as well as conjuring it back. As a child, I fell into memory as a refuge—a prized toy and distraction—something to do when hiding from Mum’s anger in my bedroom. Recitation, learning something by heart, requires few resources and no company.

I set about rehearsing my first passage of literature when I was six, shortly after Dad convinced Mum to take us off his hands so he could move in with his girlfriend. Dad sold the house and we all left Maple Street, going in different directions. We Littles lost Dad, the Bigs and most of the animals. Our family withered down to Mum and the guinea pigs—not counting our brief enjoyment of Harry the House Mouse, trapped by Erik in a shoebox as it darted across our new kitchen floor on moving day. Harry’s heart gave out overnight.

That move took us from a large, four-bedroom house on a gracious corner lot amid the wide, lush, tree-lined avenues of Kerrisdale, in Vancouver’s affluent west side, to an upper-floor rental suite in a simple stucco house on Lakewood Avenue, a converted old east-end box carved up into apartments. Our two bedrooms opened one off another, only an empty door frame between them. Mum slept on a pull-out couch in the living room. The weathered fir planks in the kitchen floor had a split so wide we spied sometimes on the family below.

While we lived on Lakewood, Mum started taking high school completion courses. She was already a card-carrying member of Mensa—and proud of it—but she’d dropped out of grade 12 several weeks before graduating. To spite her parents, she said. She had a boyfriend now who liked to help out by cooking meals and reading our bedtime stories, so Mum could do her homework. But she didn’t like him getting so involved with us and broke it off.

It was in this house that I began rehearsing the first three pages of E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, marching in a loop from the bedroom I shared with Griff, through Erik’s room and into the kitchen, then back through Griff’s and my room—only I was *really* freckle-faced Fern, and instead of parading in circles in our rented rooms upstairs in an old east-end house, I was rushing out the kitchen doors on my family’s farm, sneakers soaking up the early spring, early farmyard dew, to wrestle an axe from the hands of my confused Papa—chanting as I stomped around and around:

“Where’s Papa going with that ax?” said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

‘Out to the hoghouse,’ replied Mrs. Arable. ‘Some pigs were born last night.’

‘I don’t see why he needs an ax,’ continued Fern, who was only eight....”

Dialogues with My Mother, 3

Mum looks at me.

"All right."

She sets her wine glass down and begins to trot out phrases I've heard before.

Life with your dad was so...

I had to leave, to save my own life...

I raise my hand, palm towards her. She stops.

"No. Sorry. Not that. I understand why you left. I want to know about me. It bothers me that I don't remember."

And then I pelt her with questions that gush out of me as if I'm a clogged drain that has come unstuck.

How long did we live apart?

How long was it before I saw you again, after you left?

Did we ever talk on the phone?

Did I cry?

Did I beg you to come home or come get me?

Do you think I minded that you were gone?

My mother stares at me a long while, then shrugs.

"I don't know, Meggie." After a moment she adds, "It wasn't about you."

IN EARLY 1970, WE moved to Raymur Project for the first time. Raymur was a concrete government housing park deeper into the downtown side of Vancouver's east end. The "park" was really eight square blocks of barren, unbroken pavement. It was bordered by a gravel lot to the south, railroad tracks and industrial buildings to the east and a concrete viaduct to the north, with only the west side showing any evidence that other humans lived in the neighbourhood. Within its perimeter, the Project was a compound without walls, containing a seniors' high-rise, a family high-rise and a series of identical, rectangular, two-storey blocks of cinder grey and pale brick row houses, appearing at regular distances, always at right-angles, as if set down from above by a tidy giant playing with concrete Lego.

The day we moved in, Mum sent Erik to the store for milk. Two bigger boys beat him up before he reached the main street and the corner grocery. They took the milk money. When he came home, sniveling, Mum gave her nine-year-old son her last five dollars and a kitchen knife and told him not to come home empty-handed again.

The four of us shared a unit in the family high-rise, less than 650 ft² and only two small bedrooms. Most of the time, Griff and I shared the bigger bedroom, Erik had the small one and Mum again slept on the couch. But for a few weeks, when I was seven or eight and Erik was in hospital with a broken leg, Mum used his empty bed.

One morning while Erik was away, Griff and I woke early. We tried to play quietly in our bunkbeds, but soon started to rough-house, wrestling and pillow-fighting. At one point, I was holding Griff at bay outside our room with the door, my shoulder pressing against it with all my might, Griff pushing back. Giggling, I pulled the door toward me a tiny bit, then shoved back again to throw him off his feet. When it came back again even harder, I threw myself against it, my bare feet gripping the cold linoleum floor. In a flash I was overcome—the door pinned me against the wall, then was pulled off me again—only the person behind it wasn't Griff's size.

Pain spread as a frenzy of fists and feet landed on me and I heard Mum's voice:

Shut the fuck up!

MUM WAS POWERFUL. SHE made trains stop in their tracks once, along with other women from Raymur who became known as the “Militant Mothers” in the newspaper headlines. We kids would visit our mothers on the train tracks after school as they marched back and forth, wearing signs around their necks and yelling at conductors who inched the trains close to the tent pitched across the rail bed. The women demanded a pedestrian overpass, so the Project children would have a safe way to walk to and from the elementary school on the far side. Mum wrote the press releases.

Until grade 3, children from Raymur were schooled in two portable classrooms set up on the gravel lot to the south, so the smallest children were saved from having to cross the tracks at all. When we first moved in, Griff and I both attended the portables. But he moved on to grade 3 in September, joining Erik at the big-kid school, and I was left to walk the length of the Project each morning alone.

This was when Trudy W. introduced me to the economy of intimidation.

Trudy was my age. She lived in one of the row houses in the middle of Raymur. Other kids talked about her family as a mean family, to be avoided, but Trudy stationed herself along my path before school each morning. She was like the troll under the bridge in *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*—she leapt out at me, demanding twenty-five cents for my passage. Or else. At our first encounter, I got off scot-free because I was new and didn’t know I was supposed to bring money. Fair is fair, even to a seven-year-old thug. But Trudy warned me for next time. Or else. If I didn’t pay, she’d beat me up.

Dutifully, I began stealing quarters out of Mum’s purse whenever I saw the chance—at night, or when she was in the bathroom. As I grew bolder, I sometimes took more than one, stashing the spare against future need.

After the city agreed to build the overpass, the Mothers waged other wars in the neighbourhood. Mum and a few others staged a sit-down strike on the steps to the portable classrooms. They didn’t think it was right that the three women teachers got one toilet all to themselves while the boys and girls—seventy-five or eighty of us—had to share one toilet per sex. Next, the Mothers organized a co-operative food store in the basement of our high-rise. They sold each other membership shares and volunteered for shifts as cashier.

When one of the women pointed out that the group was going to need someone to keep track of finances, Mum, who had finished her high school program by then, started looking for correspondence courses in accounting.

“I guess I’d better become a bookkeeper,” she said.

WHEN I WAS EIGHT and a half and Dad had already moved to Europe with his girlfriend, Mum married for the third time. A man named Bill. We moved from Raymur to another Project slightly south, and I moved to my fourth school.

We kids didn't like Bill and he didn't like us. He was a mean, wrinkly old man with a grey, stubbled face. He smelled stale. Spittle gathered in the corners of his mouth, and his fingernails were thick, gnarly uncut claws, his middle fingers stained orange-yellow. When he was home for supper, nobody talked at the table. One of Bill's legs didn't work right and he used a three-pronged metal walker to get around. *Clomp, shuffle, clomp, shuffle, clomp.* He especially disliked Erik. Sometimes, as he *clomp-shuffled* behind the couch where we sat watching television, he'd swat at the back of my brother's head.

I found a stray kitten in the parking lot after school one day, at dusk. I brought her home. Mum said I could keep her, but Bill hated cats, and he told me no. So I put her out again at bedtime. But she was there at our front step when I returned from school the next afternoon, so I scooped her up and took her back inside. I was playing with her on my bed upstairs when Bill pushed open my door.

"Bitch," he snarled.

Home early?

He *clomp-shuffled* into my room. Then he raised his arm and swung the three-pronged end of the walker at me. I dodged, slipping beyond his teetering reach, opened my bedroom window and hoisted myself onto the ledge. I dropped the kitten, then spun around onto my tummy, legs outs, and stretched my toes down. My fingers gripped the sill as my foot searched for the laundry line wheel where it was anchored against the side—*there, just like my big brothers taught me*—and then pushed off, dropping to the ground. I scooped the kitten and ran for my friend Alice's house.

Soon after my leap out the window, Mum plotted our real escape. One morning, she told us her secret plan, minutes after Bill left for work. It was a weekday, but we were not going to school. A moving truck and three burly men appeared. As a few small boxes and some furniture were loaded onto the truck, she told us to grab our favourite things and wait outside. A taxi was coming.

We lived for several weeks in a big heap in a one-room cottage-style motel on the ugliest stretch of Kingsway. She reminded us every day not to tell anyone where we were. This was how I came to understand that she was scared that Bill was searching and he would find us. When Mum ran out of money to pay for the motel, she said we had to split up: she and I—and Charlie, my kitten—went to stay in the basement of a friend of Mum's cousin Carol. Erik and Griff got to stay with Carol, whose house was brimming with four boys already.

While we were in hiding, I memorized city streets and routes in this new part of the east end. I cycled from various safe houses to my grade 4 classroom, switching up my route daily in my attempt to outsmart the stepfather who I imagined could see all. He was the ogre from fairy tales who eats children, and he was hunting me, but I would be quick and brave. I stayed ever alert—I was vigilance on wheels—until I reached school, where I was *safe*—where I was *always safe*, where I was *home free*.

WHILE MUM WAS ALIVE, memory was too often a family pastime—a supper-time digression that one didn't ever really mean to engage in. The conversations at the table drifted into a rehearsal of dates and places and times, and without fail someone would turn to her and ask, *Where were we living when...?* The mark of a tribe of travelers.

We kids knew the rules around these sessions. We fed her queries that opened up acceptable stories—slapstick, irony, triumph—veering away from memories of the mugs of hot coffee she routinely hurled at bedroom walls; the time at Maple Street when she upended the kitchen table while all six kids were slurping away at their breakfast cereal; the time she nailed her bedroom door shut so we'd stop coming in to ask when she was going to get up; or the time she chased Jill around, swinging a hammer at her, until my sister dove out the living room window.

Instead, we colluded to rehearse tales of good times.

Even so, it embarrassed me when this activity took over while any non-Stainsbys were around the table. *What other families dwell in the past as much as we do?* Cringing, I could only hope that the friend who sat with us on any given day was entertained by Mum's oral histories, by her outrageousness or her wit, as frequently she arrived at some moment in a tale when she'd been subversive, or brilliant, or bold. Sticking it to the man was her hallmark. But there was always the risk the story would descend into self-pity or martyrdom, as she recalled past wrongs done her, adversities she'd overcome through sheer tenacity, particular unkindnesses and injustices visited upon her by men: by her father, my father, her boss, some asshole at a gas station. My mother prized tenacity—tenacity and cleverness—above all else.

I memorized many lists and bundles of information after mastering those pages from *Charlotte's Web*. Like the American Sign Language alphabet, after I met a deaf girl in the family high-rise in Raymur. And multiplication tables, in grade 4—which brought me special praise from my beloved teacher, Mrs. Janzen, who rewarded speed and accuracy in recitations at the front of the class. I entranced myself reciting my favourites—the 7 and the 9 times tables—as I walked to school alone most mornings, just as I would soon learn to memorize the finger placements for notes on the clarinet in band class. At the end of that year—during my weeks of cycling to school from various safe houses—Mrs. Janzen awarded me my first academic prize, an achievement award for being her top student.

The next year, when Mum was dating Costa, a cook from a lumber camp, I memorized the letters of the Greek alphabet: alpha through omega. And I took to entertaining myself while falling asleep at night to the chant-like effort of rehearsing my family's old phone numbers, from Maple Street to wherever we were living at the time, then the birthdays of my five older siblings, three of whom—the Bigs—seemed to have vanished.

AFTER OUR TIME IN separate shelters, Mum and I were re-united with the boys when we moved back to Raymur. We were assigned a row house this time, an 850 ft² three-bedroom unit overlooking the parking lot and the open dumpsters behind the Russian Folks' Home. This was the first time in all our travels that there was any sense of return, of coming home. I transferred back to one of my former schools for fifth grade. Mum seemed happier for a while.

I hadn't seen my dad since I was seven, when he quit his regular job at the *Vancouver Sun* daily newspaper to go freelance, packed some belongings into his red van and drove it into the belly of a big ocean liner. He and his girlfriend sailed to Amsterdam. He wrote once in a while, mostly postcards, and I wrote back. Once, I added,

"I don't remember what you look like. Please send a picture."

One day after school, a small package arrived with the mail, postmarked Positano, Italy. When Mum got home, she opened it. Inside, there was a note saying that Dad had been living in Italy since the summer and loved it there. He sent each of us a small, individually wrapped present for Christmas. It was November. Mum refused to let us open them.

"The son of a bitch doesn't deserve your thanks for trinkets if he isn't going to help feed you."

The presents sat on a kitchen shelf. When cousin Carol came over on Christmas Eve, I pointed at the small pile of wrapped parcels, my eyes filling with tears, so Carol asked about them. Her response to the story was sharp.

"Judy! Give the children their presents, for heaven's sake!"

Mum scowled but handed them over.

WHEN I WAS TEN, I met a man I was told to call Uncle Don. He was the uncle of my friend Alice—only Alice told me that in her family, each of her dad’s six brothers was usually called by the name of one of the Seven Dwarves. Her dead father had been Doc or Dopey. I could also call Uncle Don “Happy.”

That summer, Alice and I took a long Greyhound bus ride to Kamloops, an interior town in the Okanagan desert of British Columbia. Our mothers sent us to visit Happy and his wife, to get us out of the inner city. We were to spend a week swimming, playing by the desert lake, climbing in the scrub on the dusty hills. We raced after ice-cream trucks and slurped on endless Popsicles. We got sunburnt, then rubbed our itchy, blistered bodies up against door frames, slathered each other with soothing Noxzema, then took turns peeling moist, spongy strips of burst skin from each other’s backs.

A couple of days after we’d arrived, Happy offered to tuck us in at bedtime. We washed and changed into our nighties, then he came to the bedroom, carrying a book. The three of us lay on our tummies on the one big bed, Happy in the middle. He propped the book open on the pillow, holding down a page with one hand as he read. I propped my head up, my chin resting on my fists, looking on, listening.

As Happy read, I felt something brush against my calf. Then it moved, sliding, lightly touching, up my leg and under my nightgown, then further up, until a tickly fluttering brushed across a place no one had ever touched me. Then a sudden stab as something entered me.

Happy kept reading.

The pages grew blurry, out of focus. The voice drifted away. The fingers pushed deeper, pressing in, slipping out—in, out, in, out. When he was finished, Happy kissed us each on the forehead, turned out the light, said *Good night*.

I turned to the wall and went to sleep.

The next day, when we were away from the grown-ups, I whispered to Alice that her uncle had touched me and I wanted to go home. I asked her to phone her mum. My friend became angry. She called me a liar. She refused to talk with her aunt or call her mother. When we were called to dinner, she hissed at me to shut up and went to the table.

At bedtime, Happy announced he would come tuck us in again. Again, the three of us lay on the bed, and again, lying between us, he opened a book and started to read. Again, his hand brushed against my lower leg, stroking it. Then it began moving up. Up, under the hem of my nightgown. Higher. This time, however, when Happy’s hand slid to the inside tops of my thighs, his fingers met the cotton fabric of my underwear. He pressed briefly—a closed door—then withdrew.

Dialogues with My Mother, 4

When my first-born daughter is home from hospital, my mother—now her Nana—cuts back to half-days at her accounting job, stretching three weeks into six weeks' vacation to help me and the baby's dad adjust to our new lives as parents. Mum says she wants to be of service. She sounds gleeful when describing the chaos she imagines she'll be rescuing us from—messes to be tidied, dishes to be washed, meals to be cooked, groceries to be hauled home, diapers to be changed, bedding to be changed, nightgowns and nursing bras to be changed....

And, of course, she will mind our baby girl while I nap between feeds.

Mum doesn't know that when she touches my precious infant, my heart knocks against my breastbone, my ears roar with deafening waves of adrenalin-filled blood. When she lifts wee Erin into her arms, I freeze. I cannot breathe. I cannot speak.

In those first days, I battle a fierce instinct to shield Erin from her, to never ever *ever* leave my daughter in her Nana's care. I act politely surprised when Mum notes that we seem on top of the chores without her help, then clean house in a deranged frenzy before she comes again. I chatter brightly during her visits. I admit no fatigue, then nap deeply the minute she is out the door. I allow no need that she can fill, no chink in my armour.

When Erin is about two weeks old, Mum says she might just as well be working full days, we're getting along so well. After she leaves, my husband prods me to throw her a bone. Give her a role. Find *something*. So I phone Mum that afternoon, at work, and ask if she could possibly take over the laundry. Battling a rising panic, I push on. I make out that this chore is defeating me. We are using a diaper service, but we're drowning in my milk-sodden nightgowns and bedsheets. We don't have a proper washing machine, just a hose-filled manual spinner that has to be hauled out and hooked up to the bathtub faucet. It shoots soapy tap-water back into the bathtub to drain—and we keep re-filling until the water runs clear. We have no clothes dryer, and it's January, so our backyard clothesline is no help. As graduate students, we cannot afford the expense of a laundromat.

Mum brightens. I can hear it even over the phone. The next day, she begins daily laundry runs between our houses—happy, proud to be keeping our linen closets and dresser drawers stocked.

A new level of crazy erupts in me. As soon as Mum drops off the clean loads, I haul out and hook up the spinner tub, fill it with scalding water and scented soap. I re-wash everything.

I WAS ALSO TEN the year Mum borrowed plane fare from Granny to send Griff and me to London, where Dad and his girlfriend had settled for their second year abroad. We would stay a month. Erik had gone the year before, on his own.

Dad didn't ask for these visits—they were his punishment for running away, Mum's way of lashing out at the world traveller whose child support cheques had stopped coming. We knew we were being inflicted on him as a responsibility and a burden.

At airport security, Mum kneeled in front of me to zip up my jacket, then looked at me briefly before pushing me toward the gates.

"Your dad will have to give you your allowance for the next month. Off you go."

Before we'd left, my grade five teacher, Mrs. Turneau, assigned me daily journal writing as homework, so I could report back to the kids in east Vancouver about my travels.

Dad and his girlfriend and their black dog lived in a flat in north London, in Hendon Lane. Initially, we were sent to a school during the day, with a boy they knew who was Griff's age, but Dad also took us around the city to show us sights. I wrote lots and lots in my journal at the end of each day, for Mrs. Turneau.

One night, after tucking us in, Dad paused at the bedroom door.

"Mugwump," he began, "I read your journal today. I'm glad you're having a good time. But would you mind if I asked you to change something? It might look better if you referred to my wife, rather than my girlfriend."

On our last evening there, we went to their favourite Italian restaurant. I ate chicken Kiev, sipped wine and liqueur and drank coffee, all for the first time. I giggled when I was serenaded at the table by the owners, brothers Gino and Marco. I was happy—right up until I burst into tears over the brandy-soaked trifle.

My father laughingly waved off the embarrassed waiters.

"She's just homesick."

This was true, in part, but the tears had come when I'd flashed upon what seemed undeniably true and cruel: I would never feel fully happy again, *ever*, because while I was homesick and missing Mum and Erik, I just suddenly *knew* that as soon as I got home, I would instantly ache again for Dad. I crawled into his lap and tried to tell him this as best I could. Then I buried my face in his rough, bearded neck and cried myself out.

II. Nineteen Seventy-Nine

SINCE JANUARY 20TH, 1979, a film reel has run on loop without end, a single endless night unfolding inside me. Over and again, projection lights flicker and pull my inner eye back to the screen, back to the story that only recedes behind the curtain, never ends. Each time it erupts, sudden signals at the edge of my vision disorient me, sometimes fetch back food I've just swallowed.

The full story lasts a couple of hours. Or it would, if the movie ever ran its course, front to back without jump cuts, back-flashes, repetitions. But one particular scene—a rapid-fire series of images (*lasting, what, seconds?*)—crowds out the rest of the story, etching its groove deep through my mind.

“Run!” I hear Jamie yell, and I look over my shoulder into the rear of the van to see her and Jocelyn bust through the back door and go into the night—I see silhouettes, frizzy hair, upper bodies backlit by distant streetlamps, as my girlfriends melt away and are gone, gone—someone slams the back door shut. I turn front again and my right hand reaches for the door handle, it gives, the door opens, I am leaning partway out the passenger’s side, my upper body leading the way, my right foot free, stretching for earth, but my left leg catches—it’s in a full-length cast, it won’t bend—I am stuck, half-in, half-out, a man on the front seat yanking on my left arm. He pulls me back inside, punches down on the lock, one hand still on my arm, the other goes for my throat, and he pulls me with him to the back. Another man, the driver, pushes me between the seats and we fall, spilling into the dark, and someone else—the third man?—tugs at me, yanks up hard and then shoves me onto a plank, a platform to the side, and as one man pins down my arms, another tugs at my shoes—

JANUARY 20TH, 1979. When this night is mentioned—when anything reminiscent of it is mentioned, including the words *Jamie, Jocelyn, Friday, January, men, van, beach, cast, night, door*—the film bursts onto the screen once more. It is always running, and yet it always starts over here, *in medias res*, the camera anchored to a front row seat, its lens turned on the emptying back of the van as two girls spill into the night.

“Run!”

Over and over, again and again the images erupt from “Run!”—from frizzy-hair silhouettes, curls resolving into wisps of light that flit away like dying sparks, embers flung from the shoulders of vanishing friends.

“Run!”

That black hole where faces should be.

“Run!”

The camera always pulls back then, withdraws—*interior shot: darkness*—up to where the main character sits in the front seat, a brief sweep across her lap before zooming in.

Close-up: the left leg stretched out straight, unbending as a corpse.

Freeze: the angle communicates the rigidity of the leg, the handicap that explains the fate of the girl left behind.

“Run!”

Jump cut.

On the rare occasion I'm asked what I remember of those pre-dawn hours in 1979, I can push the film past this perpetual scene, force the reel forward to other images, other collections of images and later sensations that also come linked together in sequence.

I remember a violent thump on the passenger door, a burst of light and voices.
I remember men withdrawing from my body, hissing.
I remember being last out, stepping half-clad into flickering lights, fear.
I remember my shoes sinking into softness, sand.
I remember a man's voice: *"Up against the van."*
I remember hesitating, not sure if the voice meant me, then turning.
I remember three men leaning spread eagle against the van, faces turned away.
I remember a touch at my elbow, a woman: *"Not you."*
I remember this woman walking me away from the sand, the van, the men.
I remember stepping onto firmer ground, packed soil beneath my feet.
I remember slipping within a circle of dangling willow branches, a wispy curtain of leaves.
I remember a slight rise in the earth, crossing a wooden footbridge.
I remember gliding into darkness in a police car, away from the sand, the van, the men.
I remember the suddenness of streetlights.
I remember passing my friends at a bus shelter—sitting, just as if a bus were coming.
I remember Jocelyn's face—serious—scared—gone.
I remember brighter lights.
I remember hard floors, the tug of clothes lifted off, the tug of a gown pulled down, blue.
I remember cold air moving around bodies—policemen, a policewoman, nurses, doctors.
I remember tilting forward at the edge of a bed, hair dangling over my face like willow leaves.
I remember my sister squatting next to me, her hand on my bare knee, her eyes lifting up.
I remember noise—voices, questions, words—swirling outside the ring of my willow-leaf hair.
I remember my sister's voice: *"Do you want me to call your mum?"*

Jump cut.

It isn't until I rehearse these impressions from first to last that I spot continuity gaps. The black hole is immense. It is deep. It has swallowed everything between *"Run!"* and the beginning of the end, the dénouement.

III. Dialogues with My Daughters

Dialogues with My Daughters, 1

I was in my doctor's consultation room. I'd come to renew a prescription for anti-anxiety medication. My doctor—a younger woman I'd been seeing only since my GP of over thirty years retired—was looking at my file on her office computer when she noticed she hadn't yet done a proper "get to know you" interview. She began asking me questions about my personal and family history.

Then she reached this one—*Any childhood trauma, sexual assault, abuse?*

Where to begin?

I rattled off a few of the main beats in the narrative of my early life: the multiple marriages of my parents; the frequent moves, changes of schools, abandonments; my father's drinking, my mother's instability; the economic fall from grace following the divorce that left the Littles and Mum on welfare and in government housing Projects for most of my school years; the fact that Mum kicked one brother and then me out of the house when we were young teens, that we'd lived elsewhere since then, including foster homes and group homes. I listed off this litany of facts, my own well-rehearsed liturgy.

"But the main thing," I said, slowing down, "the main thing for me was a sexual assault when I was fifteen."

My doctor stopped typing, swiveled in her desk chair to look at me straight on. Hands in her lap, she waited. Both my girls see the same doctor, and she's fond of all three of us. I wondered if she were thinking about Erin and Tillie right then.

"It was strangers," I added. "Three of them."

And I briefly touched on the facts—the arrests, the trials.

"But I'm okay," I reassured her. Why I felt the need to add this puzzled me, although I recognized the familiar impulse to dodge pity or concern.

"Do you think you'll ever tell your daughters?"

WHEN ONE IS ABDUCTED and assaulted at fifteen, rescued mid-attack by a swarm of police, there is never going to be any real choice about privacy. As a teenager, I can't keep to myself what has already, before I even get to hospital, become a matter of public record. From that first bang on the van door and the flashlight sweeping across three men leaping up to pull on their jeans, hissing at me to cover myself up, to get dressed, my experience has already become property of the police and the Crown; and it rapidly becomes in part my sister's story, too, and her boyfriend's, since I am a minor and a ward of the Court. The police of course must contact my guardians, who are wakened by urgent knocking and dogs barking and the police standing on the stoop to inform them I am in hospital. They must come. Perhaps the neighbours figure something out before dawn as well. At the hospital, I answer question after question from the adults buzzing around me—nurses, doctors, police—who all have some interest, a professional right to know. While I'm still in a white-lit cubicle wearing the thinnest blue gown, behind the thinnest of curtains, I'm handed a clipboard and a pen and told, *write down what happened*. My sister has brought me a change of clothes—mine, bagged and removed: evidence—and she's advised that I should be seen by someone at Rape Relief right away for additional support. Rape Relief is where I'll be given another clipboard, more forms and encouraged to fill out an application for compensation, and that paperwork will be sent on to a board of some agency overseeing victim services, whose members will read just the thinnest outline of this night that I'll manage to scribble on the page. And because, understandably, they do not feel they can leave me alone, my guardians pack me a bag and take me along on an overnight trip they'd already planned, and this turns my experience inevitably into conversational fodder with the friends they're seeing along the way. When we're home the next day, my sister feels she should tell our father—and he naturally shares the story with his wife, then calls my mother and speaks to my closest brother. And so on. The news seeps out, reaching my other siblings over the next few days. Someone tells my social worker, and he makes notes in another file and arranges counselling for me. Standard protocol for sexual assault victims, even in the days before AIDS, involves prophylactic drugs in case of sexually transmissible disease, as well as a morning-after pill, and these are dispensed to me at the hospital, and file notes and test results are forwarded to my family doctor, whose office calls to advise me to come in for a prescription, more medication, since I have contracted haemophilus. And finally, months later, a subpoena arrives, and a prosecutor's office contacts me to prepare for a trial—which becomes two trials—where I am compelled to answer any and all questions put to me, again and again and again, by an expanding panel of faces all staring at me, strangers demanding my words.

Through all this, through ripples and waves of my deepening grasp of what no one ever actually says, I understand: withholding is not an option.

It takes time for these waves to lessen in frequency and diminish, to dribble down into the lesser edges of my life. Only then does the question of stewardship, of ownership over this experience, begin to take shape. The idea that I can choose between privacy and disclosure is strange; it isn't clear for many years. But time passes. I meet people who have no idea. I lose touch with people who knew me in 1979. Those still around, mostly family, don't ask me. They never mention *it*. Perhaps they assume *it's* all over—perhaps they don't want to upset me—perhaps they think I've moved on.

How can I say otherwise? I don't even know what that means.

[The above sample/excerpt from the creative manuscript ends here.]

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS on CHASING PEACE: A Memoir

A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom. Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to *make* of what happened. For that the power of imagination is required.

– Vivian Gornick¹

As a memoir, this manuscript tells a true story. It tells several true stories. But its significance, if it has any, lies not in the details or “raw material” on the page but in the work’s effort after meaning. One reason this work is a memoir and not an historical document is that the portal through which it attempts to make meaning is the imagination.

In the autumn of 2017, I crashed head-long into what felt like the limit of my ability to carry on in my professional life as if my trauma past and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) present did not exist. The labour arbitration process in which I was to testify was the catalyst for change: it led me to begin making disclosures about my condition that I had never planned to make—to be most precise, to make disclosures I had planned *never* to make. The disclosures were not inevitable. For decades, I had evaded, avoided and deceived as required to control my exposure to perceived dangers and threats, and to mask my darkest vulnerabilities. But this time, I chose not to hide.

When I said “yes” and began readying myself to testify, I felt I had chosen to step into a deep and swiftly moving stream. The timeline and necessary preparations for the arbitration were outside my control and swirling around me, dictated by lawyers and advanced by busy teams of Human Resources and union representatives. I was an active part of my team. But I also saw that I had a private responsibility to myself, and an opportunity. I had agreed to testify for the College’s sake, and for my own sake, as a matter of professionalism; but I quickly appreciated that this same “yes” could be life-changing for me, and I dedicated a great deal of psychic and emotional energy over those months to being receptive to difficult growth.

As a kind of side project to preparing the College’s case, I paid attention to what the therapists and psychologists in my life were referring to as my opportunity for “emotionally corrective” experience. I immersed myself in psychiatric literature about PTSD. I walked around in a kind of agitated state, on high alert, committed to making meaning out of this unlooked-for

¹ *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 91.

adventure. I took notes about the parallels and contrasts between my experience of the criminal courts in 1979 and of the provincial labour law system, starting in 2017. In both cases, I was the key witness. From the moment of that “yes,” the interplay between these two experiences was providing what American memoirist Vivian Gornick calls my “situation”²—the context in which this manuscript is set; what I had yet to enjoy was that “flash of insight” she identifies as its “story.”³ That insight, and this story, was another six months—in some ways, decades—in coming.

Informal Preparations

I have been telling and writing some of the stories in this thesis for almost as long as I can remember. (Not all of them—there are important exceptions, which I’ll consider below.)

My grandma Stainsby gave me a diary when I was eleven or twelve, one of those palm-sized cardboard covered books with narrow-lined pages and an ineffective lock. That diary lured me into the discipline of daily writing—until one of my brothers snuck it out from under my pillow and threw my words back at me, laughing the cruel laughter of siblings. After that, I became somewhat more guarded in what I committed to paper, until I left home the next year. As a street waif at fourteen, I carried a facsimile of that earlier diary with me everywhere; I returned to scribbling daily on its small, lined pages. And with the stability and privacy I soon gained, when I moved in with my sister Martha, I began my first auto/biographical work. Speedily, I scratched out a few dozen hand-written pages accounting for those rootless, mostly homeless six months between my mother first booting me out and my sister taking me in. My brother Erik was my sole reader—he read these pages through once before I destroyed them. He was my natural reader: a fellow outcast, booted from our mother’s home three years before I was. At seventeen, he was also writing short stories and, as a self-styled troubadour—an aspiring Gordon Lightfoot—ballads for single voice and guitar. Erik understood and shared my need to sort myself out in words, particularly my confusion, anger and grief at losing contact with our mum. Many of our early childhood wounds connected us still.

² Vivian Gornick, “A Memoirist Defends Her Words,” *Salon*, 12th August 2003, np. [A memoirist defends her words | Salon.com](#). Accessed 15th May 2021.

³ Gornick, 2003, np.

The terrifying events of 1979 cast a long shadow over my writing that has lasted for decades. In the early morning hours after the assault, still in hospital, I was prompted by the police to write a statement. This was only the first of many accounts I would eventually give of the experience—although I’m sure I never came close to the average fifty-seven recitations apparently demanded of victims in some parts of the United States before a rape case even goes to court.⁴ Within days, a Rape Relief counsellor produced a Victim Compensation Application form and encouraged me again to put the experience in writing. I wrote these early statements the only way I knew how, from beginning to end: this happened, then this happened, then this happened. At this early stage, I could provide information, but I was far—decades away—from understanding the *meaning* of what I’d been through. I was already becoming reluctant to disclose detail that was painful to recall. The hesitancy I felt was compounded by what I now understand to have been a trauma response, a drive to avoid reminders of the violence and violation. At the same time, dissociation filled me with a strange numbness and a kind of emotional distance, so that I *could* at least produce these literal accounts. Indeed, I wrote at some length, filling the pages available to me on both forms. But then the long “shadow” of 1979 fell: it functioned like a black hole, sucking in all oxygen and light, and all other material, including those earlier stories of family trauma, abandonment and dislocation that I had been scribbling down only a few months before.

Except for school assignments, I stayed away from writing of all kinds for the next five years, until I was living briefly on my own, at twenty, and I was ambushed by the unexpected radio interview that jolted me into realizing that like the distressed young woman weeping into the airwaves, I, too, had been raped. There was no other word for it—and yet it’s a word I had not used. (Such linguistic evasions, I have since learned by reading more than a dozen rape memoirs—discussed below—is common.) It’s a word I hate and use rarely, generally only of other people. But the shock of this moment loosened something in me, and I began to write the works that eventually brought me to this memoir. This writing has crossed several genres. It has been a sporadic history of sideways glances, of approaching my subject crabwise, so that I could find words for my experience without quite having to own them. My first effort was a short story, “The Scream,” about a girl having to testify at a rape trial without the support of parents; through this story, I found a bridge to conversation with both a new friend and a trusted

⁴ Abigail Goldman, “Rape Still A Crime Where Victim Can Share Blame,” *Las Vegas Sun*, 17th August 2008, np. [Rape still a crime where victim can share blame - Las Vegas Sun Newspaper](#). Accessed 15th May 2021.

teacher. After that, I tucked the story away at the back of a desk drawer and did not share it again even with the man whom I eventually married. The story stayed tucked away so deeply that its hiding place outlasted our marriage. But almost as soon as my husband and I separated, I asked a department colleague if I could sit in on his creative writing class and began to write again. Within a year I had enrolled in a graduate program in liberal studies, where I began to study auto/biography. I chose to tackle an assignment by writing my own piece of creative nonfiction: in “Life in Transit,” I traced my life story through the narrow lens of memories and moments to do with transportation—stringing together vivid childhood memories of times I’d spent on wagons, scooters, roller skates, bicycles, and in cars, buses, trains and vans. When a classmate read my final piece, she encouraged me to see its potential as a stage play—and that sent me off first to a summer writing intensive course, then to a playwriting course, out of which evolved the opening scene of a one-act play that I would flesh out nearly ten years later. That scene grew into a monologue about the impact of Vancouver-area serial killer Clifford Olson on the collective psyche of my hometown: Olson’s abduction and murder of eleven children from the area in 1979–80 haunts the longer play, which focuses on a woman who is herself haunted by the spectre of a child who climbed into a stranger’s van and disappeared forever.

It was at the summer writing intensive course, where I attempted to convert some content from “Life in Transit” into a dramatic script, that I worked with my first writing mentor, an inventive multi-genre writer from the interior of BC named Harold Rhenisch. Unclear what I wanted to do with the piece I’d submitted, Harold asked to speak with me after the workshop. He invited me to talk about my “intentions,” but not long after I began rambling on about Olson’s legacy, he cut me off with the key question:

“What aren’t you saying?”

Of course, I could not tell him. But I continued to engage with the subject of trauma with these sideways skirmishes.

Harold was the first writer/reader to challenge a silence in my writing and push me to go further. But he has not been the last. These silences—glaringly obvious to others, often invisible to me—have been brought to my attention again and again. A few years after we’d met over my Olson script, I began drafting “Lockdown,” the essay about school shootings that I mention in the memoir. I meant for it to be an academic essay, the sort of discussion paper I would enjoy sharing with colleagues. I was planning to research mass shootings in Canadian schools, to pin down how real any risk to teachers like me had become, and to compare that

evidenced-based risk against my *feeling* of risk. But the writing pushed back. The thesis-driven form yielded to a more fluid and personal essay, incorporating memories of my childhood in Raymur and moments of violence from my youth, including my abduction and attack in 1979. Frustrated by my inability to write what I believed I wanted to write, I abandoned the essay—until I began an MFA in 2010: in a creative nonfiction class, I pulled it apart to try weaving it back together again differently. When I'd finished, the piece that had emerged out of the formal essay braided present-day content from College meetings with childhood memories of doors and windows as anxiety triggers. I let another writer, a poet-friend named David Zieroth, read the complete draft. He balked at this passage, which came near the end:

I see the backs of their heads slip through the rear van door, out into the night. The door slams shut.

Lockdown.

I am dragged into the back, my clothes wrenched from my resisting body. (*Fuck! Move over, man.*) Male bravado and laughter on top, my sobs below—three strangers, me, the dark.

I survive because my friends run screaming down the dark Kitsilano streets and bang on doors until the police are raised. I survive, perhaps, only because my friends leave me.

David felt I'd broken my contract with the reader.

"You can't *do* that," he insisted. (*Do what?* I thought) "You can't withhold, be coy. Why build to this moment only to skip over it? You have to say what happened!"

I did not respond. I dissociated, retreating from the conversation into an internal, defensive crouch. This passage had been so much more forthcoming and direct than anything I had yet written about 1979. Far from seeing it as coy, I felt I'd splayed my wounded and violated body on the page, taking myself to the absolute brink of my capacity to tell. The demand that any writing should go further, provide more detail, landed not as a welcome writerly challenge but as a threat. I did not rush home to flesh out the scene to meet this imagined reader's needs; I left this exchange deflated, convinced that what David's kind of reader needed or expected was something I could never give. But I did hang on to my friend's declaration as a question I knew I must wrestle with again, as indeed I did in writing this thesis. (On my ultimate decisions around handling this scene, see below, p. 211)

It was just before I began the MFA program that I first learned that I had been living for decades with PTSD. Over the next few years, I began to let this diagnosis settle into my sense of self. So I was surprised but less threatened when a classmate in a creative writing workshop

complimented me for being brave enough to write about PTSD; I had not recognized that this was what I had done. Looking back, I see plainly that I was trapped in a writerly loop, a recurring compulsion to tackle this story in writing. Through a police statement, a victim compensation statement, a short story, a formal essay, two creative nonfiction stories, a monologue and a one-act stage play—never mind the oral recitations demanded of me at court—over and over again, I was telling it but not telling it. Even in grad school, leaping from genre to genre, I kept circling back around the serious story of 1979. I see only in hindsight that I was in the grip of the trauma survivor’s “psychological imperative, analogous to the legal imperative, to keep telling one’s story until it is heard.”⁵

When I finally proposed to a therapist that I tell her the full story of the night of the attack, I had never heard of narrative exposure therapy⁶ or NET. I was only curious, acting on a hunch that it might be good for me to try the straight-on approach. I wondered what it would feel like to get the story out, from first to last, without pretending it was someone else’s or cloaking it in stage direction or metaphor. And I was lucky that I had a therapist with whom I could do this: although at the time I didn’t see a link between my desire to recite these details in a safe, structured environment and my many failed and fumbled past efforts at telling, I had had endless experience with the harm of broaching my story with people who did not know how to listen or bear witness. This isn’t a matter of blame: I didn’t know what I wanted from these listeners any more than the listeners did. None of us, I believe, understood then what is well-known now, that “[t]he reactions of those who hear rape narratives can have the ability to retraumatize victims.”⁷ While I would not have had the language to describe myself as having been “retraumatized,” with each failed telling I buried the story just a little more deeply and grew just a little more vigilant about evading likely triggers. And so, on the appointed day, after a clumsy preamble about all the reasons why talking it through was a bad idea—particularly my anxiety over burdening my listener with such dark images—I set out to recite the most detailed telling ever of what I remember from 20th January 1979.

This disclosure process proved anti-climactic.

What I hadn’t admitted to either of us was that I had been hoping (naïvely) that this one-time rehearsal of a coherent forward-driven narrative might release me from the

⁵ Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Re-making of a Self* (Princeton UP, 2002), 110.

⁶ See below, p. 221.

⁷ Tara Roeder, “‘You Have to Confess’: Rape and the Politics of Storytelling,” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 9.9(2015): 24.

<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1081&context=jfs>. Accessed 15th May 2021.

compulsive, recursive loop of film that had been playing inside my head for over thirty years—which, of course, it didn't. But in the experience of telling, I *had* been surprised. What surprised me was that I'd found myself weeping intensely only once, and only when I spoke about my mother's emotional absence during the entire ordeal. What I could not see for several years was that those sudden tears were a clue to where the "story" lay. In the therapeutic language of "hot" and "cold" memories⁸—that is, memories that are emotion-laden, confusing, disconnected from immediate context, in contrast with those that appear merely as information, as processed, contextual detail from which a person has achieved emotional distance—in these terms, this memory was white hot. But when I applied for this doctoral program, proposing for my thesis a book-length story about a complex interplay of traumas, in the context of my 2017 arbitration "situation," I was still working to see this story clearly.

Formal Preparations

My initial proposal for what has evolved into *Chasing Peace* was a pitch for a creative nonfiction (memoir) project that would, through auto/biographical material, explore the impact of trauma on one individual's private/family life and professional life. The situation: the way traces of the 1979 criminal story were erupting into and influencing my experience of the 2017 labour arbitration. The story, as I imagined it at the time: a creative exploration of memories on the primary theme of trauma, how its impact can go undetected for decades, manifesting itself subtly (if pathologically) in displaced ways—including, in the family context, through intergenerational transmission; and in the workplace context, through unhealthy practices such as chronic overwork and hypervigilance. In terms of structure, I hoped to avoid "braiding" narratives, or weaving back and forth between times and strands of story, only because I had worked with this technique in some of the stories for my MFA thesis and craved the challenge of writing longer form, with more sustained chronology; I expected to minimize content from early childhood, which I also felt I had explored enough elsewhere. Within these parameters, I proposed to structure the manuscript chronologically, punctuated in regular intervals with one

⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Ann Bevan for this concept and terminology, which informs NET. See also "What Are 'Hot' and 'Cold' Memories?" <https://irmhp-psmir.camhx.ca/cop/blog/-/blogs/what-are-hot-and-cold-memories-the-science-behind-narrative-exposure-therapy-net-for-refugees>. Accessed 17th May 2021; and "Narrative Exposure Therapy V2," nd. https://www.vivo.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Narrative_Exposure_Therapy.pdf. Accessed 8th April 2021.

key auto/biographical scene or episode per approximately every five years, and to mine and explore the echoes flowing from 1979 as the narrative approached 2017. Once I began mapping the work out, however, many of my plans and initial intentions changed. (For expanded discussion of final form and content, see below, p. 198.)

As I developed the proposal, and in the early months of drafting the memoir, I curtailed my reading in the genre of memoir⁹ specifically to avoid works exploring sexual violence and rape trauma. I continued to read in related areas such as grief, family dysfunction and mental and physical illness, but until a first draft of my own work was in hand, I thought it best to avoid what I anticipated might be potential direct influences. My writing would still be informed by a strong foundational knowledge of auto/biographical forms, gained by extensive reading I'd done in the past and by my experience teaching several university-level courses in various subgenres of life writing, including auto/biographical fiction and trauma narrative. On the basis of this foundation, I worked at consolidating my voice and narrative before reading more deeply in the field of trauma memoirs that would serve as direct comparator texts.¹⁰

Overlapping with the preparation of my proposal, I continued to read in psychiatric and neuroscientific literature, deepening my appreciation of the complexities of PTSD. Since I had first mapped my own symptoms against those detailed on the Mayo Clinic's chart,¹¹ as described in the memoir, I had remained intrigued by the breadth of behaviours that had their roots in the condition. So much so that during the early drafting phases, I played with the notion of replicating symptom categories somehow in the manuscript's structure: early on, I plotted out a four-part work in which I might collect up elements of story around the broad categories of intrusive memories; avoidance; negative changes in thinking and mood; and arousal (hypervigilance). And although I soon discarded the idea, recognizing the limited appeal such a clinical approach might have to readers, I clung to the spirit of this use of labelling while drafting several early scenes, assigning some episodes headings that flagged the PTSD symptoms on display.

⁹ See discussion of genre definitions below, p. 218.

¹⁰ See discussion of comparator texts below, p. 225.

¹¹ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>. Accessed 5th August 2017. Reproduced as Appendix B.

Among the research texts I read, in addition to several brief histories of the understanding and treatment of trauma by psychiatric and medical professionals,¹² I benefited most from four core texts. First was Judith Herman's massively influential *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*,¹³ which opens with Herman's own survey of modern concepts of trauma, making a decisive case for recognizing sexual violence and domestic abuse among its most significant and frequent causes. Herman traces diagnostic and treatment practices for trauma from the then-emerging field of psychiatry in the 1890s, through the exploration of the origins of "hysteria" documented in the 1895 patient case studies published by Breuer and Freud,¹⁴ to the evolving recognition over the latter part of the 20th C. that sexual violence, like combat experience, routinely immerses its victims in circumstances in which they are overwhelmed by helplessness and terror in the face of existential danger. Herman's analysis of the manifestations of PTSD especially contributed to my understanding of the mechanism of dissociation. For my understanding of "freezing" (tonic immobility), I am especially indebted to Babette Rothschild's exploration of the field of somatic memory and the physiological bases for PTSD in her work *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*.¹⁵ From *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*,¹⁶ by Bessel van der Kolk, a pre-eminent researcher in trauma-spectrum disorders who works extensively with brain imaging to understand PTSD's neurophysiology, I learned how profoundly the condition changes the brain's wiring. The insights I gained influenced my selection of material, in some cases, and led to some technical experimentation and decisions about craft in my writing that are suffused throughout the memoir, perhaps most evident in my gaining the confidence to try to convey moments of dissociation, freezing and somatic memory.

It was Robert Scaer's study, *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation, and Disease*,¹⁷ that had the most far-reaching impact on just what story I was proposing to tell. More than the other researchers I consulted, Scaer delves into questions of why trauma-

¹² For example, Joanna Bourke's "Sexual Violence, Bodily Pain, and Trauma: A History," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 29.3(2012): 25-51. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4001210/>. Accessed 23rd August 2019.

¹³ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. 1992. NY: Basic Books, 2015.

¹⁴ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*. 1895. 2nd ed. Trans. Nicola Luckhurst. Penguin, 2004.

¹⁵ Norton, 2000.

¹⁶ Penguin, 2014.

¹⁷ 2001. 3rd ed. Routledge, 2014.

induced stress resolves itself for many people but latches on, sending down roots and becoming a long-lasting, even life-long *disorder* for others.¹⁸ He explores several key predictors and necessary preconditions to the development of PTSD, including pre-traumatic life experiences involving “boundary violations” and/or a lack of maternal attunement in early childhood, and a failure of humans in the immediate moments after the traumatic event (the “peri-traumatic” period) to do as other mammals do in “discharging” the freeze reflex that seizes a body when powerless in the face of extreme threat or overwhelming force, usually expressed in the form of exaggerated, violent tremors or shaking.

I was reading Scaer’s work around the time of another session with my therapist, recounted in the memoir, in which she questioned whether I might be over-attributing my PTSD symptoms to events of 1979, suggesting that traces of some other trauma(s) seemed to be contributing to and possibly muddying (her phrase was creating “static” in) my reactions to triggers. She suggested I might want to reflect on that possibility. Instantly I felt one of those “flash[es] of insight” Gornick speaks of: I wasn’t at all sure where exactly it might lead, but it was this moment—its resonance with my recent reading—that ultimately re-framed the question I would explore in the memoir. Instead of remaining tightly defined by the situation of 1979 as set-up for 2017, or of unfolding as a kind of cataloguing of PTSD symptomology, the work would evolve into an interrogation of whether, how and to what extent those early years set me up to respond as I did to events of 1979 (and possibly, later, to those of 2017).

As the writing got underway, I abandoned any suggestion that the memoir might involve a didactic assemblage of what PTSD symptoms “look like,” which would admittedly have narrowed any potential readership. I also rejected the initial structure—a map of my life in five-year intervals—and accepted that the story would expand in as-yet-unknown directions. I found myself working in more scenes from family life, especially those exploring aspects of the mother-daughter relationship that reflected my sense of having been unsafe and at-risk, as well as relationships and circumstances, particularly the presence of siblings and adults outside the home, that provided a counterbalancing stability and acceptance. Since I had already been

¹⁸ Statistics can help us grasp the frequency of a life-sentence of PTSD arising from a rape: consider that 25% of Canadian women are sexually assaulted in their lifetimes; that about 13% of women faced with a traumatizing event develop PTSD; and that for 60% of trauma sufferers, the disorder eventually resolves. Even the very rough math of a non-social scientist can lead us quickly to see that odds are about 1:100 that a Canadian woman will develop enduring PTSD after sexual assault. (Calculation based on statistical frequencies cited in Dave Grice, *Sequelae of Sexual Assault in Women with PTSD: Peritraumatic Dissociation, Provoked Memory, and Organization of Trauma Narratives*, 2006 (Trinity Western U, MA Thesis), 4, 5, 9. https://www.twu.ca/sites/default/files/gricedavid_0.pdf Accessed 10th May 2018.)

intending to explore the impact of my own trauma on my daughters, I could see that opening the story up to complementary content touching on the earlier generation(s) might further deepen the theme of intergenerational trauma in a way that might also be satisfying for both me and the reader. It was only while preparing to undertake the final revisions to the manuscript, while reading more extensively about the determinants of the development of PTSD¹⁹—most importantly, the role of social supports in the early post-traumatic period, including the critical question of how one’s trauma is acknowledged (or not) by close family and friends—that I understood the thematic power of the “hot” memories such as the one discussed above.

My “story” finally and fully came into focus.

Matters of Craft in the Evolving Manuscript

It’s all in the art. You get no credit for living. – V.S. Pritchett²⁰

Living with a manuscript of this length has been like playing for an extended time in a laboratory for creativity. The final memoir emerged over a series of six formal submissions, and my creative and technical skills, like my plans for the memoir, evolved alongside the growing manuscript. Although I began receiving feedback from supervisors on all aspects of the emerging work from the point of the first submission, as much as I could bear, I resisted my compulsive appetite for editing and set aside many significant questions of craft in these early stages, content to just “get it down” on the page.

In its final form, the work comprises five distinct, separately titled sections, each containing many smaller “scenes” or episodes that range in length from a few lines to nearly three pages. Informing and guiding many revisions and stylistic edits was an early conviction—reinforced at every decision point—that I wanted to produce a literary memoir rather than a research-based academic or popular book about sexual assault, trauma or PTSD. Accordingly, the following reflections on craft and how the manuscript has taken shape are organized first around matters of form and content, then those of style and voice.

¹⁹ See Grice, 15; and Suzanne Ogden, *Narrative Coherence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptomatology Following Combat in Iraq and Afghanistan*, 2010 (U of Lincoln, PhD dissertation), 62-66.

²⁰ As qtd in Mimi Schwartz, “Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the Line?” *Creative Nonfiction* 10(1998): np. [Memoir? Fiction? Where's the Line? - Creative Nonfiction Creative Nonfiction](#). Accessed 30th April 2021.

Form and Content

Liberated from my early plan to write twelve equally spaced episodes along a timeline, I brainstormed a longer, messier list of incidents and memories that resonated in any way with the broadened scope of the memoir. This new list included all twelve original incidents and many more—and even more suggested themselves during the drafting process, in that way memory has of rewarding your attention to one moment by opening the door to another, previously forgotten one. Despite my earlier plan to minimize early childhood memories, I added several such scenes, particularly those with traumatic weight: this was consistent with my sharpening clarity on the story, and my growing recognition (thanks both to therapy and to Robert Scaer) that the traumatic experiences of 1979 were not the whole context for navigating 2017 but had only layered over and compounded earlier trauma, especially that arising from repeated parental abandonments. For this reason, the childhood content would become more than “backstory” in the manuscript. After producing a horizontal timeline, annotating each remembered moment in tiny, crimped letters in a variety of colours, I began writing by simply choosing one “point” on the timeline and drafting the corresponding scene, then moving on to another.

I let instinct and whim lead me, initially without regard for chronology or concern for the ultimate sequencing as “scenes” began to amass. I labelled them as per the timeline, some with year and location (e.g., “1973 – Kamloops”), others with thematic labels for the categories of PTSD symptom mentioned above (e.g., “Avoidance” and “Hypervigilance”), still others with experiential/thematic categories I expected would surface repeatedly throughout the unfolding manuscript (e.g., “Trauma” and “Disclosure”). At the point of first submission, the writing (approximately 27,000 words) contained a mixture of story-based scenes and “essayistic” or explanatory prose, frequently but not always used to contextualize the scenes with my understanding about PTSD. In keeping with feedback and my goal to produce a literary work, I subsequently chipped away at the expository content, trimming it back with each draft. I strove to become more adept at avoiding the initial production of it, too; to this same end, I also excluded direct use of “research” materials, even though I had initially supposed I might somehow integrate some of the neuroscientific and psychiatric literature mentioned above. With the second submission (approximately 54,000 words), scene headings had lost reference to time and place, in favour of broad and recurring thematic groups (e.g., “Memory” and

“Trauma”), and an expanded section dedicated to reflections on PTSD served as a separate final section.

As Gornick asserts—and memoirists know too well—“What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to *make* of what happened.”²¹ As scenes emerged as discrete moments, I continued to wrestle to find the shape of the story. In the end, the sequencing across the large divisions reflects a forward chronological movement—generally but not strictly—from early childhood to present day, while some of the chronology is refracted through retrospective commentary, and some scenes told from the point of view of an older self are braided in with the otherwise-linear chronology. Arriving at this final structure was not simple or quick but resulted from playing with multiple possibilities over successive drafts.

The opening section, “Dialogues with My Mother,” covers material chronologically from the period 1963–1978, spanning the narrator’s infancy to fourteen years of age, with periodic intrusions of the older narrator attempting to understand the impact of her mother having abandoned the family when the narrator was five years old. These intrusions include brief moments from a single evening’s dinner conversation between the narrator and her mother, when the narrator is thirty years of age, and a few later related scenes; these episodes stand apart visually from the unfolding childhood narrative by virtue of the recurring heading “Dialogues with My Mother” and the placement of each “Dialogue” passage on a fresh page. My decision to weave this dinner conversation across the section reflects my aim that the scene should, by such framing, suggest the implied purpose for revisiting the early childhood material: that is, to elaborate on and understand how the narrator’s earlier, foundational traumas might have pre-disposed her to develop PTSD prior to the events of 1979. I hope the reader is engaged by the variety and pacing here, as well as by the sense of narrative build-up towards the mother’s reply (or non-reply) to the narrator’s question. The layout of episodes—of which there are now more than thirty-five in this opening section—allows for considerable blank or “white” space between memories, evocative of the gaps in time and recollection that recall of early childhood is subject to. The exact placement of dinner scene instalments among these other scenes is somewhat intuitive, informed by hunches about the reader’s need for variety and effective pacing, as well as the opportunity to exploit the potential of provocative juxtapositions.

²¹ Gornick, 2001, 91.

Expanding early childhood material quickly raised other content considerations, tied to point of view. It is the nature of a trauma memoir that one emphasizes, by selection and examination, experiences that were profoundly hurtful or damaging. Lining up episode after episode of such material, one can quickly create the impression that all was horror and suffering in one's life. Yet as a matter of tone and sentiment, it was never my goal to render this story through a lens wholly darkened by misery. Such a rendering would be unpalatable to me and feel untrue—I do, after all, remember happy times from childhood, and have in many ways felt myself lucky in life. Nowhere was my concern with balance as aroused as in the portrait of my mother. I had no interest in presenting her in a wholly negative way²² or reducing her to a villain, an easy scapegoat for my own character or problems, given the increasing compassion I feel for her and my memories of her. I sent in a note along with my first submission to the effect that I was fretting over the possibility I could already see that my mother could easily appear as some sort of monster. The truth of my experience of her instability, when I was a small child, is that she was a terrifyingly powerful and capricious force, rarely a source of comfort or safe harbour; the fact that I now look back with empathy on her struggles with mental illness, and on her own childhood abandonments and neglect, does not militate against the reality that I experienced her, especially in my early years, as someone who often hurt me, both passively by withholding love and actively by her knack for cruelty and occasional violence. And it was the child's point of view I was striving to convey, which required giving voice to those experiences.

I looked for strategies to humanize the characterization of my mother without violating my efforts to convey as authentically as possible the child's perceptions and memories. For example, in successive drafts, I added material recalling some of her creative gifts, her love of animals, her efforts in our mature relationship to be supportive; and I explored moments that suggested that she (like all of us) was influenced by formative relationships with her own parents. I went on to develop material to introduce those parents: this content added a welcome layer to the story, complementing my interest in exploring intergenerational trauma. Among the last edits I made to the opening section were small touches expanding the presence of my grandparents. And—among the most difficult changes made in this spirit, of balancing my portrait of my mother—I pushed myself to own up to ways I believe I failed or betrayed her, or otherwise contributed to the stagnant relationship between us. In these and other ways, I tried

²² My aversion to creating a parental “monster” figure alone might disqualify this memoir from the label “misery lit,” about which, see below, p. 212.

out of my “need to make sense of a strong but vexing relationship,” and to lend my mother’s portrayal and presence what Gornick calls “texture,”²³ to live up to Gornick’s reminder that a memoir must “shape a piece of experience so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one with meaning for the disinterested reader.”²⁴

Other fundamental structure- and content-related questions came bundled up with the problems of memory and time, their role in the memoir, including the exploration of the way traumatic memory insinuates itself into so many dimensions of life and collapses time. What “time” to establish as the baseline? Which periods to present retrospectively? And how to introduce memory evoked by association as distinct from “flashbacks” evoked by trauma trigger? While I quickly settled on an essentially chronological approach across the larger manuscript (as noted above), within sections I played extensively with continuity breaks and episodic interruptions to the dominant (linear) chronology, most of which play off some question of memory and/or disclosure. In early drafts, to facilitate experimentation, I inserted page breaks between each scene in the three “Dialogues” sections: this made it easy to shuffle scenes on the printed page, so I could consider how placements and juxtapositions might influence the overall pacing, rhythm and implied thematic links across episodes, the natural fluidity evocative, I hoped, of the way memory generally works, so often taking us by surprise, as it sorts and sifts and skips along by association. My aim here was to create opportunity for the reader to share in the experience of discovering these implied links and associations.

Memory is a vexed question in any memoir. How could it not be? Science tells us that memory is unstable and fluid—that memories are influenced by the language we dress them in and can change clothing with each act of recall. Memories can also be repressed; some believe they can be planted by wily therapists.²⁵ Fortunately, as Gornick reminds us, “memoirs belong to the category of literature, not of journalism,”²⁶ and memoirists hope that readers will not quibble over the colour of someone’s shoes or the weather on the afternoon someone died. And yet, so much depends upon the reader’s trust that the memoir’s narrator is presenting

²³ Vivian Gornick as qtd in Maria Popova, “How to Own Your Own Story: Vivian Gornick on the Art of Personal Narrative and Nuanced Storytelling,” *Brain Pickings*, 22nd June 2015, np. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/22/vivian-gornick-the-situation-and-the-story-personal-narrative/>. Accessed 14th May 2021.

²⁴ Gornick, 2003, np.

²⁵ For a recent discussion of the influence of a key proponent of “false memory syndrome,” in the context of #MeToo, see Rachel Aviv, “How Elizabeth Loftus Changed the Meaning of Memory,” *The New Yorker*, 5th April 2021, np. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/05/how-elizabeth-loftus-changed-the-meaning-of-memory>. Accessed 15th April 2021.

²⁶ Gornick, 2003, np.

memories credibly, sincerely. The trust operating between reader and narrator is central to Philippe Lejeune's conception of "the autobiographical pact":

In effect, the autobiographical pact is a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some important historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and understand his or her own life.²⁷

Put more colloquially, "What a memoirist owes the reader is the ability to persuade that the narrator is trying, as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the experience at hand."²⁸ When that experience is not only decades removed from the writing but also viewed through the extra-distorting filter of trauma, signaling that one is sincerely trying to "get to the bottom" of it, in good faith, can be especially tricky. This difficulty is only exaggerated when the story contains good reason to mistrust the narrator's memory.

Chasing Peace opens with something of a memory quest, as the narrator seeks to recover presumed memories that do not surface when bidden but remain blocked. Through the fragments of "Dialogues with My Mother," this section dwells precisely on an important memory gap—the narrator hungers to remember early childhood experiences by which she feels haunted despite not being able to see clearly what haunts her. And this same section ends with a scene that is entirely fictionalized: it offers a speculative account of a car accident that the narrator learns about only after the deaths of her parents, the details and context of which she cannot corroborate with anyone living. Piecing together clues from extant letters, I rendered the scene in a way that holds explanatory power and feels "true" to my experience of my parents. But it remains only an intuited if educated guess, presented in italicized text as a way of signaling the creative license being taken, in the absence of first-hand memory or eye-witness account. Some readers may balk at finding such an invention embedded in a work labelled "memoir," but I would argue my choice here differs only by degree, not by kind, from the countless writerly decisions that every memoirist must make while trying to "get to the bottom of the experience at hand." My hope is that being open in such ways to occasions when memory cannot serve will ultimately bolster the narrator's credibility with the reader in other moments, when material appears as confident (sometimes corroborated, documented) recollection.

²⁷ Paul John Eakin, Foreword, *On Autobiography* by Philippe Lejeune. Trans. Katherine Leary. *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 52 (U of Minnesota P, 1989), ix.

²⁸ Gornick, 2003, np.

My concern to sustain the reader's trust influenced other content decisions linked to memory. For example, I expect (and hope) that the inclusion of detail about the narrator's younger self's disciplined approach to the "game" of memorization and recitation, about how she cultivated memory as a self-soothing technique, contributes to her reliability when she describes other scenes of early family life with vivid recall. At other moments, anxiety over the accuracy of memory led me to back off a level of specificity, so I could feel confident myself in my detail. For example, when describing the evening my father killed a family cat, I had initially identified the cat by name, as Thursday; when I shared the draft scene with one of my brothers, he responded by saying that I had "nailed it" in terms of sequence and atmosphere, but his memory was that our father had killed another cat, one of Thursday's offspring named Tuesday. After discussing the story, we both remained certain of the accuracy of our own memories. We were only five and six years old at the time, so either of us could have been correct; however, to avoid the possibility that I might introduce factual error, I resolved my own doubt in the next draft simply by having the cat appear unnamed. It was only some weeks later, after speaking with our sister Martha—who was adamant that it was Thursday who had eaten her baby mice—that I reinstated the name, opting to defer to the memory of the sibling who was, after all, thirteen years old at the time of the traumatic incident, and at its emotional centre.

As I was completing the first draft of the manuscript, I confronted another, much more significant "problem" of confirmed memory error: as described in the concluding section, it was only in the process of writing this work that I finally examined the contents of the file I'd been given by the Registry Clerk at the BC Supreme Court in 2018. There, I discovered that the subpoena I received on the front steps of my mother's home in September of 1979 was not for the pre-trial at the old Main Street courthouse, as described in the memoir, but for the actual trial at British Columbia's Supreme Court in late November. The pre-trial, I also learned, had taken place four months earlier, in May of 1979. This is more than a surface error on my part: it subtly changes the context, for instance, of my sister and father coming to the Main Street court to take me out for lunch, which I had misconstrued, looking back, as their way of staying in touch despite my having moved back in with my mother. It shifts the season, too, when I walked alone to the courthouse in the morning, steps behind my silent mother. And it means these walks happened only for one trial, not both. What to do, now that I saw these mistakes? Given the importance of the subpoena scene to the work's characterization of the mother-daughter relationship, I could not simply excise it, in the same manner I had (temporarily) erased the cat's name. The details and deep emotional content of the primary scene—certainly one of *the* most

devastating scenes between mother and narrator—remain true to my memory; only its context is inaccurate. Still, for integrity’s sake, I felt the need to account for this discovery. My options seemed limited to re-writing the relevant sections to attribute the subpoena properly to the Supreme Court trial—which would have created a new puzzle, of how to account for the pre-trial having taken place before my unravelling on Davie Street, before my grandmother’s funeral and before my decision to move home—or letting my conflation of events and times stand as written.

Before opting for the latter course, I reflected on my resistance to re-writing the relevant scenes to match my discovery of “the truth.” This resistance may seem arbitrary, given the admission above that the manuscript includes an imagined scene of my mother’s first breakdown, a scene in which I appear only as an infant. A crucial difference between these moments is that I have no memory of that breakdown, the car accident surrounding it or the fact that my mother stopped breastfeeding me abruptly because she was hospitalized. What I do have are these bare facts, and they sketch an outline that a memoirist quite reasonably and creatively views much as the “black-and-white line drawings”²⁹ in a colouring book: the facts invite me to write into a known gap, to interpolate, to colour in those drawings. So long as I “[g]o for the emotional truth,”³⁰ and my narrator’s intention is still to work in good faith, I am in no conflict whilst imagining this scene. By contrast, I have a clear and powerful memory of the afternoon the sheriff served me with the subpoena, and of walking from my mother’s house to court in the weeks that followed. To write it other than how it comes to me, in my mind, would require a lack of faithfulness—I would be writing *against* memory, *against* the narrator’s emotional truth. From the more theoretical/psychological point, as a friend pointed out, it should surprise no one (least of all me) that memory in the aftermath of abduction and sexual assault—as well as the compounding cruelties of the criminal justice system and parental desertion—should be affected by trauma. That memory is radically and abnormally involved by trauma³¹ is, after all, one of its defining features—PTSD has in fact been characterized “as a disorder of autobiographical memory” precisely because “trauma memory does not form a coherent narrative and is not integrated into the overall life story of the person.”³² This observation reassured me about a possible cause of my memory lapse, but did nothing to allay

²⁹ Schwartz, np.

³⁰ Schwartz, np.

³¹ See van der Kolk, 173-201.

³² Ogden, 52.

my concern about the accuracy issue, or to entice me to venture into creating scenes that would undermine my efforts at staying true to memory. My compromise in the end was to leave the scene as written, so that it accords with my (flawed) memory, and to add the following line to the discussion of the court file, in the concluding section: “Sifting through these documents, I discover things I had known but forgotten, things I thought I knew that I’d got wrong, and things I never wanted to know” (182).

As noted above, traumatic memory is incoherent, fragmentary; traumatic memory also intrudes into the present *as if* present, images and sensations associated with the original trauma not relegated to the past³³ as normal memories are. The second section of the manuscript, “Nineteen Seventy-Nine,” which covers the year the narrator is 15–16 years of age, presented several other technical writing challenges related to the handling of memory. How to capture the disorienting fragmentation of this bewildering year? How to convey the failure of a mind to absorb events into normal memory, and to express the “frozen and wordless quality”³⁴ of trauma memory? How to convey the relentless, Sisyphean repetition of these frozen images and sensations? The choice to approach the experience of abduction and attack only as it is remembered *as trauma*, rather than first “telling” what happened in detail, before those memories became frozen, was intuitive; presenting the trauma memory as a “film” on loop also came easily, the fit almost literal rather than metaphoric. From these first decisions flowed the addition of cinematographic or scene direction—*Jump cut! Close-up. Freeze-frame*. These cinematic cues, I hope, contribute to the reader’s sense that the “directing” of the film/story is not necessarily under the control of the narrating “I”; instead, the cues reinforce her experience as someone moving through a story not of her making, a story that has shocked her out of normal ways of understanding, feeling and remembering.

The narration across “Nineteen Seventy-Nine” is again essentially chronological, the only structuring clues appearing via repetition. For example, separate moments and memories begin with one of a few recurring assertions (I remember..., I want..., I learned...) or the date of the attack, suggesting that the narrator is trying to rely on her usual strategy (and strength) of mastering the world through understanding and memory—memory, normally, being something that she controls. However, across the section, through the recurring filmic techniques—complemented by an increasing use of interior monologue (marked by italics) and the switch to

³³ See Herman, 37-39.

³⁴ Herman, 37. And see below, pp. 219ff.

present tense to suggest the immediacy of the images—the reader witnesses the amassing of the chaotic, intrusive and haunting qualities of traumatic memories which, by definition, the narrator does *not* control. As the narrator questions herself, bumping up against the limits of her memory and understanding, these choices are meant to suggest that she has not yet grasped or fully integrated the extent of her trauma.

Unlike the “Dialogues” sections, in “Nineteen Seventy-Nine” there is no movement between times once the telling begins: this section contains no framing conversation. Nor is there any empty white space left open between scenes. Instead, the material is more compressed visually and its pacing meant to feel more urgent. My intention is that there be no distraction to allow the reader distance or relief from the relentlessness and disorienting quality of the events of this year. The whole section is clearly recounted by an older narrator, but apart from providing the opening and closing comments that she is haunted by the film on loop in her head, that mature narrating self slips into the perspective of the teenager. To keep the reader in that girl’s “present” moment, over successive drafts, I removed a few instances where I had unwittingly broken the present-focus, such as in one prolepsis, a brief moment when the narrator reflects on her mother’s claim to have been nanny to one of the men who attacked her in 1979, when he was a newborn in 1958: this short paragraph, which began “I remained silent on this comment for the rest of my mother’s life...,” was relocated and now appears, slightly altered, in “Dialogues with My Therapist” (160), embedded in the context of a therapy session three decades later, at the point in time when the silence referred to is finally broken. Through such efforts, I aimed to keep the reader immersed in the narrator’s relentless remembering—thereby also to prepare for the narrator’s later development of PTSD.

Given the large scope and amount of material remaining, what I had initially expected to be a third and final section needed to be split and became the next two substantial sections, “Dialogues with My Daughters” and “Dialogues with My Therapist,” and a brief concluding section. Structuring the longer sections to maintain narrative drive (and sustain the reader’s interest) proved a difficult challenge. The solution evident in the final manuscript came about in stages, after a great many false starts and frustrations. It came in the form of one piece of writing that I had drafted early on and included with the collection of scenes in my first submission but had not yet placed in the evolving manuscript. It was effectively a stand-alone piece, which I was calling “Dialogues with My Daughters”: considerably longer than any of the scenes or episodes so far appearing in the manuscript, it also had a coherence and energy quite distinct from many of the more “frozen” memories I’d been working with. It was when shuffling

scenes in what would come to be the section by the same title that I was inspired to carve that longer piece up and weave it through the rest of the material, in much the same fashion that “Dialogues with My Mother” proceeds through braiding. Scenes prompted by this question, “Do you think you’ll ever tell your daughters?” now recur across this section; the question itself serves as a springboard and a recurring touchstone, haunting the narrator as she reflects on herself as a parent while coming to understand that the ways she is haunted by her own childhood. I found that by experimenting further with braiding, with juxtaposing scenes only loosely or intuitively linked, I could lift the energy of some of those other scenes, which I hope sustains the reader’s engagement and interest.

Working these fragments from the “Dialogues with My Daughters” narrative into the larger section also sparked an important thematic insight, which was that I could increasingly conceive of the work, as a whole, as being unified around the matter of conversation. The entire manuscript, in one sense, is about talking—more precisely and variously, it’s about talking and not talking; disclosing and not disclosing; asking for conversation; learning to listen and not being heard; being forced to tell and being unable to speak. This broad conceit subsequently guided the choice to include additional material, such as some content pertaining to the intergenerational themes linking the narrator with her mother, grandmother and daughters, and to the narrator’s pursuit of the court records, to pin down any official documentation of who said what in 1979. This insight also led to the decision to frame the fourth section with another conversation, namely the “Dialogues with My Therapist” instalments, and to organize this material around the recurrence of the narrator’s exploration through therapy of the impact of PTSD, and eventual NET experience, looking beyond the family context to include social and professional dimensions. And finally, understanding the manuscript as cohering around the matter of conversation helped me resolve the difficult question of how to bring the work to a satisfying end. I had recognized early in the drafting stage that I wanted a comedic rather than a tragic resolution, in the Shakespearean sense of an ending that emphasizes integration and celebration rather than dissolution and loss. “After Talking,” the brief final section, provides reflection on the value and necessity of connection, of communication; its lack of a framing conversation suggests (I hope) a calming of the conversational storms that have plagued the narrator over the preceding sections (and decades).

Apart from the complexities of memory, I wrestled over the course of revising and expanding the manuscript with the question of how to develop and present experiences of PTSD—such as being triggered, dissociating, panicking and freezing—so as to establish the

repetitiveness and pervasiveness in my life of such moments without causing the reader to feel that the *writing* is repetitive. After all, readers can take only so much relentlessness, especially relentless sameness. This was one of the first technical challenges posed to me by a reader who read two early scenes, in both of which I describe the experience of dissociation. How to accumulate more such scenes while keeping the reading experience “fresh”? Another friend and reader suggested I elaborate on what it is like to undergo a “triggering” event only a limited number of times, to make sure the experience comes to life for the reader, but then find some shorthand means of invoking or alluding to those sensations in later episodes. With this strategy in mind, I re-read the earliest relevant scenes. I found my “short-hand” cue waiting for me, in a scene from “Dialogues with My Daughters” in which the narrator recounts having one of her most severe dissociative episodes during a conversation with her elder daughter:

I look at the hand—mine—that is wrapped around the cider glass. The numbness is already spreading to the fingertips. I wiggle the toes inside the shoes attached to the legs dangling beneath this stool. My chest is tight, each breath louder—*in, out, in*—and a tingly, unsettled feeling in my gut is on the move, it’s rising, then *whoosh!* pounding inside me—*dangerdangerdanger*—dissolves into the veneer of calm, almost *insouciance*, that I welcome as it wraps around my body, an invisibility cloak that lifts me up until I am floating above the table...

(82-3)

“*Whoosh!*” This single word packs in several attributes of being triggered: the suddenness of it; the sensation of the floor dropping out from under one’s feet; the loss of orientation and balance. At the time of this revision effort, this passage marked the word’s first appearance in the work, and already in that early draft combined it with considerable explanatory detail. I could see that replacing at least some parts of the repeated descriptions with this single word could bring a lighter touch and energy to some passages. One example of a subsequent edit comes from a scene in which the narrator is being driven home after midnight one winter night, along a dark stretch of highway, after a date with a man she scarcely knows:

“I should tell you about the time,” he started, “when my ex-wife contacted the police and told them to investigate me,” he laughs, “for *murder.*”
Instantly, I feel lighter.

In the final manuscript, this scene reads:

“I should tell you about the time,” he started, “when my ex-wife contacted the police and told them to investigate me,” he laughs, “for *murder.*”
Whoosh!

(102)

This word appears more than a dozen times in the finished manuscript, operating, I hope, as a touchstone that is spare and accessible, evoking for readers something of the physiological experience of dissociation without undue repetition and description.

Scenes capturing intense emotional distress may also tax a reader's tolerance or interest. It is not always obvious when first drafting just how much such detail is needed (or again, will be tolerated) for a passage to be effective without it feeling overwrought, indulgent or melodramatic. During revisions, however, I tightened several passages by compressing emotionally charged detail and/or language, as in an episode describing a full-on panic attack (from "Dialogues with My Daughters"), which initially read as follows:

I ran to the bathroom. At the sight of my terrified self in the mirror, crying gave way to sobbing, even less oxygen coming from every breath as the pounding of my heart grew louder.

This is it, I'm going to die.

I reached for the water glass. The arm stretched in front of me began to tremble, then to shake violently as a tremor spread up from my forearm, until my whole arm began to jerk through a widening arc, back and forth, faster and faster—and when I lifted my other arm to still it, that arm, too, began to convulse. Soon my whole upper body was shaking. I was mouthing words at the face in the mirror.

I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying.

This moment appears in the final manuscript in this more restrained form:

I ran to the bathroom. At the sight of my pale, terrified self in the mirror, crying gave way to sobbing, even less oxygen coming from each breath.

I'm going to die.

Trembling gave way to convulsing. My whole upper body shook as I mouthed at the face in the mirror,

I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dying.

(106)

Silence and Disclosure

The flipside to this manuscript's central pre-occupation with conversation must be its silences. As noted above, behind *Chasing Peace* lurk long-standing silences in my life, and some of those are forever blown open by the writing of this memoir. Yet, some relevant material still has not been shared. The decision-making process behind these choices has not always been a conscious one.

Several readers of early drafts began their feedback with general remarks about how “brave” I’d been to write this story. For me, bravery isn’t the question. The question is what the writing demands. The insight one often gets from other writers is that writing demands everything. American memoirist Annie Dillard conveys this aptly in her brief, inspirational book for writers: *Give It All, Give It Now*.³⁵ Certainly, writers who are mentors and friends, including Harold Rhenish, Wayne Grady and David Zieroth, have over the years challenged me to take telling further. As a writer, I find nothing more exhilarating than the gift of a reader who can simply point at a single off-hand phrase or sentence or gap in something I’ve written and show me where they see a window that I can open onto some larger part of story. Letting the light shine into these gaps, filling in lacunae that I do not spot for myself, often leads to exciting material that takes a work in surprising directions.

But writing into the gaps on matters to do with trauma involves paradox. As far as writing is a meaning-making exercise, traumatic experience is “good” material (as in, challenging) because at root, traumatic experience is senseless; trauma overwhelms precisely because it is incomprehensible. The impulse to tackle such material may be positive and constructive, even of therapeutic value. And many people (like me) find that writing (language) is the best way to make sense of the world. I have known for decades that in some ways, I’ve lived a haunted life, but the door to really grasping what this means only opened for me recently; I cannot fathom how anyone with the opportunity to walk through that door would not choose to do so. I have also come increasingly to see that the very secret keeping that trauma demands has kept me frozen in its grip. Just as avoidance that becomes pathological leads to a constricted life, secret-keeping on this scale leads increasingly to isolation, and it prevents growth. Perverse as it can seem—and it does frequently seem perverse, even profoundly so, when I wake in the night flooded with doubt about the wisdom of this whole enterprise—breaking the silence trauma has imposed seems my best shot at releasing myself from its grip; at the same time, the act of *sharing* my writing means dismantling the protective armour that PTSD has demanded I wear, losing control over my environment, my ability to construct a world impermeable to trauma triggers, many of which are idiosyncratic. Putting my story onto the *published* page would mean reducing that control to zero. In this way, trauma

³⁵ Annie Dillard, *Give It All, Give It Now: One of the Few Things I Know About Writing*. 1989. Inscribed and illustrated by Sam Fink (NY: Welcome Books, 2009).

memoir has the paradoxical potential for the writer to free herself from PTSD while making re-traumatization almost a dead certainty.

Confounding the impulse to write is the fact that traumatic experience itself can seem to defy expression in language. Trauma studies scholar Leigh Gilmore writes of the “unspeakability of trauma itself, its resistance to representation.”³⁶ Having committed to writing this story, I launched into doing so without any predetermined boundaries around material that might be “off limits.” I discovered, though, as I wrote, that of course I had boundaries. Some are ethical and relate to respect for other people’s privacy, what has been called “considerations of tact”³⁷ in memoir, particularly important when writing about real people who do not choose to appear in one’s book. In this spirit, I have not written about my daughters’ or my siblings’ adult lives or their families, with the exception of the final days of my brother Erik. When referring to people other than family members, I have typically limited my use of names to first names or the first initial of the surname³⁸, to minimize the possibility that they might be identifiable to readers. I have chosen not to name the businesses or institutions to which I allude. And I offered the use of pseudonyms to every living person I name in the story whom I could reach to make this offer, family members included.³⁹

Over time, through drafting and re-drafting, I also became clear about the boundaries I would observe for disclosing and withholding details. I say “over time” because the boundaries announced themselves to me along the way. I was well into the second draft of “Nineteen Seventy-Nine” when I was genuinely surprised to recognize a lacuna of major proportion. After characterizing the film that loops inside my head, replaying the story of how I wound up alone in a van that night, I had written this:

On the rare occasion I’m asked what I remember of those pre-dawn hours in 1979, I can push the film past this perpetual scene, force the reel forward to other images, other collections of images and later sensations that also come linked together in sequence.

(58)

³⁶ *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Cornell UP, 2001), 46.

³⁷ A.O. Scott, as qtd in Nancy K. Miller’s “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 122.2(2007): 541.

³⁸ With exception, obviously, of two of the three men convicted of indecent assault toward me, which convictions remain a matter of public record (the family name of the third man is not given, since this man subsequently applied for and received a judicial pardon).

³⁹ The list of pseudonyms used in *Chasing Peace* appears as Appendix A.

Only upon re-reading the entire section did I notice that immediately after this reference to “other collections of images and later sensations”—which a reader might reasonably expect was preamble to a telling of the details of rape—I had skipped right to the end of the ordeal, to the arrival of the police:

I remember a violent thump on the passenger door, a burst of light and voices.
I remember men withdrawing from my body, hissing.
I remember being last out, stepping half-clad into flickering lights, fear....
(58)

Yet again, despite my subjective experience of the writing—which had left me feeling utterly exposed—I had in fact (true to pathological tendencies) turned my head and looked away, averting my own eyes. I sat with the question of whether or not to fill in this vital gap for several weeks. In the end, I accepted that not only do I have no appetite for providing this detail, I could justify withholding it in the context of the work, which is not motivated by any spirit of exhibitionism or impulse to pander to the reader of “misery lit,”⁴⁰ or to the “bad reader [w]ho wants to know all, immediately, ‘what really happened.’”⁴¹ (And I suppose, therein lies my answer, nearly fifteen years later, to my friend David.) My unconscious aversion to being overly graphic was also compatible with Gilmore’s observation that “[t]rauma emerges in narrative as much through what cannot be said as through what can.”⁴² As the manuscript grew, I also became aware that this critical, notable silence in “Nineteen Seventy-Nine” would be thematically helpful in the later “Dialogues with My Therapist,” underpinning the importance of my deciding to narrate those earlier-omitted details only once in my lifetime, in a therapeutic setting many years later. So, I made peace with this particular textual silence. But I also acknowledged it, even drawing attention to it by adding this concluding line to the relevant section of “Nineteen Seventy-Nine”:

It isn’t until I rehearse these impressions from first to last that I spot continuity gaps.
The black hole is immense. It is deep. It has swallowed everything between ‘Run!’ and the beginning of the end, the dénouement.
(58)

Two other key silences in an earlier draft of the manuscript were flagged for me by a reader, and these were ones I chose to address. First, after building to the narrator’s disclosures

⁴⁰ For a discussion of this publishing category or phenomenon, see below, pp. 229ff.

⁴¹ Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, as qtd in Miller, 540.

⁴² Gilmore, 46.

to her daughters across the entire third section, I had dispensed with those conversations rather summarily; and after building toward the triumph of securing the Supreme Court records from 1979 across much of the fourth section, “Dialogues with My Therapist,” I had left the narrator simply tossing the records aside (literally, into a filing cabinet) without further comment. Both silences surprised this reader, who felt that I had built expectations only to disappoint, especially since she had anticipated in both instances that the (missing) content would be emotionally charged. This feedback reminded me again that there are unwritten contracts between writer and reader: in this case, I could see the wisdom of the writerly principle of Chekhov’s gun,⁴³ that if there is a gun onstage in Act One, the audience will rightly expect it to go off by the end of the play. In other words, I saw that I had indeed raised expectations, which, I agreed, the memoir could and should meet. Elaborating on the conversations with my daughters gave me the opportunity to add some emotional content aimed at better conveying the intensity of these moments for the narrator. And the prompt to review the court records led to my learning that I had misremembered the timing and context of the pre-trial, as noted above, which deepened my thinking about memory and truth in memoir, and about the value of engaging imaginatively with the past. More than any answer in a file, it has been this reflective process that has brought the memoir to its natural end.

Voice and Style

Under the broad topic of style fall several aspects of writerly craft that touch on matters of voice. The response of one reader-friend to a complete draft of the manuscript is striking for her insights about voice. This friend, an academic with a specialty in autobiography, and in trauma narratives in particular, commented that she struggled with the voice of the narrator, finding her difficult to connect with because so relentlessly in control, deliberate in every point of diction, turn of phrase and revelation. As a reader, she felt she was not being let in enough, not trusted; she also felt the narrator was only rarely giving her a glimpse of the vulnerability that leads to empathy. There were exceptions, she went on, pointing to passages that approach a kind of stream-of-consciousness, where the narrating self is reliving dissociation and manages

⁴³ <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/writing-101-what-is-chekhovs-gun-learn-how-to-use-chekhovs-gun-in-your-writing#who-was-anton-chekhov-and-how-was-chekhovs-gun-invented>. Accessed 22nd May 2021.

to communicate not just the out-of-body-ness of such moments but the out-of-control-ness of them as well. In terms of “hot” and “cold” memories, again, these were definitely moments with heat. As a reader, my friend wanted more such moments.

In a way, these reflections complemented feedback I was hearing from members of my supervisory committee, who were consistently encouraging me to resist “over-processing” story material or switching from a creative voice back to my more “essayistic,” expository or analytical one. I was encouraged to restrain myself from opening scenes with warm-up contextualizing statements and from concluding them with summarizing gestures meant to tie up loose ends. Show rather than tell. I continued to comb through successive drafts of the expanding manuscript, cutting explication and analysis, deliberately working to let passages end without my mature thinker-writer’s voice coming in to offer commentary. For a work to challenge readers, and to stay with them—to keep them thinking long after they’ve turned a page or put a book down—I recognize, it can be effective to leave more unsaid, to leave room for the reader to imagine, to give the reader work to do. For instance, here are the last lines of a scene from the opening section of the work, as they appeared in the first complete draft submitted:

This boy, I hear myself repeating to Barb, was just spinning there on the sidewalk. He was abandoned—by the very people who should have protected him! She wants to know. Would you describe yourself as having been abandoned as a child? I have to think about this. My usual narrative approach to my family story contains the simple declarative sentence, “My parents split up when I was five.” At thirty years old, and for the first time, I am beginning to hear how clinical this sounds. I guess so, I reply. Yes?

In the final manuscript, this scene wraps up much sooner, without the reflection:

“This boy,” I hear myself repeating to Barb, “was just spinning there on the sidewalk, abandoned by the very people who should have protected him!” Knowing my history, she prods, “Would you describe yourself as having been abandoned as a child?”

(10)

Similarly, in several drafts, an early account of my pestering my sister Martha to tell me how I’d reacted when my mother walked out on the household in 1968 ended with an explicit answer:

Martha shrugged.
“You did have five older siblings, and pets.” She paused. “Jill and I took care of you. And Dad hired a string of housekeepers.”
“But did I cry? Was I scared?”
Martha couldn’t remember me being any bother at all.

In the final version, the last line has been removed, so the passage ends on my probing, my need to understand left hanging on the questions, “But did I cry? Was I scared?” (8).

Both these examples come from the first section of the work, the section that contains the greatest volume of early childhood memories, before the traumas of 1979; this material also happens to constitute the most told and re-told content in the manuscript—both told by me, in earlier pieces of writing, and also told within the family, as moments that have often been picked over, revisited in supper-table conversation over decades. For the most part, these early stories have not been “secret” but have been shared fairly liberally with friends over my lifetime. Little surprise, then, if such memories begin to assume their own power, as if they are telling themselves. By contrast, the more recent content from my adult life is less polished, more raw, because as-yet-unexplored in writing. Another editing task for me, then, involved remaining vigilant, watching out for near-fossilized memories, and trying to open them up to feel fresh. How might I look anew at these early experiences and circumstances, to consider, for instance, how they might have set me up or predisposed me to be a “good” candidate for PTSD, possibly years before the violence and trauma of 1979 unfolded?

My friend’s remark that every detail felt deliberately placed—contributing to her sense that the narrator was too in-control—seemed to me, intuitively, to overlap with another comment by one of my supervisory committee members, who had been struck by my handling of geography, by my precise accounting for direction and distance and the relation between objects in space. He encouraged me to experiment with reducing this precision, just to see what the effect might be. Over successive drafts, I also looked for revision opportunities of this type. I could see that lessening the hyper-attentive descriptions could make room for the reader by leaving more to the imagination—in a sense, this was a challenge to open the story more to the reader as a collaborator in visualizing a scene. With this challenge in mind, I was struck by the significant volume of spatial/relational content in the following paragraph, which opened an important early scene establishing the narrator’s susceptibility to unexpected but profound emotional triggers. The paragraph appeared in several early drafts as follows (***bold italic*** font added, to emphasize such spatial/directional detail):

One morning, as I’m delivering Erin to kindergarten, a car ***speeds into the school zone and shrieks to a stop right up against the curb, nose in just ahead of my car. Before the vehicle is even at a full stop, the driver’s door is flung open. I hear a voice scream, “Run!” A woman leaps from the driver’s side, rounds the front of the car, just gaining the curb when a second car speeds up from the opposite direction, stopping just before hitting the first. Its door, too, is thrown open. A man flings himself out and runs***

after the woman. As this scene is exploding, one school-aged child has clambered out of the first car to the sidewalk and begun running; the screaming woman is on its heels, heading in the direction of the office. My eyes then fall to a third occupant emerging from the woman's car, just stepping onto the pavement as the man from the second car overtakes him, closing in on the woman from behind. The child is small, a toddler, perhaps two or three. He hesitates a little, as if to consider ***the man lunging past him. The boy falters, rights himself, turns back to look at the cars, as if unsure which way to go, then stumbles towards the building, following the adults.***

In the final manuscript, the scene appears as follows:

AS I'M DELIVERING MY daughter Erin to kindergarten, a car speeds toward us in the school zone, lurching to a stop against the curb, nose against my car. The driver's door is flung open.

Someone screams.

"Run!"

A woman leaps out, rounds the front of the car, barely gaining the curb before a second car speeds up from the opposite direction. A school-aged child jumps from the first car to the sidewalk and begins running, the screaming woman on its heels, heading in the direction of the office. The door of the second car opens and a man flings himself out, running after the woman. A third occupant is emerging from the woman's car, toes just touching pavement as the man whips by, closing in on the woman. The last one out is a smaller child, perhaps two or three. He hesitates, falters as the man lunges past, rights himself, looks back at the cars and then toddles after the adults.

(10)

The lessening of precision in the revision is meant to convey better the frenzy of the unfolding scene. It's an explosion of domestic violence, after all, not a moment when the narrator has time to pause and measure distances between actors. Overall compression (the passage has been cut down from 222 words to 161) and changes in diction are also aimed at increasing energy: the older child no longer "clammers" down from the car (which, upon reflection, struck me as too leisurely a motion) but "jumps" from it; the man no longer "overtakes" the younger toddler but "whips by" him. And even the small change from "I hear a voice scream" to "Someone screams" lessens the distance between reader and action by removing the reminder that the narrator (the "I") is a filtering consciousness; and the imprecision of it being now "someone" who screams invites the reader into the sense-making. With the narrator loosening her control over such details, I hope to lessen if not altogether avoid the sense that she got there ahead of the reader and figured things out before sharing; instead, she and the reader should be on an equally disoriented footing.

In passages where the adult narrating voice is meant to slip into that of a young child, additional considerations of diction and syntax come to the fore. In the episode about living with her stepfather, the narrator assumes the simple language and straightforward syntax of an

eight-year-old, describing the stepfather as “a mean, wrinkly old man” who “smelled stale” (15). But here, too, was a minor opportunity to back away from pre-digesting information before sharing it with the reader. The set up to a conflict over a stray kitten appeared this way through four of six drafts:

Mum said I could keep her, but Bill hated cats and told me no, so I’d put her out again at bedtime. But she was there at the door when I returned from school, so I scooped her and took her upstairs.

Bill came home early and surprised me with the kitten.

“Bitch,” he hurled at me, as he *clomp-shuffled* into my room...

It evolved into this:

Mum said I could keep her, but Bill hated cats, and he told me no. So I put her out again at bedtime. But she was there at our front step when I returned from school the next afternoon, so I scooped her up and took her back inside. I was playing with her on my bed when Bill pushed open my door.

“Bitch,” he snarled.

Home early?

He *clomp-shuffled* into my room.

(15)

Among other simplifications, the declarative statement “Bill came home early and surprised me with the kitten” has been replaced by the simple unspoken question to self, “*Home early?*” meant to suggest the child’s momentary confusion and sense of ambush, a sense the reader is invited to share.

Later in the same scene, the narrator describes cycling from various safe houses to her elementary school, afraid that the angry stepfather from whom the family is hiding may find her when she is outside, alone and vulnerable. This scene afforded a complex example of the kind of “control” my reader found sometimes off-putting in the narrator. Another reader had already flagged this scene as a place where I might look to add emotional colour or sensory details, to heighten the reader’s empathy for the young girl. In this scene, in fact, the narrator is reveling in a sense of control—she’s nine years old and relying on her mastery of city streets—on her memory—to keep herself safe. For several early drafts, the passage read as follows: the stepfather “was the ogre from fairy tales who eats children, and he was hunting me. I stayed ever alert—I was vigilance on wheels[.]” To suggest something of her naïveté here, and her need to feel this control, I developed the passage slightly in the final manuscript, adding a key phrase (*italicized* for emphasis): her stepfather “was the ogre from fairy tales who eats children,

and he was hunting me, *but I would be quick and brave*. I stayed ever alert—I was vigilance on wheels” (15).

I found another opportunity to improve the authenticity of the narrator-as-young-girl in the scene in Kamloops, 1973, when she recounts being molested by a friend’s uncle. The narrator is meant to be ten years old. The initial draft describing her violation included the line, “Uncle Don’s fingers fluttered lightly across my vulva.” The moment now reads, “a tickly fluttering brushed across a place no one had ever touched me” (18). These changes are aimed not just at changing register (from clinical to colloquial) by simplifying vocabulary but also, in removing the pointed reference to the “uncle,” at allowing the girl a brief moment of unknowing, of lacking the experience that would help her frame so quickly what is happening to her as a violation being done *by him*. To ensure the reader looks through the child’s eyes only, the narrator refrains from expressing judgement toward her younger self’s abuser, this man she was first “asked to call Uncle Don,” then “Happy” (18), although perhaps her exaggerated compliance with this request—the repeated references to her adult host as “Happy” even after he has violated and betrayed her—might suggest the narrator’s unstated assessment.

Trauma as Genre

To situate my thesis in the current publishing landscape, I need first to establish some common language and genre distinctions. The term “trauma narrative” has a dual career as a term in at least two professional worlds. In the practice of psychotherapy, it means one thing; to scholars specializing in the study of auto/biographical texts and/or the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies, and to publishers, it has a related but distinct meaning. My thesis engages with both worlds and both definitions.

First, a brief outline of trauma as understood in the psychotherapeutic context. From the Greek word for “wound,” the English word “trauma” made its way into print in the late 17th C. through a translation of a Danish medical dictionary⁴⁴, where it was defined as “a Wound from an external cause.” By the late 19th C., its meaning had widened to include a psychic or psychological wound, “esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed

⁴⁴ “Trauma (1),” *Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Oxford UP, 2021. [trauma, n.: Oxford English Dictionary \(oed.com\)](https://www.oed.com). Accessed 2nd April 2021.

and remains unhealed,”⁴⁵ helped by the work of Freud and Breuer in examining women patients suffering “hysteria,” a condition that they came to believe was brought on by the repression of memories of childhood sexual abuse. As is clear from such cases, there is a strong link between the experience of powerlessness and that of trauma. Science has long-observed that our brains are hard-wired to react instinctively to existential danger: in the face of overwhelming threat, the nervous system instantly “propels the body to run, hide, fight or, on occasion, freeze.”⁴⁶ But when one is prevented from acting on such instinct by circumstances that pre-empt individual agency—“for example, when people are held down, trapped, or otherwise prevented from taking effective action, be it in a war zone, a car accident, domestic violence, or a rape” (van der Kolk, 54)—then “the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning [and] the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman, 33) are overwhelmed. Such events “confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror” (Herman, 33); psychological trauma ensues. And because such instances block normal resolution and dissipation of the acute fear that first set the nervous system alight, “[l]ong after the actual event has passed, the brain may keep sending signals to the body to escape a threat that no longer exists” (van der Kolk, 54); thus, “[t]raumatized people feel and act as though their nervous systems have been disconnected from the present” (Herman, 35).

Among the “ordinary human adaptations to life” are the mind’s mechanisms for converting new experience into memory, then integrating new memory into an individual’s unfolding life story and cumulative sense of self. Under normal circumstances, each new experience becomes part of one’s personal history and past: each memory contributes to the construction of identity over time, but also fades in intensity when supplanted by newer experience and the creation and storage of more recent memories. A victim of trauma, though, “relive[s] the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. ... [T]he trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma[, which...] becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory” (Herman, 37). Where normal memories are encoded “in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story,” there is a “frozen and wordless quality of traumatic memories” (Herman, 37). A trauma victim gets stuck, unable to make sense of the events that threatened her annihilation because, in part, her processing and storage systems shut down. If we cannot place a memory appropriately on the conveyor belt of

⁴⁵ “Trauma (2.a),” [trauma, n.: Oxford English Dictionary \(oed.com\)](https://www.oed.com).

⁴⁶ van der Kolk, 54.

personal time, aligning it with related or contiguous experiences, we cannot integrate it into the story we tell ourselves of who we are. Those memories are chaotic. They *are* chaos. Because of this, “The rules of narrative—synthesis, continuity, causality—do not apply to ruptures of the moral order.”⁴⁷

Building on the work of Freud and Breuer, early approaches to the treatment of trauma patients were influenced by the belief that bringing the “frozen and wordless” experiences behind a patient’s “hysteria” into conscious memory—encouraging her to translate the associated images and emotions into speech—could resolve them. The repressed memories that explained her manifest incoherence or neuroses were to be confronted and “re-organized” to form part of her conscious and continuous (narrative) understanding of her own past. With the guidance of the psychotherapist, the “hysteric” would essentially remember and narrate herself into freedom from ongoing suffering. In its earliest form, this method was described by one of Breuer’s patients as the “talking cure,”⁴⁸ and it became the forerunner to modern psychoanalysis.

Although neuroscience has now demonstrated⁴⁹ that Freud and Breuer were overly optimistic about the absolute curative power of the “talking cure,” the general principle that talking through traumatic experience in a supportive context can lessen the negative, ongoing impact of trauma is still seen as therapeutically valid. This is particularly important given that, untreated, a trauma sufferer who develops PTSD can expect to develop a pathological drive for “avoidance,” the cost of which over time can be the perpetuation of the trauma and, consequentially, an impoverished quality of life:

In avoiding any situations reminiscent of the past trauma, or any initiative that might involve ... risk, traumatized people deprive themselves of those new opportunities for successful coping that might mitigate the effect of the traumatic experience. Thus, constrictive symptoms, though they may represent an attempt to defend against overwhelming emotional states, exact a high price for whatever protection they afford. They narrow and deplete the quality of life and ultimately perpetuate the effects of the traumatic event.

(Herman, 47)

⁴⁷ Nancy Venable Raine, *After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back* (NY: Three Rivers, 1998), 112.

⁴⁸ Josef Breuer, “Case Studies 1: Fräulein Anna O.” Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*. 1895. 2nd ed. Trans. Nicola Luckhurst (Penguin, 2004), 34.

⁴⁹ van der Kolk, 196.

To avoid the diminishment of a life circumscribed by pathological avoidance, “exposure therapies” in general aim to desensitize⁵⁰ patients to anxiety and trauma triggers, confronting the triggers to increase the patient’s tolerance of them, lowering their reactivity over time and in a safe, non-threatening context—a kind of inoculation by conditioning or practice. Within this broad field, “narrative exposure therapy” (NET) has developed as a treatment for sufferers of PTSD, used commonly with victims of complex or multiple trauma, such as refugees and survivors of mass atrocity, both individually and in groups:

This treatment helps individuals establish a coherent life narrative in which to contextualize traumatic experiences. With the guidance of the therapist, a patient establishes a chronological narrative of his or her life, concentrating mainly on their traumatic experiences, but also incorporating some positive events. It is believed that this contextualizes the network of cognitive, affective and sensory memories of a patient’s trauma. By expressing the narrative, the patient fills in details of fragmentary memories and develops a coherent autobiographical story. In so doing, the memory of a traumatic episode is refined and understood.⁵¹

The writing down of the auto/biographical details is typically done by the therapist who listens to the narrative; the therapist presents the finished story to the patient at the conclusion of the therapeutic process. The document produced is the “trauma narrative.” The story it contains may extend years beyond the account of the traumatic events: by extending out beyond the trauma, the narrative attempts to put those events in perspective and consign them to the past, re-framing them as events in a life that also contains other, more positive content. NET⁵² can be supported by interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and/or Eye-Movement Desensitization and Re-processing (EMDR) therapy, the latter of which aims not to desensitize the patient to trauma’s “frozen and wordless” images and sensations but to integrate⁵³ those images and sensations into memory, thereby resolving the fragmentation and incoherence that result from them pressing upon her conscious mind as repetitive, intrusive echoes of the past-that-is-ever-present. Within my thesis, the narrator’s recounting to her therapist the full details

⁵⁰ van der Kolk, 257-58.

⁵¹ American Psychological Association, *Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments/narrative-exposure-therapy>. Accessed 3rd April 2021; see also “Narrative Exposure Therapy,” Vivo International. [Narrative Exposure Therapy – vivo international](https://www.vivointernational.com/narrative-exposure-therapy). Accessed 7th August 2021.

⁵² American Psychological Association, *Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/treatments/narrative-exposure-therapy>. Accessed 19th March 2021.

⁵³ van der Kolk, 257.

of her traumatic experiences from 1979 was an unstructured, spontaneous engagement with the potential therapeutic value of “trauma narrative,” by this definition.

Away from the therapist’s office, in academic scholarship and publishing, “trauma narrative” is used more widely and is not limited to narratives in which the re-telling of traumatic events occurs in a therapeutic setting or for therapeutic reasons. These narratives can be accounts of trauma experienced by individuals, groups or societies, and range from single-author publication of a literary auto/biographical type (e.g., a Holocaust memoir) to eye-witness accounts of atrocities or natural disasters, and testimonial documents (e.g., courtroom transcripts) of survivors of genocidal campaigns or Truth and Reconciliation processes; the term is sometimes also used in literary criticism of fictional works treating traumatic subjects (e.g., one might produce a study of trauma narratives embedded within the novels of Toni Morrison⁵⁴). Given the scope of this thesis, I will restrict my further discussion of trauma narrative to nonfictional auto/biographical narratives about trauma written intentionally for publication, and, to differentiate these published works from texts generated in a psychotherapeutic context, will refer to them below as trauma “memoirs.” Although the terms “memoir” and “auto/biography” are often used interchangeably, for clarity’s sake, I use the term “memoir” here to signify a subgenre within the broader field of auto/biography, a subgenre largely distinguished from this broader genre by a matter of scope: that is, the subject of memoir defined by and concerned to represent a slice of the author’s larger life, accounting for a specific period of time, a role or an experience(s) in that life (e.g., a state president’s reflections on her time in office; an astronaut’s account of his stay on the International Space Station; a freed hostage’s account of months in captivity). I reserve the broader term “auto/biography,” by contrast, to refer to works the focus of which is less circumscribed by a particular time, role or experience, and which typically begin at (or closer to) the beginning, presenting the author’s coming-of-age and emergence into adulthood⁵⁵ and development of character or, as Lejeune holds, of “personality.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Nasrullah Mambrol, “Trauma Studies,” *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2018. [Trauma Studies – Literary Theory and Criticism \(literariness.org\)](https://literariness.org). Accessed 30th January 2021.

⁵⁵ Except in cases of serial auto/biographies that relate the story of the life and emergence of self in instalments across volumes. Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for instance, begins with the narrator’s earliest memories, from the age of three, and ends when she is seventeen; it is followed by another six auto/biographical volumes.

⁵⁶ Lejeune, 120.

Auto/biographies have provided scope to examine sources of deep suffering since at least the time of Saint Augustine,⁵⁷ but works that foreground and examine traumatic experience as now understood are a relatively modern phenomenon. Perhaps the earliest recognizable cluster of such works in the Anglo-American canon arose in the Americas with the circulation of narratives by escaped and emancipated slaves,⁵⁸ narratives that recount prolonged and dehumanizing experiences of brutal oppression, torture and physical and sexual violation. Yet many of these narratives are ultimately framed as triumphant stories of liberation—of the uplifting of individuals through escape, rescue or emancipation and, often, education. By contrast, the accounts of Holocaust survivors that began to emerge early after World War II⁵⁹ established auto/biography's scope for documenting atrocities that (paradoxically) are said to exceed the capacity of language to represent them,⁶⁰ and in the context of which to speak of liberation or transcendence seems obscene. More than seventy-five years after the end of that war, publications arising from these darkest of human experiences continue, extending now to include memoirs of Jewish descendants who are at two and three generations' remove from the camps, exploring the impact of intergenerational trauma⁶¹ and somatic memory and epigenetics.⁶² That there has been and continues to be a readership or market for exploration of traumatic experience seems indisputable.

Over the past twenty-five years, book publishers, reviewers and sellers have announced that “the triumph of memoir is now established fact.”⁶³ The appetite for trauma stories has grown steadily alongside the market for the entire genre. In this field, there are now many

⁵⁷ *Confessions*, ca. 400 AD.

⁵⁸ The most famous of these must be the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).

⁵⁹ Primo Levi's first account of the horrors of the Nazi death camps appeared in 1947 (published in English as *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*), followed by the publication of Anne Frank's diary the same year, soon followed by other Holocaust accounts, including Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1958).

⁶⁰ In *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001), cited above, Gilmore notes, “Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable[,] to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way” (6). This premise is fundamental to the work of many trauma studies scholars and is reflected in psychiatric literature on PTSD as well (for example, Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, cited above).

⁶¹ For example, Elizabeth Rosner's *Survivor Café: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory* (2017).

⁶² For example, Claire Sicherman's *Imprint: A Memoir of Trauma in the Third Generation* (2017).

⁶³ James Atlas, “The Age of Literary Memoir Is Now,” *New York Times Magazine* 12th May 1996: 25–27. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/12/magazine/confessing-for-voyeurs-the-age-of-the-literary-memoir-is-now.html>. Accessed 21st March 2021.

subtypes of trauma story, including those of grief⁶⁴; of medical illness, catastrophe and disability⁶⁵; of mental illness⁶⁶; of war zones, religious extremism and terrorism⁶⁷; of natural disasters;⁶⁸ of dysfunctional family life, notably childhoods marked by severe poverty, abandonment, substance use or abuse⁶⁹ (including a sub-set in which the impoverishment intersects with systemic racism or institutionalized oppression⁷⁰); and of incest,⁷¹ sexual exploitation⁷² and violence, particularly rape.⁷³ When we are remarking on “the triumph of memoir” (here used in the more slippery fashion, to include auto/biography more broadly), it is helpful to keep in mind that the auto/biographies in demand today are far more divergent in focus, audience and tone than at any point in publishing history. And while many authors do have a public profile prior to issuing their memoirs—politicians and entertainment celebrities come to mind—my discussion below emphasizes explorations of trauma published by private citizens with relatively little or no prior claim on the public interest or the public arena, whose “claim to fame” rests on the readership’s interest in the experience the authors are choosing to share.

⁶⁴ Examples include Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2006) and *Blue Nights* (2011); Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk* (2014).

⁶⁵ Examples include Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* (1994); Jean-Dominique Bauby’s *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (1997).

⁶⁶ Examples include Barbara Gordon’s *I’m Dancing as Fast as I Can* (1980); Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1992); Judy Rebick’s *Heroes in My Head* (2018).

⁶⁷ Examples include Romeo Dallaire’s *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (2003) and *Waiting for First Light: My Ongoing Battle with PTSD* (2016); Mellissa Fung’s *Under an Afghan Sky: A Memoir of Captivity* (2011).

⁶⁸ For example, Sonali Deraniyagala’s *Wave: Life and Memories after the Tsunami* (2013).

⁶⁹ Examples include Nuala O’Faolain’s *Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman* (1998); Jeannette Walls’ *The Glass Castle* (2005); Stacey Patton’s *That Mean Old Yesterday* (2007); Tara Westover’s *Educated* (2018).

⁷⁰ Examples include narratives by African Americans, such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969); and Indigenous Canadians, such as Basil H. Johnston’s *Indian School Days* (1990); Richard Wagamese’s *For Joshua: An Ojibway Father Teaches His Son* (2003).

⁷¹ Examples include Liza Potvin’s *White Lies (for My Mother)* (1992); Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss* (1998).

⁷² For example, Evelyn Lau’s *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1989).

⁷³ See list of comparator texts below (pp. 226ff.).

Comparator Texts

I find relevant comparators for *Chasing Peace* in both trauma narrative (primarily rape memoirs, but also one story of incest, one of intergenerational trauma stemming from the Holocaust) and the more conventional coming-of-age auto/biography.

Unlike a conventional auto/biography, as noted above, the scope of trauma memoir is generally defined by the precipitating traumatic event(s). Given the prevalence of sexual assault in western societies—estimated in Canada, for example, to affect between one in two and one in four women, depending on one’s definitions⁷⁴—finding representations of sexual violence in women’s life stories should strike us as unremarkable. Still, detailed, forthcoming examination of such experiences is a relatively modern phenomenon. One early example of a rape narration⁷⁵ in auto/biography appears in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), the first volume of Maya Angelou’s serial memoir: Angelou’s narrator recounts her rape by her mother’s boyfriend when she was only eight years old.⁷⁶ In recent years, both the pace of disclosure and the detailed emphasis on the aftermath of such violence have intensified. In Angelou’s work, the traumatic assault is self-evidently presented as a devastating, critical event that shaped aspects of her adult character, but the influence of that one event over the rest of the work is not defining; by comparison, the rape memoir subgenre that emerged within thirty years of Angelou’s first volume features texts wholly devoted to providing first-hand accounts by survivors of both sexual violence and its consequences. That this subject matter has become a discernible publishing trend with a voracious readership is evident in the title of a 2016 article, “Rape Memoir: Our Other True-Crime Obsession,” accounting for these works as “the emergence of a literary genre that seems very much in demand.”⁷⁷ Only one year later, in October 2017, the media coverage of several high-profile rape and sexual harassment cases brought against men in a variety of public roles, including politicians, judges and celebrities—

⁷⁴ Grice, 1. The World Health Organization estimates that globally “about 1 in 3 women (30%) have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime”; however, this figure conflates physical with sexual violence. See [Violence against women \(who.int\)](#). Accessed 8th August 2021.

⁷⁵ I am setting aside rape and sexual violence recounted in the context of auto/biographies told by survivors of institutionalized forms of oppression, such as the narratives of former/emancipated slaves, survivors of war, including women incarcerated or kidnapped, as well as former residents of Indian Residential Schools in Canada.

⁷⁶ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Random, 1969), 65.

⁷⁷ Sarah Liss, “Rape Memoirs: Our Other True-Crime Obsession,” *Literary Review of Canada: A Journal of Ideas*, November 2016, np. [Rape Memoirs: Our Other True-Crime Obsession | Literary Review of Canada \(reviewcanada.ca\)](#). Accessed 13th February 2021.

perhaps, most notoriously, former Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein—led to the social media explosion of the #MeToo movement, which has in turn fed back into other creative and arts industries, including book publishing. In the wake of #MeToo, the now-conventional rape memoir is complemented by curated collections of story-length essays and creative nonfiction pieces attesting once again to the fact that there is, devastatingly, nothing exceptional about sexual violence, particularly for women: for example, *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*,⁷⁸ published in the United States in 2018, and *Whatever Gets You Through: 12 Survivors on Life After Sexual Assault*,⁷⁹ published in Canada in 2019. These collections do add diversity to the voices given room on the published page, however: whereas the rape memoir field is dominated by works by white, heterosexual, educated, middle-class professional women,⁸⁰ these post-#MeToo collections feature voices of queer and trans women, women of colour, disabled women, sex trade workers and working-class women.

Crafting trauma memoirs of any kind is in some sense an exercise in reading one's life both forwards and backwards through the prism of event(s) so out of range of the normal human experience that they cleave that life in two. Often, the story names or reveals the event(s) in the book's opening pages—even, as in the following examples of a Holocaust narrative and a grief memoir, in the opening lines:

I was captured by the Fascist Militia on 13 December 1943.

– Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The question of self-pity.

Those were the first words I wrote after it happened.

– Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Because the scope is circumscribed by the telling of the trauma(s), content about earlier (pre-trauma) life is typically introduced via flashbacks or other retrospective techniques, whereas the forward momentum is provided by the account of the trauma and its consequences. This

⁷⁸ Roxane Gay, ed. Harper, 2018.

⁷⁹ Stacey May Fowles and Jen Sookfong Lee, eds. Vancouver: Greystone, 2019.

⁸⁰ Eight of the eleven authors whose works appear on the comparator list of rape memoirs fit this profile; of the other three, one is a Latina-Canadian theatre artist from Chile, one a visual artist of mixed race (Chinese-American), the third a queer American writer of Afro-Caribbean descent.

structure generally holds in rape memoirs,⁸¹ including the following book-length comparators published since the late 1990s (listed chronologically), most of which disclose and examine the aftermath of single-episode rapes, most of those involving life-threatening violence committed by one man who was a stranger⁸² at the time:

1. *After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back* – Nancy Venable Raine (1998)
2. *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery* – Patricia Weaver Francisco (1999)
3. *Lucky* – Alice Sebold (1999)
4. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* – Susan J. Brison (2002)
5. *One Hour in Paris: A True Story of Rape and Recovery* – Karyn L. Freedman (2014)
6. *Mexican Hooker #1 and My Other Roles Since the Revolution* – Carmen Aguirre (2016)
7. *I Will Find You: A Reporter Investigates the Life of the Man Who Raped Her* – Joanna Connors (2016)
8. *Jane Doe January: My Twenty-Year Search for Truth and Justice* – Emily Winslow (2016)
9. *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* – Roxane Gay (2017)
10. *Know My Name: A Memoir* – Chanel Miller (2019)
11. *Dancing with the Octopus: A Memoir of a Crime* – Debora Harding (2020)

Another five comparators will be touched on in the discussion below, two being trauma narratives (one an account of incest; the other a treatment of intergenerational trauma originating in the Holocaust), and the remaining three coming-of-age auto/biographies that include but are not defined by disclosures of trauma (not sexual violence in every case):

12. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – Maya Angelou (1969)
13. *White Lies (for My Mother)* – Liza Potvin (1992)
14. *The Glass Castle* – Jeannette Walls (2005)
15. *Imprint: A Memoir of Trauma in the Third Generation* – Claire Sicherman (2017)
16. *Educated* – Tara Westover (2018)

In all eleven rape memoirs, the fact that the narrator⁸³ has been attacked is acknowledged at the outset: in eight,⁸⁴ the very early pages include a detailed account of the assault, typically in unflinchingly clinical and graphic language; of the remaining three, the

⁸¹ The following analysis of comparator texts is limited to single-author book-length auto/biographical works, setting aside the edited and curated collections of shorter writings on rape-related trauma mentioned above.

⁸² The exception to these generalizations is found in Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, in which the author discloses a gang-rape by three boys, one of them her boyfriend, when she was twelve.

⁸³ As Philippe Lejeune tells us, "In order for there to be autobiography..., the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical." For simplicity's sake, however, I will streamline references to this triad with the shorthand, "narrator." (Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," *On Autobiography*, 5.)

⁸⁴ From the list, #s 1-5, 7, 8, 10.

description of the attack is slightly delayed in one,⁸⁵ and placed approximately halfway through the work in the other two.⁸⁶ In the two cases where the rape account is delayed, the re-telling is also less graphic than is typical of the majority of these exemplars: in Aguirre's *Mexican Hooker #1*, this may be tied in part to the broader scope of the memoir, the first half of which treats the narrator's life with her family, Chilean refugees who relocated to Canada to escape Pinochet's regime, prior to the attack in her new Canadian home; and in Harding's *Dancing with the Octopus*, the delay is consistent with a number of other features that distinguish this memoir as one of the more literary among the sample rape memoirs (see below).

A major strength of opening with the brutality of attack is that this tactic re-enacts a kind of ambush. Of course, readers probably know the general subject matter of these works before they begin to read—it would be difficult not to know, given that the word “rape” appears in the subtitle, epigraph and/or prologue of most of the books. Still, through the choice to open with graphic sexual violence, the narrator gestures towards her own experience as assault victim by hitting the reader with it with little or no preamble. Before we begin to get our bearings in her world, we witness the narrator being caught from behind, dragged to the ground, or shoved up against a wall with a knife to her throat. These first lines of *Lucky*, by Alice Sebold, serve as an example of such an opening gambit:

This is what I remember. My lips were cut. I bit down on them when he grabbed me from behind and covered my mouth. He said these words: “I’ll kill you if you scream.” I remained motionless. “Do you understand? If you scream you’re dead.” I nodded my head. My arms were pinned to my sides by his right arm wrapped around me and my mouth was covered with his left.

He released his hand from my mouth.

I screamed. Quickly. Abruptly.

The struggle began.

(5)

We may be momentarily disoriented. Or put another way, the rape *is* our orientation—it's the way we find our footing in these books—foregrounded, we accept it as ground zero. And since we do not know the narrator (now victim) as the person she was prior to the attack, we are left to assemble our understanding of her as she conveys her story, as she also works to reconstitute her sense of self.

⁸⁵ From the list, #9.

⁸⁶ From the list, #s 6 and 11.

These opening scenes are without exception shocking, and they could be read merely as dramatic “hooks,” pulling readers (at least, those who don’t drop the book and recoil) into adrenalin-inducing action. An important question is whether they are exploitative, crass bids for the voyeuristic reader’s attention, strategically placed to snag the eye of someone with time only to flip through the opening pages of a book on a book stall’s carousel at an airport. This question is not limited to rape memoirs but is asked of the wider range of auto/biographical tales of dysfunctional childhoods listed above, memoirs marked by sexual or other forms of abuse, neglect or torture, usually inflicted by a parent or other responsible adult, lumped together as “misery lit.”⁸⁷ While there is nothing that inherently precludes stories that examine traumatic experience from sparkling with literary quality (Joan Didion’s grief memoirs come to mind), works identified as “misery lit” are widely disparaged for lacking in literariness. The label is understood by booksellers and publishers to refer to works that exploit horrific, graphically recounted childhood trauma in sensationalizing and crassly commercial prose that is “rarely mediated by much literary merit.”⁸⁸ American memoirist Vivian Gornick refers to such works as “testament” and suggests they are more plentiful than the literary memoir: the problem, she says, is that “most people who are writing memoirs are not writers”; they are, instead, “celebrities and crime victims.”⁸⁹ Such works abound (“reproducing like bacteria”) because “misery sells” (Addley, np). Interestingly, Harper Nonfiction is said to have estimated in 2007 that 80% of its “misery lit” stock sold not in bookstores but in supermarkets.⁹⁰ The shock tactic used in the opening pages of many rape memoirs could certainly be seen, in this light, as a savvy marketing ploy.

However, there is a political dimension to many of these works that suggests another motive may be at play. By their very existence, rape memoirs push back against historic silence. Rape is not a “typical” crime; it is perhaps the only crime in which the perpetrator’s guilt is too often felt or borne equally if not disproportionately by the victim (in the form of both guilt and shame). As suggested by some of the memoir titles (*After Silence; Telling*), to speak out about rape is not easy—it takes a great deal of preparation and practice, of steeling oneself, and it

⁸⁷ One of the foundational works in this category is Dave Pelzer’s *A Child Called It* (published in 1995 in the USA and in 2000 in the UK).

⁸⁸ Esther Addley, “So bad it’s good.” *The Guardian*, 15th June 2007, np. [So bad it's good | Children | The Guardian](#). Accessed 8th May 2021.

⁸⁹ Michelle Dean, “Interview: Vivian Gornick—‘Most people who are writing memoirs are not writers.’” *The Guardian*, 24th May 2015, np. [Vivian Gornick: 'Most people who are writing memoirs are not writers' | Autobiography and memoir | The Guardian](#). Accessed 15th May 2021.

⁹⁰ Addley, np.

means breaking taboos, confronting the fact that “no one wants to hear about such terrible things” (Raine, 119). Rape memoirs are filled with victims’ comments about feeling bombarded with pressures, in the form of both overt demands and subtle cultural cues, to remain silent. As if in direct answer to these pressures, these memoirs reverberate with declarations such as these: “I have kept writing because I want rape to be unacceptable, not in polite conversation, but in our lives” (Francisco, 3); and “By speaking out about their experiences of sexual violence, survivors can help us to see the problem of rape as a problem of social justice” (Freedman, x). After declaring, “I was raped” to an elderly visiting neighbour, the narrator in *Lucky* goes on to reflect, “I felt I had to say it. But I felt also that saying it was akin to an act of vandalism. As if I had thrown a bucket of blood out across the living room at the blue couch” (Sebold, 68). As suggested by another two titles among the comparator texts—*Know My Name* and *Jane Doe January*—the drive to make rape visible and the discussion of it palatable extends also to the demand by victims to make *themselves* visible, to be known, seen, named. For many, disclosing the details of their attacks and signing their names to these accounts amounts to refusing to bear the shame for what happened to them. This writing is a political act, notwithstanding the irrefutable fact that, at the same time, it could hardly be more personal.

There is a political dimension linked with other traits shared by many of these works. For instance, just as they wrestle with their drive (desire/need) to tell their stories, rape memoirists often acknowledge that they are writing at least in part for each other, that is, writing to reach out to other survivors of sexual violence. In works that are more journalistic than literary, the address to this particular reader can be explicit, as in Freedman’s *One Hour in Paris*, the prologue to which ends with this declaration of solidarity: “if I am sure of anything it is that there are innumerable other survivors out there whose experiences mirror mine. If you are one of these people..., please know this: I wrote this book for you” (xi-xii). A similar sentiment appears at the end of Raine’s opening passage, which she addresses “To My Reader”: “I hope to dispel at least some part of the fear and shame that has made victims mute. If I can expand the possibility for other survivors to speak, if they so choose, in an environment of informed tolerance and, ultimately, of acceptance, I will feel blessed by the darkness I have known” (6). And in several other of these memoirs, the writing-as-solidarity gesture can safely be inferred.

There is also a notable volume of research content incorporated into many rape memoirs, serving a politically educative or didactic purpose, which may be of benefit as much to the non-victim reader as to the readership of fellow survivors. Expressed typically as straightforward exposition, this research is presented as information the narrator needs as part

of educating herself after the attack, part of her recovery and healing, as she tries to make meaning out of her trauma: for instance, the narrators commonly rehearse key points from the same neuroscientific and psychiatric texts I cite above. As they learn to cope with their new lives as PTSD long-haulers, several bring in the history of PTSD as a recognized mental illness and diagnostic category, first appearing in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III*.⁹¹ And several quote at length from statistical information, including the frequency and prevalence of rape; the likelihood of apprehension, arrest, trial and conviction of rapist(s); and the (poor) odds of marriages surviving after one partner is raped. The most research-heavy of these comparators include Freedman's *One Hour in Paris* and Brison's *Aftermath*. Both authors are academics—both philosophers, in fact—and despite the intimate content and nature of disclosure in each work, the narrators' voices tend toward the scholarly and academic, as if their implied or imagined reader is a fellow scholar rather than a mass-market reader. Brison's work is the most scholarly, least memoir-like of the comparators considered: described on the fly-leaf as "At once personal narrative of recovery and a philosophical exploration of trauma," it brings together academic journal articles Brison published over the 1990s with new, purpose-written content, all of it infused with her examination of moral, feminist and psychological issues she confronted after a stranger raped and beat her and left her for dead in 1990; *Aftermath* is indexed and includes extensive notes and a bibliography. Freedman's work also contains (albeit somewhat less) extensive material about PTSD, and she concludes it in scholarly fashion with a four-page discussion of sources.⁹² These are not works that pander to the mass-market reader.

Several of the comparator texts, by contrast, are more journalistic than academic, presumably targeted precisely at a mass-market "popular" readership. While research surfaces at times in the pages of these works—especially in *I Will Find You*, written by an investigative reporter bent on researching the childhood and family history of her now-dead attacker—it tends to appear diffusely, not foregrounded in the didactic fashion we see in Brison's and Freedman's works, so that readers are not made to feel the narrator's "story" has been put on pause while they learn relevant history, statistics or psychology. Of these more "popular" works, Chanel Miller's *Know My Name* is perhaps the best candidate to be seen as market driven. It is also the closest among these comparators to a "celebrity" memoir, given that the criminal trial

⁹¹ American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 1980.

⁹² "Further Reading," 191-95.

of Miller's attacker became a social media sensation in the United States in 2016, after BuzzFeed News⁹³ published Miller's victim impact statement.

Like so many rape memoirs, this work opens graphically—the extent of disclosure limited initially only by the fact that Miller was unconscious when attacked; she goes on to share full details with the reader later in the narrative, consistent with the process by which she herself learned them. The narrator is frank and forthcoming; like many of the other memoirists, she is committed to using her story to encourage victims of sexual assault to find strength in sharing their own. The tone is angrier than is common, which I am tempted to attribute in large part to the brief time that lapsed between the assault and trial and the writing of the memoir. Although her age at the time of the assault—at 22 years—is the same as for four of the eleven comparator authors, Miller was by far the quickest to produce a book about the experience, publishing *Know My Name* within three years of the trial and four years of the assault. By contrast, the time lapse between attack and memoir publication for the other ten authors ranges from 13–36 years, the average gap being 24 years and the average age of the other authors at time of publication just under 49 years. Four of the authors who were adults at the time they were attacked were already professional writers,⁹⁴ and yet each notes, even so, that she felt unable to write about what happened for five, ten or more years. The decades that most spent absorbing the impact of their experiences and coming to the insights they share in their memoirs, I suspect, have a good deal to do with the tone typical of these other works, which is much more reflective, grief-laden perhaps, than angry. Many of these women have spent half their lives incubating their material. The uncharacteristic urgency with which *Know My Name* came into print may have everything to do with the context of #MeToo and the “buzz” (and market) created by BuzzFeed: Miller's story debuted on the *New York Times Best-Seller* list at number five,⁹⁵ won the 2019 National Book Critics Circle Award for auto/biography and was re-released in paperback in 2020.

The most recent comparator cited here is the 2020 work by Debora Harding, *Dancing with the Octopus: A Memoir of a Crime*, which breaks many of the conventions common to the more popular and academic rape memoirs in ways that make it a closer comparator for my work. Of all eleven memoirs, *Dancing with the Octopus* gives the greatest scope to the

⁹³ 3rd June 2016. Identified then as “Emily Doe's Victim Impact Statement.” <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra>. Accessed 8th May 2021.

⁹⁴ From the list, #s 1, 2, 4, 7.

⁹⁵ 13th October 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2019/10/13/>. Accessed 8th May 2021.

narrator's childhood and family life before the attack. From the outset, the work unfolds by weaving across times, moving through very short scenes while braiding together threads from the narrator's early childhood in the American mid-west through to her present-day adult married life, even briefly back (with some poetic license, given the marketing of the work as a memoir) to her parents' own childhood family circumstances and the early days of their relationship, prior to having children of their own. The scenes are all labelled with date and location, as welcome signposts. Through the first half of the book, the scenes conveying other times and places and family circumstances pivot around instalments of the unfolding of one night in 1978 when Harding was abducted, attacked and left for dead. Metering out the vivid details of that evening slowly, the narrator brings us to feel familiar with the family setting for what is happening to her, but delays disclosing that there is a rape until almost mid-point in the book. When she brings us to that moment, unlike in the other rape memoirs, she does not recount the violation itself: instead, the narrator skips from "he instructed me to take my jacket off" (181) to "After [he] was done with me, he gave me my shirt and gauchos back, tied my hands, covered my head with the burlap bag again and pushed me into the space behind the driver's seat" (189). She then resumes the precise, emotionally distressing and detailed account of events that bring her ordeal to an end. As seen in the lines quoted above, she is precise about physical danger, and she recites the conversation between herself and her attacker at some length, but she chooses to spare us—perhaps more importantly herself—from visualizing exactly what goes unsaid by this strategic elision and textual silence.

The delay, the withholding and the parallel development of the family context all contribute to a thematic de-centering of the sexual violence in *Dancing with the Octopus*, with the result that this memoir, like mine, is as much about a dysfunctional family failing to respond to trauma and to support the young rape victim as it is a "rape memoir." The tone of the work is whimsical at times, with a humour that one might suspect is serving as a distancing tactic for the author but could as well be aimed at re-assuring the reader that the work will remain somewhat "light" rather than becoming too brutal to endure. For example, each short scene is introduced with a title after the style of Winnie the Pooh stories, beginning with "In Which..."—including "In Which I Meet a Masked Man" for the scene recounting her abduction. Speaking of this "masked man," she goes on to tell us in an aside, "I will now call him Mr. K, for *kidnapper*" (13). There is a lot of heft in the book nonetheless, including a standard rehearsal of some of the history of PTSD as a diagnosis. Some of the characters are realized as fully as they might be in a novel; and the braiding effectively sustains tension as the narrator brings the family dramas to

their own climax in tandem with the story of her abductor's long term in prison and their ultimate meeting when he is facing release back into the community. The hard cover edition includes a reproduction of an interview the author gave in 2020, which suggests that the publishers might have been anticipating a general interest audience—perhaps a paperback printing to provide library sets for book clubs will soon follow.

I include among comparator texts some works that are not rape memoirs but offer some overlap in form or content, and/or they stand as an aspirational goal for me when thinking about both the market for and the type of work I hope to have produced. The three coming-of-age auto/biographies listed above, by Angelou, Walls and Westover, all give a counterpoint to the concentrated representation of rape trauma presented in the comparator memoirs. In these accounts of childhoods spent in dysfunctional and/or severely impoverished families, traumatic events are relayed as the narrative unfolds chronologically, almost as a matter of course. That is, the sexual and/or physical violence contained within these works appears as part of the fabric of the story rather than being foregrounded *as* the story. The events in question include the devastating rape of an eight-year-old girl by a grown man (Angelou); a series of separate molestations—committed in turn by an eleven-year-old neighbourhood boy, a stranger at a bar and a paternal uncle—when the narrator was between the ages of eight and thirteen (Walls); and ongoing, often life-threatening physical violence and psychological abuse within the family, in the third (Westover). Formally, what distinguishes these stories from the rape memoir are their broader scope (the development of identity and personality of the narrator), and their more fictive qualities, including a narrative arc that is more conventionally novelistic, and attention to the development of literary elements, such as setting, character and dialogue. They are also free of formal features of academic works such as tables of contents, bibliographies, footnotes and suggestions for further reading; any research or scholarship that may be informing them is well disguised. While all are recounted in the first-person singular voice and have been marketed as auto/biography, they have the popularity often of good fiction: both Angelou and Walls saw their works adapted to movie form, and the works by Walls and Westover have both survived for extended periods on best-seller lists⁹⁶ for nonfiction.

⁹⁶ Walls' *The Glass Castle*, first published in 2005, is in its 445th week on the *New York Times*' bestseller list for paperback nonfiction as of 22nd August 2021. ([Paperback Nonfiction Books - Best Sellers - Books \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/paperback-nonfiction)). Accessed 16th August 2021). Westover's *Educated* debuted at number one on the hardcover nonfiction best seller's list in 2018, and stayed on the list for 132 weeks, until September 2020.

Liza Potvin's brief memoir *White Lies (for My Mother)* deals with life-long trauma in the form of incest and its aftermath, and it does so in a compellingly lyrical and evocative manner. The complexity of the betrayal and damage that incest causes is signaled by the fact that the narrator speaks directly to an imagined listener, throughout the work, addressing herself to "Maman" as she tries to fathom not only the sexual violence done her by both her stepfather and grandfather, but her mother's failure to protect her from men she knew to be abusive. A child's need for the adults in her life to protect her, and teach her, is underscored by the literary frame of reference she brings to bear on her story, as she weaves in moments from fairy tales, myth and movies, and church liturgy. The work opens with this invocation of the classical story of rape and silencing:

I speak with the voice of Philomela, of silence and of pain. Which is to say I do not speak at all. The blankness of the page is my message that invites your gaze, your speculation. I have woven my secrets into the white spaces of nothingness, from rags once torn and then bonded together, waiting for you to unravel them. I could write nothing at all, and you would know just what it is I am saying. *Mais il faut m'aider.*⁹⁷
(1)

Large amounts of white space abound in this slim volume, which reads as much like poetry as prose. The text is sparse and indirect: references to the sexual violation of incest are cloaked in hints at purity and whiteness, sacrifice and blood. By integrating mythology, fairy tales and Biblical references, Potvin assumes a reader prepared to decode literary allusion and metaphor. The experience of reading this memoir can feel at times like reading through gauze, in fact; the narrator assumes we will be equal to the task of following her allusions.

Claire Sicherman's memoir *Imprint: A Memoir of Trauma in the Third Generation* is an exploration of the inherited trauma of descendants of the Holocaust. Sicherman's text is a searching treatment of history and somatic memory. It unfolds through a series of short passages divided into four "Books": within each, we find a blending of untitled historical passages, which document and pay tribute to ancestors murdered in Nazi death camps and to the grandparents who survived; letters to the narrator's nine-year-old son, which the narrator signs "Love always, Mom"; and numbered journal entries, incompletely represented as if excerpts from an actual, longer journal, providing glimpses into the narrator's inner life, her struggles with the meaning of dreams, memories of and insights into unacknowledged family

[\(Hardcover Nonfiction Books - Best Sellers - Books - Sept. 13, 2020 \(nytimes.com\)\)](#). Accessed 16th August 2021.

⁹⁷ Translation: "But you must help me."

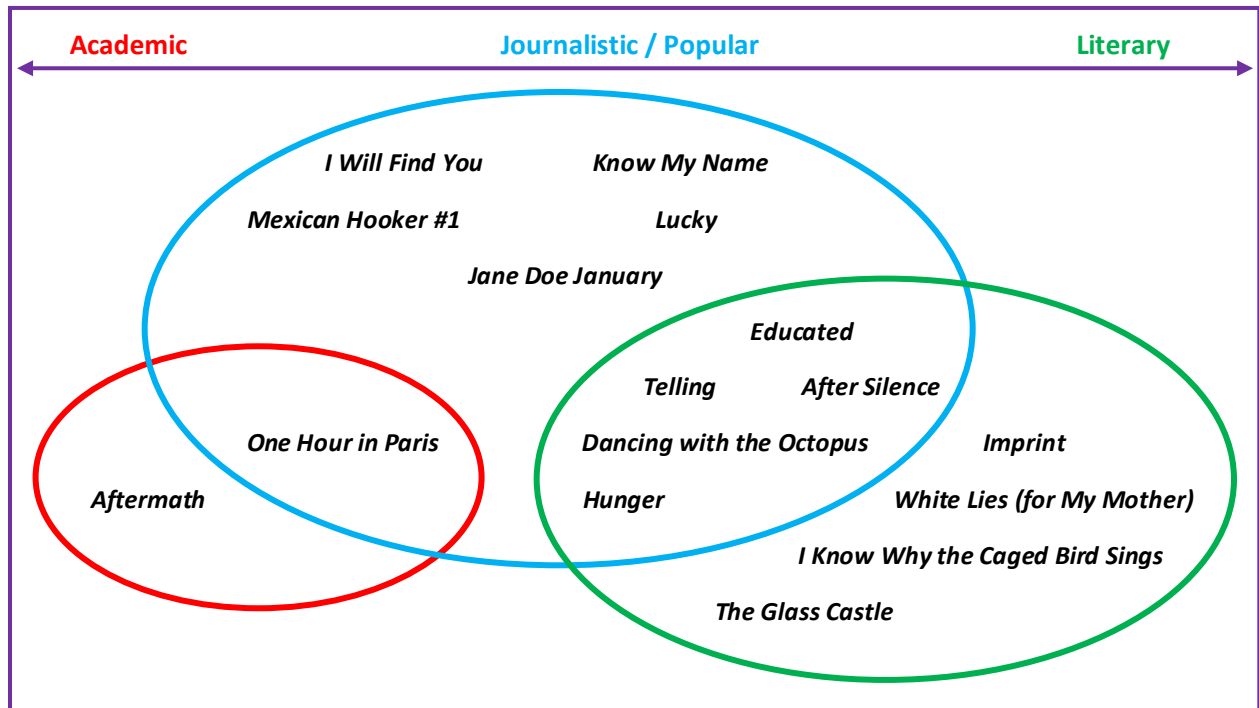
sorrow, and the depression she links with both the inheritance of trauma and her incapacitating anxiety about transmitting trauma to the next generation. This memoir is steeped in history and is informed by scholarship on trauma and therapeutic approaches to resolving PTSD—and it comes complete with a bibliography—yet the work as a whole does not feel academic or “researched”; rather, it is intimate, vulnerable and moving. It offers a meditation on how to make space in one’s life for grief that cannot be resolved, a scope that extends its value to an audience much broader than the already considerable readership for stories that bear witness to the long reach of the Holocaust.

By way of concluding these remarks about the publishing field into which *Chasing Peace* might be launched, I will attempt to account for my distinctions along the “academic – journalistic/ popular – literary” continuum. I do so with trepidation, lest what follows be misconstrued as judgements about the value of the works, and fully recognizing that such distinctions are of course to a great degree subjective. But in making these assessments I bring to bear my career teaching literature and gender and women’s studies at the university level in Canada. In a broad, holistic way, I’ve asked myself of each text, *Would I teach this work in a literature class and/or in a women’s studies class?* Within the answer lie implicit assessments of whether a work would lend itself to rich study through the lens of literary analysis—discussion of matters such as form, voice, point of view, diction, figurative language, allusion and imagery *as well as* theme, content or subject-matter—in which case it would be at home on a literature syllabus. At the other end of the spectrum, if a work’s contribution to a classroom would be more narrowly thematic—if our treatment of it would be content-driven, topical—I might include it on a women’s studies syllabus. As this suggests, such distinctions rest largely on how a text might be *used* in a course: a text that reflects writing conventions of popular, journalistic or academic prose may be a useful *vehicle* for discussion of ideas, events or concepts; a text whose conventions are more literary, by contrast, can itself fruitfully *become* the focus, as students are developing the skill to analyze not just *what it says* but *how it says it*. Given that literary texts lend themselves also to thematic/topical discussion, a text at home on a literature syllabus might make its way onto a women’s studies syllabus; the reverse, in my experience, is unlikely.

By way of attempting to summarize at a glance how this exercise leads me to understand and identify these works, Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the sixteen comparator works placed along a continuum, from the most academic and scholarly work to the most creative and literary. Placements are informed by the matters discussed above, including

issues of style, scope, degree of foregrounding of the traumatic event(s) and of research or scholarship, emphasis on the therapeutic role of constructing a trauma narrative, and presumed (or addressed) readership and publishing purpose (where this is stated or can be inferred).

Figure 1: Venn Diagram of Comparator Texts



Although I think of *Chasing Peace* as a trauma memoir, this is a convenience, a kind of short-hand: the manuscript that has emerged is a hybrid one in which the conventional trauma story, called into being by virtue of a single event, intersects with the coming-of-age narrative that accounts for the development of an individual’s identity and personality over time and rooted in a particular familial context. Attributes of both these forms appear throughout the manuscript, competing in a kind of generic tug-of-war for its textual soul. This has been my response to the challenge of resolving the interplay between “the weight of ... family history,” on the one hand, and the “autobiographical singularity [that] emerges in negotiation with this legacy,”⁹⁸ on the other. Whether the effect of this has been to create a memoir that meets the broadest test of literature, which is, as Gornick puts it, “the same responsibility [in memoir] as [in] the novel or the short story—to shape a piece of experience so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one with meaning for the disinterested reader,⁹⁹ is not for me to say.

⁹⁸ Miller, 2007, 543.

⁹⁹ Gornick, 2003, np.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Abbreviations and Pseudonyms Used in *Chasing Peace*

The following names that appear in the manuscript are pseudonyms or abbreviations, used for the purpose of preserving each individual's privacy:

Alice; Associate Chief Justice C; Bob Barry; Bobbie; Cheryl; Colleen; Denny Barry; Ersilia; Graeme; Griff; Jean; Jocelyn; Jordan; Kirk; Lisa; Marilyn; Mark Barry; Mrs. A; Suzanne; Trudy W.

Appendix B: Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Mayo Clinic)

The chart below comes from the website for the Mayo Clinic.¹⁰⁰

PTSD symptoms are generally grouped into four types: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions. Symptoms can vary over time or vary from person to person.

Intrusive memories – symptoms of intrusive memories may include:

- Recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks)
- Upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event
- Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the traumatic event

Avoidance – symptoms of avoidance may include:

- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Avoiding places, activities or people that remind you of the traumatic event

Negative changes in thinking and mood – symptoms may include:

- Negative thoughts about yourself, other people or the world
- Hopelessness about the future
- Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event
- Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- Feeling detached from family and friends
- Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- Feeling emotionally numb

Changes in physical/emotional reactions (also called arousal) – symptoms may include:

- Being easily startled or frightened
- Always being on guard for danger
- Self-destructive behaviour, such as drinking too much or driving too fast
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability, angry outbursts or aggressive behaviour
- Overwhelming guilt or shame

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967> Accessed 5th August 2017 and 18th October 2018.

Appendix C: *Writing My Father*¹⁰¹

Meg Stainsby

After twenty years of carting it around unopened, I unpacked a stale cardboard box stuffed with crackly, yellowed sheets of typescript—some still clinging to their carbons, all faint and fusty—and began a solitary trek across a forty-year expanse of written terrain that my father had left scrawled out behind him. Donald Orval Stainsby, born New Year’s Day, 1928, in Fernie, BC, spent his life writing. Upon his death, in 1981, I took custody of this box of manuscripts and files; finally, I decided it was time to open it.

I was accepting an invitation from a dead man.

As I marked my own trail through my father’s words, my trek became both a literary exercise and a personal pilgrimage. I haven’t always respected my father as a parent, but I had many reasons for rescuing this box of manuscripts from the obscurity of my attic: because I felt the burden of being its sole guardian; because I wanted to mark the twentieth anniversary of the man’s death; because I wanted to learn what I could of Don Stainsby as writer and adult in the world; and, perhaps most compellingly, because I wanted to write, my own creative drive pushing me to reconcile myself to whatever legacy my writer-father might have left me.

Although anxious to dive into my father’s fiction, I was moved by what I witnessed initially about his earlier efforts, as editor of UBC’s student paper, *The Ubyyssey*, in the late 1940s, then as a newspaperman in Vancouver in the early ’50s. A scrapbook, tossed into the box along with all the writing—the early captions written in my grandmother’s tiny, steady hand, later ones dashed off in my father’s own hasty script—preserved evidence of my father’s relationships with local literary personalities of his day. His newspaper columns, such as “Books and Bookmen” in *The Vancouver Sun*, and his live interviews with authors, on both local CBC and CHQM radio stations, brought him many of these connections. I knew a little about these friendships before reading his old notes and letters; what I had not appreciated was the esteem in which other writers held him. Ethel Wilson, the notoriously aloof elder stateswoman of letters, singled out my father as a reviewer she trusted and respected; among my father’s papers are two hand-written letters from Wilson, thanking him for his intelligent comments about her fiction. Letters crossing both ways between my father and Margaret Laurence are warmer, more familiar. Laurence asks after my mother, about my recovery from a car accident I apparently suffered as an infant. She and my father swap writerly details and excitement over evolving projects. In one letter, Laurence confesses relief that my father liked a first draft of *The Stone Angel* she’d sent him, particularly grateful that he was convinced by the soon-to-be-classic character Hagar. Poet Earle Birney makes cryptic remarks in a letter about the “real gossip” he can’t commit to paper, then invites my father to his West End flat for drinks and conspiratorial fun. Writers liked my father.

Emboldened by what I found in these letters, I took a couple of risks I hadn’t planned on—side-trips of sorts. Family lore had long cast Alice Munro not only as another writerly friend of my father’s but possibly as his lover: she was also reputed to have drawn upon him as inspiration for the short-story character Hugo (from “Material”) in the early 1970s. Hugo, like my father was, is a man from a mining and forestry town, a man whose father died of a heart attack, a man with notoriously bad teeth—Dad’s had been replaced by full dentures before he was thirty—and, most tellingly when Alice knew him, a man of many wives and twice as many

¹⁰¹ Written 2002; revised for publication in [Ormsby Review](#), No. 876. 20th July 2020.

children. My father and his first wife Mari had met Alice and Jim Munro in the 1950s and become fast friends, later living as neighbours on Ottawa Road in West Vancouver. Yet the files of my father's correspondence yielded no trace of this friendship. In the spirit of my quest, I wrote to Munro, asking for memories of my father and their long-ago friendship. My letter went east as Munro wintered out west, but when the letter found her, she telephoned me. She was gracious, generous with her time as she recalled my father and his writing. She alluded obliquely (I *think*) to rumours of their romantic ties, hoping (again, I *think*) to put them quietly aside. She was emphatic about not having modeled the character Hugo, himself a writer, after my father: she said she would not have done so because she "did not see [Don] as disconnected from all other realities but his own, as Hugo is." I bit my lip and stayed silent here.

But I did go on to answer Munro's questions about my father's later life, after their close years—telling her, for example, about his time in the early '70s driving around Europe. Her enthusiasm was immediate:

"Oh, wonderful! Was that good for him, as a writer, do you think?" Imagine my surprise. I found myself agreeing that of course it might have been wonderful for *him*, but I'd been more inclined to focus on what he left behind: six children, two crazy ex-wives and no money.

"Oh," Munro said, "your mother must have felt so abandoned by him."

Indeed, I thought.

What was clear to me as Munro spoke was her affection for my father, her admiration for him *as a writer*, and her sense that his choices as an *artist* might have been viable, even enviable ones.

As we were about to ring off, Munro remarked, "You look just like your father, you know—I suppose you get that all the time?"

Imagine my surprise. We *were* speaking by phone. I found myself scanning my bedroom for a hidden camera. I must have sounded flustered because she reminded me of our brief meeting at one of her book signings in Vancouver in the mid-1990s, saying she had noted my resemblance to my father then.

"No," I replied, "no one has ever said that."

My mother always insisted that I took after the Gibsons, her father's family, and did not look like a Stainsby at all.

"Oh," Munro went on, "I knew right away you were Don's child."

We said goodbye. I later sent her six of my father's best stories by way of a thank you, and we spoke again briefly about his fiction; but in that one quick aside, Munro had already contributed to my pilgrimage a boon I hadn't known to ask for.

With such encouragement, I next sent an email to writer/editor Robert Fulford, with whom my father corresponded a good deal in the '60s and early '70s. In another generous reply, Fulford, like Munro, handed me a gift in the form of a memory: he related a brief tale of my father, a *mea culpa* story in which my father's climactic line was "I did a bad thing." Imagine my surprise again: this phrase, *verbatim*, appears in an anecdote I had recently sketched, a brief tale, set when I was four, in which I seek out my father to confess that I have stolen some coins from a friend's piggy bank. I announce my crime in just this way: "I did a bad thing." Amused by the uncanny echo, I sent Fulford my anecdote; in his reply, he noted the mirror phrasing as an example of how families often develop and speak their own "private languages."

Fulford's comment, like Munro's, made me temporarily re-frame my travels, directing me to turn inward. Two CanLit figures who "knew Don Stainsby when..." gave me a way to acknowledge a little piece of my father within myself—in my use of words, the turn of my nose, perhaps, whatever others see that I do not see in myself. That I carry any echo of this man within me was a possibility I'd not been prepared to consider before. To be drawn to dwell upon this now, seriously, was a complex and loaded gift. And even if ultimately the likeness between

my father and me is slight, or the comparisons prove more disturbing than pleasing, I concede that my life mirrors his enough that I may learn something about examining what it means to be “Don’s child.”

Once immersed in my father’s short stories, I found myself pausing often to think about the relationship between his writing and what I know of his life, the “real world” through which he daily moved. Or more precisely, about the considerable *lack* of relationship between his actions as father and his preferred identity as writer. Sure, I had undertaken my pilgrimage in a spirit of reconciliation. But how to reconcile, for instance, Munro’s delight that an artist should wander Europe, soaking up life and storing experiences against later creative need, with my own child’s view of my father as having run away from home and family to live a remarkably selfish life?

Early along in my reading, I was very nearly warned off my conciliatory path by an encounter with one of my sisters. We were in sporadic touch at the time, but I sought her out the very day I posted my letter to Munro. After an hour’s chat, as we were about to part, I told her about my archival project, sketching for her a few of the themes that had captured our father’s interest over the years, commenting on how I was seeing his craft developing. As if outraged that I could compartmentalize so—as our father had done, perhaps?—my sister responded by immediately recounting one of our father’s most brutal moments, an evening when he beat one of our cats, Thursday, to death. I was five years old, my next closest brother only six, and I recall our father kneeling down to the two of us, trying to justify his savage attack on this cat, who had eaten our sister’s pet mice. As I was looking into my father’s face, I saw over his shoulder our eldest sister coming through the front door. She had gone to the garbage can where our father, assuming the cat dead, had deposited Thursday’s mangled body; sobbing, clutching the bleeding mess of fur, his eldest child looked hopefully through her tears as she said, “Daddy, she’s still alive.” In her confusion and shock, my sister could not have thought through this error, not registered that the parent to whom she was now appealing for rescue was the very man who had just violated our trust. Wordlessly, my father got up, left my brother and me with the older kids, and took Thursday back outside, where he wrung her neck before throwing her back into the trash.

Of course, one does not forget such betrayal. But to have my sibling call the image before me now, just as I was hearing some faint call to kinship with my father, felt defeating, deflating. She seemed to be declaring my reclamation project to be fundamentally ill-conceived; Facing her own struggles, my sister struck me as resistant to integrating the disparate fragments of our troubled lives, to moving beyond the worst. I did not believe the same to be true of me, but I took her gesture as a challenge. As I’ve searched out more and more pieces to the puzzle that was my father, I have had to ask myself repeatedly whether in the final re-construction all fragments must be accounted for. Can they ever be? Paradoxically, are some best left outside our sense of the Whole, of the Holy? My instinct clearly is to find room in patterns—in pictures, in words—for any and every shard, but whether this is wise or ideal I cannot begin to say.

To my surprise, moving alongside my father’s writerly self drew me also to reclaim an earlier affection for him as parent. I read my way back to a simple truth: I hadn’t *always* disliked my dad. When I was little, I adored him, as children will, and I simply assumed that he cherished me, too. In fact, I stuck faithfully (even perversely) to this vision throughout my childhood, despite my mother’s many efforts to disabuse me of any hope that he was capable of love, of a stance towards the world other than selfishness and self-interest. I do not recall that I begrudged him sailing off for Europe when I was eight, leaving home with the woman who would become his third wife, sending in three years little support money, fewer than a half-dozen letters and once only—so far as I remember—a Christmas present. I took nothing personally in those days. I couldn’t afford to. He was, after all, a *writer*. At school, during “show

and tell," I would hold up his travel books and articles, beaming. My mother somehow scrounged the airfare to send one brother and me to England when I was ten, to see our father. We stayed an intoxicating month. Our last evening there, Dad took us to his favourite Italian restaurant: I ate chicken Kiev, sipped wine and liqueur and drank coffee, all for the first time. I was serenaded by proprietor-brothers Gino and Marco. It was a thrill, and I felt supremely happy—until I burst into tears over dessert. My father laughingly waved off the embarrassed singing waiters, telling them I was homesick. This was true, in part. Really, the tears had come when I suddenly flashed upon what to me seemed an undeniable truth: I would never feel fully happy or whole again, ever, because while I was indeed desperately homesick and missing Mum, I also knew that once home, I would instantly ache for Dad. I crawled into his lap and told him this as best I could, burying my face in his rough, bearded neck. Ten years old this night, I would not see him again for a full year, by which time our estrangement was great enough that I never again sought refuge in his arms. But I seized my moment with him and cried over my trifle in Il Cervo's Ristorante Italiano in west London; then I flew home the next day to my mother's downtown east end Vancouver apartment in a government housing project. A few days later, I stood before Mrs. Turneau's grade five class, reading my report: "My Month in England." I left out the final scene.

Years later, when he was back in Canada, I continued to protect my vision of my father. When I was sixteen, my severely depressed mother demanded I declare my loyalty and "choose" between parents; when I refused, she declared the refusal a betrayal and a choice, and threw my belongings out her front door. It seems impossible to me now—and merely one more sad reflection of a child's overriding need to believe in her parent's love—that I did not ask or expect my father to take me in. After all, he hadn't offered me refuge on the two earlier occasions I'd left my mother's home. I did search him out to tell him my news, though. He was then editor of the magazine *BC Outdoors*, and on this day was meeting with out-of-town representatives from the publisher, McLean-Hunter. I tracked him to one of Vancouver's oldest, most regal restaurants. Calling him away from his business lunch, I told him I had no home, that Mum had asked me to forswear him and I'd refused. He rolled his eyes at my mother's instability, asked that I keep him posted, then returned to his guests, leaving me in the restaurant foyer. Perhaps I had hoped for more—at least a pat on the back for not abandoning him when threatened with exile—but I do not recall taking slight at his failure to offer me some food, let alone a bed, a roof, some care. My father was not in the habit of putting himself out for others. I knew this. And I wouldn't have asked, certainly not directly, already at sixteen being well schooled in the art of avoiding rejection. It was perhaps only by such savvy that my faith in my father was kept tucked up out of sight, safe from blunt challenge, my belief in his love never exposed for what it might have been.

With three part-time jobs and the help of one of my sisters, I made my own way through the remaining year and a half of high school. But after graduation—when I was no longer a potential dependant, one might wryly observe—my father at last invited me "home," to be his housekeeper and nanny to his seventh child in return for room and board while I attended university. None of us knew this for several weeks, but even as I was unpacking, my father had begun dying of lung and liver cancer. Although only fifty-three, he was typical of newspapermen of his day—a heavy drinker and heavier smoker. I had only a few weeks in which to learn the rhythm and hum of the keys of my father's typewriter, on which he kept tapping ferociously between transfusions and bouts of chemotherapy. As long as that sound danced in the air, he could pretend all was right in his world. But the tapping soon stopped. He went quickly. On one of his final days at home, he told me that Dylan Thomas was wrong, that if one fought and raged against the dying of one's light, one wouldn't see the light fading. My father wanted to live his death; he wanted to experience it, not fight it. He kept pad and paper

by his bed in palliative care. He scratched notes right up until the morphine won over his pain and persistence and he dropped into a coma. He died as he had lived: observing. And distant, even in the presence of his closest kin.

It was long after his death that my view of him changed. Slowly. Over the course of many conversations and several years, my then-husband began pointing out to me how appallingly forgiving all Don's children seemed of him. Measured objectively, wasn't my father's performance as a parent dismal? Deserting his first wife when she was hospitalized with paranoid schizophrenia, he farmed their three children out to relatives and took up with my mother, already pregnant and soon to become his second wife. When his second marriage failed, he immediately began living with another woman; within two years, he left all six children behind in Canada and set out with this last partner for a bohemian artist's life on the road in Europe. Rarely was he financially solvent; he contributed to his six children's keep minimally, begrudgingly, and only at the urging of the courts. Yet he was not above calling his children to mind when convenient: although we heard little from him from Europe, his archive contains a 1972 letter to a CBC film producer, written from Denmark where my father was assembling a documentary film crew. He flippantly trots out the fact that he has six children ("somewhere") and is sure he can lure one to Europe if the storyline requires. He was an habitual drunk and a loser of jobs. He gave us little in life and even managed to die intestate, so that his mother's beach home on the shores of Howe Sound, to which I was brought as a newborn in 1963, and the only "estate" that might have benefited the brood, fell into the exclusive hands of our stepmother, who chose to share this legacy with only her own son. Why, my husband challenged, did we all speak lovingly of this man who had so repeatedly failed us?

Self-protection, my guess. Denial. I had spent my childhood resisting the tsunami of my mother's anger, on the one side of me, and the equally brutal, objective truth of my father's neglect, on the other. Only years after his death did I relax my defenses and allow myself to see that, yes, okay, my father had failed me. Being a writer was no excuse; even being a *great* writer would have been no excuse. I began to develop what a therapist friend refers to as "righteous anger" (as I've seen most of my siblings, each at her/his own pace, has done). I raged for well over ten years, snorting dismissively at my stepmother's suggestion that my father might have drunk as he did because of psychic, spiritual or emotional pain; that he might have sent more money to his children had my mother been more civil and generous in their interactions; that he had been, after all, an artist reaching towards personal fulfillment.

None of this washed with me. Whether the result of my own impending parenthood, or only the inevitable boon of distance and time, through my twenties and early thirties I grew increasingly critical of the choices my father made, of his selfishness, of what I came to see as his stellar failure as a parent. (Maybe this is the real reason that his papers languished unread in a torn old cardboard box at the back of my attic so long. Let's see how *he* likes twenty years of neglect.)

And yet, here I was, all these years later, rifling through this stack of manuscripts. Righteous or not, anger is wearisome and demands a vigilance that doesn't come naturally to me. So it passed, and I turned to the box in the attic. Damned if my father's charismatic aura didn't flutter in the air over the pages as I re-read his letters to so many editors and publishers. Damned if I couldn't hear him again in his travel memoir, somehow insinuating into his romantic song of the nomad's life his right—his *entitlement*—to the good life, to the open road of southern Italy, to cheap fresh bread and deep red wine.

Near the end of my readerly pilgrimage, hunting for some missing manuscript pages of a novel, I found one more image of my father. Literally. Out slipped a photograph I'd never seen before, a late one, probably taken the year before his death. It's a classic, glossy, black-and-white 5" x 7": The Writer at His Desk. Papers are piled all around him, one sheet protruding

from the typewriter carriage, over which he's thrown a lanky forearm as if to keep his words to himself. On the desk a cigarette burns in an over-flowing ashtray. He is half-smiling, looking content, tired and oh, so familiar. I can't help it, I thought. Bad father be damned. *This* man—the one with the rheumy blue eyes, the fingers as nicotine-stained as that reddish moustache, his front paunchy and his back hunched—*this* man I had liked once, very much. Of course, recollecting this does not mean I can or will revert to my childish, uncritical defense of him. No. I'm still prickly enough to note, for one thing, that this picture reveals a desktop cluttered only by cigarettes and the jumbled pages of works in progress: where are the mementos, the framed photos of *any* of his seven children, even the last of his three wives? As a parent myself now, I do not accept that my father should have felt free to make many of the choices he made. Nor do I believe that one is any less accountable for harm done indirectly, by the withholding of care, than one is for damage willfully achieved. Indeed, my experience suggests that the unintended outcomes may be the ones we regret most earnestly. But as a writer—a term I do not apply to myself until my father has been dead for decades—I see that the point of examining this man's life and his writing is not to judge but to understand.

When I first sat down to write my way through these reflections, I felt overwhelmed by a riot of emotions. Where possibly to begin? I sat at my desk, hands frozen in the air above the keyboard for a long, long time. And then it hit me. Quite apart from any literary merit of my father's fiction, his box of papers has reinforced the significance in my life of typed words. I thought, How apt it would be for me to move off this computer and dust off my father's old manual typewriter. I would have to do some repair work before it would be serviceable: I recalled that the ribbons were last left in a tangled heap when my young daughters, guilty, afraid of angering me when they went too far playing with this ancient relic, had hastily stuffed the whole mess far into the back of our attic closet. I found it, of course, and shrieked in my most aggrieved voice—half-victim, half-tyrant—“That is *not* a toy!” When I knelt down to get a better view of the damage, I felt quickly defeated by the gnarls before me and returned the typewriter to the closet deep. Now, years later, I thought it might be time to drag it out and tackle those knots again.

My father earned his living for over thirty years by pounding away at the keys of any number of typewriters, but I like to think of this old manual, a portable Olympia, as his truest companion. More than seventy years old now, in its two-toned teal and off-white hard-shell case, the Olympia looks like a small, abandoned suitcase. It is certainly better traveled than I am. I can't describe its earliest days in the late 1950s, although I'm sure they were unorthodox. During the '60s I know it to have led an energetic if divided life, mostly domestic, occasionally wild: it camped, canoed and caroused its way on “assignment,” into the BC interior, north to gold-rush country, all up and down, on and off the islands of the west coast. It cruised out of Vancouver's Coal Harbour in 1971, crossed through the Panama Canal, stopped overnight in Venezuela and at several ports-of-call in the Caribbean, and disembarked from the ship finally in Holland. And then the little bugger got really lucky, caravanning throughout Europe and North Africa for more than a year before settling in for an enviable if frugal stay in a ground-entry flat in Hendon Lane, off the North Line in London, the city in which my father chose to hack away at his craft for another year and more, and to which my much poorer mother would in time send my brother and me for our month's visit. By the time this dependable, mechanical friend flew back with my father from Heathrow to Vancouver in 1974, the two had collaborated on countless business and arts articles for newspapers and magazines in England and Canada, at least two novels, a half-dozen short stories, some memoirs, reviews, screenplays, interviews, résumés, and “pitch” letters to publishers, pleading (with varying degrees of humility) for support for any number of fledgling projects.

It was on this typewriter, in fact, that my father composed the occasional letter home, to me, and it is for this sentimental reason alone that I kept it after he died, even though by the mid-1970s he had moved on to electrics. By 1981, he was working at an IBM Selectric, the kind with those removable font-balls, little globes, each one containing an entire alphabetical world. The very impermanence of any one of those fonts, the temporariness with which a ball could be chosen, makes it hard for me to imagine my father striking the keys of that, his final machine, with anything of the trust or fondness I believe he shared with the Olympia.

I would like to say something romantic here too about the noise of my father working—a wistful, nostalgic claim, for instance, that my child’s ear could detect from the Gatling-gun report of my father’s one-hundred word-per-minute flying fingertips that all was right with my world. But I cannot call up this sound from my early childhood, those first five years when I shared houses with this man and his beloved machine. He surely wrote then, daily—he must have done, since it was primarily by his wits that his six children, his ex-wife, his second wife and he himself lived. But he was not a man to be at home much. Truth be told, my father was not a man to keep any home for long. Although his long-term relationship with the Olympia might suggest otherwise, my father was simply not long on commitment.

So I guess I continue to hang on to this typewriter because it is evidence I have sorely wanted that my father was capable of stability, of loyalty, of love. When I was five years old, he and his Olympia moved on without us, without me. What does it mean that no matter how often I move, I lug the old portable along? If I am ever truly to journey out to meet the writer who was my father, as he represented himself on the page, and to others—to writers, lovers and friends—I must deal with the private symbolism of this machine. It suggests that it was not his particular words but language itself that my father chose as his closest companion, writing the preferred mistress who alone got to accompany him on his solitary way.

That I turn to the keyboard myself when I crave understanding—or to be understood—is a complex irony not lost on me. We *are* kin, Don Stainsby and I. As his daughter, I have read my way back to scenes of unremembered love and over-vexed anguish, and I remain deeply ambivalent towards all these memories. As a writer, I am grateful for the emotional imagination that infuses these inward travels. While I hope I’ve raised my daughters to know that they trump writing like paper swallows rock, I admit that I—like Munro’s Hugo, like my father—am often guilty of seeing life as so much “material.” I find myself rummaging through my “bank of memory” as well as this box of my father’s yellowed pages, turning over the “scraps and oddments” of early life to reveal what might become “ripe and usable”¹⁰² in art. Understanding this now, I see that this archival pilgrimage has been a journey I have long needed to make.

¹⁰²Alice Munro, “Material,” *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (Scarborough, ON: Signet / McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), 36.

Appendix D: *Our Lady of Perpetual Surprise: Reflections of a Recovered Concussive*¹⁰³

Meg Stainsby

We're on a road trip and Nova Scotia beckons, so I'm loading the car. From North Cable Head, we'll drive west to peek at Green Gables, crisscross the island province again to take the Wood Islands ferry back over the Northumberland Strait. Only a few more bags to load, cousins to kiss and we're off. All but the road snacks and wet beachwear are stashed as I repeat my steps between cottage and car. I open the rented Pontiac Sunfire's rear door, lean in, place my cargo on the seat. As I pull back, righting myself, *whack!* I'm slugged in the right temple by the return swing of the door—clipped by its protruding metal edge. I'm knocked against the cab, momentarily dazed but not out.

“Ow!”

Nobody hears. I shake my head, touch the spot already swelling—no blood—and return indoors for the last bag of food.

As we drive away, I use a frozen juice box as an ice pack, driving with one hand, holding the juice ice-cube to my throbbing temple, as long as I can bear, with the other. A headache's coming, but the injury hardly seems memorable—certainly not catastrophic. By afternoon, driving south from Truro to Halifax, I should have forgotten it altogether.

But I don't forget. That evening I'm overtaken by the first symptoms of concussion, diagnosed two days later by an emergency-room doctor in Lunenburg, NS. He predicts headaches and dizziness for up to six months; however, my symptoms fail to resolve and I'm moved, medically speaking, to the more exclusive category of concussion patients whose symptoms do not abate so quickly, possibly not at all. For nearly three years, my life will be defined by this injury, variously called mild traumatic brain injury, acquired traumatic brain injury, closed head injury, eventually post-concussive syndrome.

At the time of my injury, in 2004, I was forty-one, a single mother of two girls (eleven and fourteen). By profession, I was an instructor of English literature and writing; in my spare time, I'd just completed a second Master's degree, overseen a major renovation to my seventy-five year-old farmhouse, and had a one-act play produced in a student theatre festival. The trip to the Maritimes came at the end of an extraordinarily busy school year, and offered the girls and me an unheard-of seventeen days together, uninterrupted by their sojourns with their father.

My early writings reveal that the first months post-injury were a time of complex deficits, as many of my cognitive functions and emotional responses simply vanished. Here are the biggies. I lost creative thought—meaning access to my dream life, to metaphor and symbolism; to my capacity to think by association and analogy; and to my own creative work. Two or three weeks post-injury, I began losing my short-term memory, and shortly thereafter, went off work. I lost my appetite for fiction and poetry, switching to non-fiction. My affect flattened. I lost my sense of lightness—humour, playfulness, wit. Early on, I lost my will, my capacity to formulate or pursue desires other than basic ones (to eat and sleep). Then that shifted: I became impetuous, acting without reflection or regard for consequence. I lost the highly activated chatterbox who lived inside my head, prodding me on to multi-task, to

¹⁰³ Published in Bonnie Nish, ed., *Concussion and Mild Brain Injury: Not Just Another Headline* (Youngsville, NC: Lash, 2016), 36 – 51.

anticipate, to chart my way through life as a high-functioning woman. I lost the neurotic shadow-side to this confident chatterbox—the anxious second-guesser who reflected compulsively on my actions, motivations, words. I lost some aspects of empathy, what I prefer to call my emotional imagination—that intuitive grasp of how others will feel in response to what I do or say. I lost an awareness of time passing. Partly because of this, because I lost interest in social interaction and because I wasn't permitted to drive after dark, I fell out of touch with friends. And even though there was a brighter side—my decade-long battle with insomnia disappeared, as did some excess weight—these losses meant that intellectually, emotionally, socially, creatively, I was changed.

The loss most obvious to people around me was of my short-term memory. This emerged early post-trauma. A simple example: one September morning, I sat down in front of email. Still in my pyjamas, the idea of tea just forming in my mind, I heard the kettle whistle in the kitchen. The girls had slept at their dad's, so this surprised me. In the kitchen, I found that, *ta-da!*, someone else had already had that very same thought about tea. I turned off the stove and poured myself a pot full. Of course, I deduced that the other person must have been me (clever me), but try as I might, I couldn't recall having already gone through the water-boiling steps. Even faced with such concrete proof as a steaming mug of Red Rose, my mind was blank. No "Ah, yes!" moment. And this became a pattern: someone or something would force me to recognize that I had had yet another memory lapse, but even the clear *fact* of the lapse did nothing to "remind" me of whatever information I had failed to retain. My most common expression in these early weeks was "Oh!" I was becoming Our Lady of Perpetual Surprise.

At our next appointment, my doctor administered some common short-term memory and cognitive function tests. These revealed another major deficit, one more threatening to my sense of self than my failure to encode or recall information. First, I was asked to count backwards from one hundred by intervals of seven. As a former Grade 4 math champ, I wouldn't have thought this could be tricky, but because I couldn't hang onto the number that resulted from one subtraction while turning my attention to the next, it was tricky indeed. When I asked the doctor how I'd performed, she said, "Not too badly."

But the real failure came next, when she gave me one minute to name as many mammals as I could. I'd love to know what a healthy-brained person comes up with. Twenty? Thirty? I named eight: rabbit, dog, cat, horse, bear and three more, again forgotten. Then I just sat, silent, aware that I was conducting a mental search but unable to reach after the missing words. The search seemed to take on a spatial, three-dimensional aspect: looking across my interior field of vision, I "saw" a white expanse, an undifferentiated tundra-like surface stretching into nothingness. White and empty. I thought, information is here somewhere, but I see no clues, only blank terrain. I felt that *something*, some feature on the landscape, should lead me on, but the rest of my minute ticked by fruitlessly. Finally I said, "I don't know how to find the rest of the words. I can't see any markers."

I went straight from that appointment to lunch with a friend, so I put the test to her. She not only listed way more animals (over twenty) but articulated the memory retrieval system by which she was identifying them.

"Let's see: African mammals, right? Zebra, elephant, giraffe, lion...." Then: "Cat family: tiger, panther, cougar, lynx..."

"That's it!" I broke in. "The dog *family*! That includes wolf, coyote, fox—not just 'dog.'"

Such were the categories or strategies that I'd looked for in vain, strategies upon which, as a highly associative thinker, I normally rely. Once my friend named them for me, I could use them; I just couldn't access them independently. Thinking via analogies and associations is vital to analytical and creative thinkers; it's what I've done professionally my entire adult life. Yet, with my current cognitive ability, I was a metaphoric and an associative dunce.

Soon sent off work on medical leave, I readily surrendered professional responsibilities and entered a new phase, one marked by a spirit of deep relaxation and loss of desire, of drive—no doubt helped along by my short-term memory gaps, since it's hard to be anxious about things one doesn't remember. I turned my whole attention to health and wellness, consulting a naturopath for brain-healing remedies, taking ginkgo and herring oil supplements, beginning a detoxification diet—giving up meat, wheat, dairy, eggs, sugar, caffeine, alcohol. (That left me with tofu—tofu and lots of rice.) I spent several afternoons swimming and steaming out impurities in the sauna. I joined a gym and began working out three times a week. I lost weight, toned up, felt metabolically efficient. I recall saying to friends that, notwithstanding the soreness lingering at my right temple and my bizarrely fluid symptoms, I felt pretty good. In many ways, better than I'd felt in years.

The ease with which I let go of habits—certain foods, coffee all morning, cider or wine most evenings—baffled yet delighted me. I've felt a need to monitor my own vices for years, to give them up occasionally just to prove to myself that I could. I know from these efforts, as from having given up cigarettes after ten years of heavy smoking, that one can long plan for abstinence and yet, faced with momentary temptation—out with friends, walking by a café—cave in, with glee. Suddenly, abstaining was a snap. I made no preparations, just looked at the restrictions on the naturopath's list, said "okay" and turned from these items on the spot. As if they were nothing. As if I had no desires to resist. For the first time as an adult, I felt free of all cravings. I noted all this not-minding, this easy asceticism, in my health journal.

The freedom—or perhaps emptiness—of life without urges seems to me to have been linked, somehow, to another loss, that of my ability to follow through on intention, to fulfill a plan of action. This wasn't universally the case: I could develop a routine such as going to the gym daily. But I experienced no *desire* to go to the gym. I would simply go because my doctor said it would be a good idea—and because someone (me?) had written "gym" on my wall calendar. I functioned most reliably when enacting deeply engrained habits, such as buying groceries and seeing the girls off to school. When faced with one-off or occasional duties—to respond to social invitations, make or attend appointments, phone someone—my follow-through was not good. Such commitments were as forgettable as a pot of water boiling in the next room.

Car trips were prime occasions for me to lose track of intention. Inside my frontal lobe, a new idea could come along like a curling rock—and knock!—any plan I'd had shot right out of the target zone. A song on the radio could do this, even an interesting sign along the road. Driving alone, I could travel far off track—for miles!—before being recalled from my wanderings. Typically, when I "came to," I'd find myself on autopilot heading for one of the two most familiar places, the college where I'd taught for a dozen years, or the girls' school. When they were with me, though, the girls became good at monitoring my focus:

Erin: "Mum. Do you know where you're going?"

Me: [Quick look around.] "No idea."

Erin: "We're driving Michael home."

Me: [Glance in the rear-view mirror. Michael?] "Okay."

I'd pull a u-turn and head to Michael's house.

It surprises people that I characterize this time as stress-free, but without the capacity to anticipate, I felt calm (if not slightly stunned). Imagine how liberating it might be to be

impervious to the sense, ever, that one ought to be doing anything. I'd become a child of the moment. Tillie and Erin certainly enjoyed some of my new *laissez-faire* attitude. My contented energy in the house contrasted sharply with the super-mummy blur that used to whiz around our kitchen on a work-day afternoon, juggling phone calls, dinner prep, homework supervision, internal replay of the day, financial worries. Now, instead of pushing the girls to start their homework as soon as we got home, I could quickly become a playmate. Tillie would ask if I wanted to play a game, and I'd pause—listening, as ever, for that inner voice to tell me if I wanted anything, anything at all, anything other than what was on offer at that moment. In the absence of any reason not to, I'd drop to the floor in front of the coffee table and we'd play. We played a lot that autumn. Yahtzee! Crazy Eights. Scrabble. We'd play until Tillie asked, "Can we have dinner now?" Pause. Think. Why not? "Okay." Pliable.

About one month post-trauma, my inner accountant also either got drunk or went AWOL. Erin quickly detected my relaxed hold on money. I'd put her on a clothing budget when she turned twelve. Since then, she had chosen how to spend each monthly instalment: sometimes, socks and underwear ranked high on her list; other times, two months' funds went on extravagant designer jeans. The responsibility was character-building, I thought, delighted to see how quickly she'd cottoned on to the value of clearance racks. But I could be a tough banker: if she ran out of socks while hoarding money for sexier items, then her feet went bare. I resisted many requests for an advance so she could buy something she just had to have, *right now!*

"When you get a job," I'd say, "you'll get paid when you get paid, period. Same thing here." That's the kind of mum I'd been.

Our next clothing budget conversation went more like this:

Erin: "Momma, have you thought about giving me extra money for clothes?"

Me: "Oh. No. I was supposed to think about that?"

Erin: "Mum! You said you just had to figure out why it could be okay. You've got to take me shopping—I need jeans!"

Me: "Oh, right. You do. But I don't give you money outside your clothing budget. That's why it's called a budget."

Erin: "But we talked about this! You said you'd think about it. Remember?"

Me: "Oh, okay. Yes, I think I did. But how do I justify this?"

Erin: [hand on hip, extra-arch in her eyebrow] "You know, Mum, this 'teach your daughter how to budget' game is very good and all, but sometimes you just have to clothe your children! Just because they're your children!"

Me: [laughing to the point of hiccoughs] "Okay. You win."

And because I'd lost the faculties of regret (backwards worry) and anticipation (forwards worry), I fussed no more. Erin and I hit the mall and spent an extra two hundred and fifty dollars. I enjoyed myself as much as she did.

Impulsivity soon led me to begin blurting out thoughts without filter, without pause or reflection. Head-injury patients are notorious for outbursts—most often shows of anger or aggression. I recall no anger, but I certainly began to speak freely, without inhibition. I shocked a few salesclerks and bank tellers with my directness. If someone treated me gruffly, I'd look her in the eye and say, "Please don't be rude to me" as I handed her my cash. No anger, no sarcasm, but no bullshit either—and generally no self-recrimination later. I'd think, "That was unlike me" and let it go.

Some of my truths would have been better left unsaid, such as when I told a married friend that I was interested in spending more time with him and suggested dinner. Of course, I would have liked to spend more time with him—if only he hadn't been married. Before the head injury, I would have bit my tongue, understanding that my attraction to him was entirely my problem; I'd been at least as adept as the next adult at exercising good judgement (courtesy, kindness, what have you). But disinhibition led me time and again into wholly unguarded interactions—like Jim Carrey's character in *Liar, Liar*, cursed with compulsive honesty.

In those early post-concussion months, I experienced my mind as a place of unconnectedness. It was full of walls, silos, all stillness and dark where once it had been a breezy, well-lighted place, a place of sparks, of leaps and insights, of speed and fluidity, and of dazzling synaptical energy. Now, when someone put a question to me, I in turn would hand it over to my brain, like an old-fashioned telephone operator patching an incoming call to the appropriate line. I was just the middleman. The problem arose when no one picked up at the other end. (Ring, ring. Nobody home? Gee.) Just as I'd done at the doctor's, while waiting for mammal names to appear, I would experience myself in such situations as passive, waiting for my brain to hand me an opinion or answer. What do I believe? How do I feel? How does one decide for or against a request? Who was I to say?

For someone who lived professionally in language, teaching the beauty of metaphor, pattern recognition, theme and meaning, such lack of integration was profoundly alien, as if I were seeing only one colour-sliver of a refracted light beam after having lived my life awash in whiteness. I was unable to process one moment in light of any other. What do I want? was a question I could answer only head-on, isolated from related questions such as, *Should* I want this? Or, How would X feel if I *said* I wanted this? Such cognitive deficits challenged my sense of self not only as a professional but as a creative person, and as a friend; they threatened my Jungian's love of wholeness and my Unitarian's regard for interdependence, what I might describe as my rather ecological grasp of what it is to be human. Without access to such interconnectedness, I was off balance. And I had long since internalized the notion that being balanced was core to my identity. For me, this was radical loss of selfhood. Still, in my detached and curious way, I merely noted these changes in my journal and thought to myself, *Oh!*

My impulsivity led to another out-of-character move, one more significant than splurging on jeans or propositioning a friend. The girls then attended a specialty arts school in the historic village of Fort Langley, tucked along the Fraser River. We longed to move there—not just to eliminate my forty-five minute, twice-daily commute, but to give them a neighbourhood of friends and me the access to street life—coffee shops, bookstores, arts groups—that the Fort affords. Before my head injury, we'd occasionally visited open houses, once considered living in a too-small apartment in the one apartment block in town. Yet I'd dragged my feet at the actual prospect of moving. I hesitated out of anxiety, worried that too much change for the girls on the heels of their parents' separation would do them harm. I had come from a chaotic family myself—by the age of nine, I was living in my fifteenth home, attending my fourth school—and I felt a crippling (probably misplaced) need to compensate to the girls for their own family breakdown by staying put. Even to think about moving would release the ghosts of a childhood gone emotionally very wrong, and I'd panic. So we stayed. Luckily, I genuinely loved our farmhouse—even more since I'd renovated it, restoring old wood floors, giving myself a bright, big master bedroom. And years of landscaping work meant that the large garden now produced an annual parade of blossoms that marched steadily from February to November. Although I

hated the location, remote from friends and siblings, the home itself was warm, safe. I had no intention of leaving.

Until the head injury: enter spontaneity, exit anxiety and emotional fragility. One October afternoon, Tillie and I happened to look in at the local realtor's window after school and noticed a listing for one of those too-small apartments in the village. We asked for a tour. We liked. I pulled Tillie aside:

"You won't be heart-broken to leave the house? The yard? Your new purple bedroom?"

"Nope," she said.

"Okay," I said. We walked back to his office. I wrote out an offer and signed it, then took Tillie grocery shopping, promptly forgetting what I'd done.

Sometime the next weekend, at a family Thanksgiving supper, I remembered.

"We might be moving," I blurted out, *à propos* of nothing. Heads turned. "I put an offer on an apartment the other day, in Fort Langley."

My news met with surprise and concern. No one knew I'd been looking to move (I hadn't been). Hadn't I just renovated our house? (Yup.) Would the new place have as spacious a bedroom for me? (Nope.) As inspiring a writing space— a study full of light and wood? (Nope. No study, in fact.) Three bedrooms, at least? (Uh, no.) Would I have anything like my lush garden to look out on? (Uh, no garden. Third floor.) Could we take our dog, cats and rabbits? (Rabbits? I forgot we had rabbits....)

In the next weeks, many people who love me fretted. Lawyer friends pointed out that I hadn't read the strata bylaws or arranged for a home inspection. The realtor's assistant called me after I missed the date for removing the subjects on the offer. (Of course I missed it: I didn't remember placing subjects....) I apologized and promptly drove to the office and removed them all—without, of course, following up on any of them. I was legally incompetent. Yet the move was on.

Over late autumn 2004 and spring 2005, some of my lost mental facility would re-appear occasionally, but recovery was not linear. In the case of selling my home, my grasp of the significance of my decision lagged months behind the fact of moving. In fact, I didn't really "get" what I'd done until sometime in 2006. In the case of sending up a romantic flare to my married friend, it was three days after I invited him to dinner that I suddenly flashed on the emotional risk of expressing my attraction to him (egad! butterflies entered my tummy); at the same time, and more significantly, I grasped that I'd behaved in a way of which I didn't approve. What must he be thinking of me?

I took comfort in these insights. They were signs of recovery, however delayed, small or impermanent. In late October, my health journal notes that I woke up aware, for the first time since the whack on my temple, that I'd been dreaming. I missed my dreamlife. I'd always loved falling asleep because such a wonderful world awaited me. This new night-time quiet behind my eyes was a definite bummer. Progress was erratic, though, sometimes fleeting, mixed with shifting concussion symptoms and fluctuating levels of headache and fatigue. My notes record times when Erin pointed out improvements. To her, I seemed more "normal" on days I might be quick, "snappy," capable of coming out of my fog long enough to bark out a command or grow annoyed at her forgetfulness.

We'd smile at these observations, and she'd say, "Don't get better too quickly. I like Dreamy-Mummy."

As Erin's remark suggests, changes in my basic mood were not altogether problematic. Several friends joked about my having found nirvana on the fast-track—I seemed all zen, all the time.

There were, however, rare times when my changed wiring led me to tears, usually in response to a question about what I wanted.

For example, well into a searching phone call, a close friend said, “You’re sounding tired. Do you want me to get off the phone and leave you alone now?”

I repeated aloud, “Do I want...?” and did a quick self-check. There I was once again, listening in to my own mind, awaiting a reply and getting none—no expression of desire or will. And yet the question implied that I should or might want something.

“I don’t know,” I said. Tears spilled down my face. “I don’t know how to answer the question.”

For a moment, I grieved the emptiness in my head, paradoxically saddened by my own lack of emotion. But then the winds changed, the inner clouds moved again and my access to this light-shaft of sensation disappeared.

Generally, I was more curious than upset about my condition. When another friend asked a version of the inevitable “Are you angry?” question, I pointed out that the same whack on the head that messed with my frontal lobe’s administrative abilities had also muted my affect so I could not despair.

“Lucky,” I said.

“That’s not luck,” he said, “that’s grace. That’s the universe making sure you can handle what it’s given you.”

Perhaps the universe should have known better than to allow me to put that offer down on the Fort Langley apartment. Mid-January, we moved from our many-roomed home on a large lot to a tiny two-bedroom apartment. And then the last, most dramatic change struck: depression. It struck so hard and fast that it seems to me now as if I went to sleep one night a not-unhappy-soul and woke up inside a cloud of grief. Really, the onset was slightly less dramatic, taking about two weeks.

Depression is so common with head injuries that a doctor at the Early Intervention Brain Injury Clinic predicted upon first meeting me that it lay in my path. I hadn’t exactly scoffed at his remark, but given my blissed-out mood then, I couldn’t imagine my psyche taking such a turn. I have no journal record of my early descent into the dark (because I’d packed my health journal in one of forty-five identical boxes), but in my first entry from the apartment, February 2005, I note,

I’ve begun to feel down in a way I haven’t all fall. The bliss or mellowness is dissipating....

This was no fleeting mood swing. After the whirlwind of preparations and a major move, I hit a wall and stopped functioning.

How to account for depression? Having lived with family members afflicted with both manic-depressive and depressive illness, I appreciate the difference between temporary sadness due to life circumstances—death, divorce—and the sort of unprovoked crash of someone suffering unhappy brain chemistry. Over the decade prior to 2004, I had found myself occasionally slipping into one- or two-week long “blue” periods, characterized by pervasive sadness, a sense that, despite demonstrable reasons for happiness in my life—chiefly Erin and Tillie, my good health, my dear friends—I lacked access to some essential source of meaning, of joy. These moods tended to descend when my hands were idle, at the close of a big project or end of a busy season. I learned to pick myself up psychologically by “picking myself up” physically,

becoming active. Gardening and landscaping were favourite therapeutics. But really, I would busy my hands with anything if I could thereby outrun my mind. (Once, I'd spent a Friday night sorting the contents of a small mechanic's cabinet with eighteen tiny drawers full of nails, screws, batteries. I not only sorted nails from screws, I cleaned each one before stashing them away again. I really would do *anything* to keep from idleness.)

Not long before the Maritime vacation, I'd visited a naturopath, my much-deferred fortieth birthday present to myself. I went for what I thought of as a midlife tune-up. My only health complaints were an arthritic knee and episodic insomnia, yet I found myself telling the doctor of a recent ennui, my inclination to withdraw socially, avoid answering the phone, decline contact with friends, all of which I'd begun noticing. She suggested I might be mildly depressed and prescribed St. Johnswort, which I'd been taking since. I noted in my health journal that the herb seemed to buoy me up. But by the time we moved, it was no longer enough.

And then I went back to work.

At the College, my department Chair had arranged as low stress a teaching load for me as possible: two combined sections of a single course, no back-to-back classes or late nights. But the complex cognitive effort involved in academic work did me in. I slept eight to ten hours every night, yet found myself fighting sleep in the car on the drive home, and falling into a foggy-headed stupor as soon as I reached the couch, no matter how early my day ended. And all this was prior to the move in mid-January. Afterwards, I relapsed completely. There were too many decisions to make at the new place—and they were too interdependent for me to know how to begin—so I made none. I took to wandering zombie-like around the apartment, avoiding towers of unpacked boxes and side-stepping unhung pictures. I slept without sheets on my bed for three weeks, partly because I couldn't think my way through unearthing the linen, partly because my room was so crammed with up-ended furniture and more boxes that I preferred not to enter it until I had to, for sleep. When the shelf in my bedroom closet crashed to the floor, I walked away from the disaster. A day or two later, I tried briefly to muster the ability to think through how to re-mount the brackets. But I failed, so I left the collapsed shelf, and all the previously ironed work clothes, now crushed and buried, for another two weeks. It didn't help that every time I left the bedroom, I'd forget about the chaos of the closet. Each rediscovery led me to say, "Oh, I forgot. This fell down." Again and again, new information. I washed and re-wore the same two teaching outfits for three weeks.

In the classroom, my cognitive deficits led to situations that would have embarrassed or distressed me if I'd had the capacity to be embarrassed or distressed. On teaching mornings, I woke with no idea what my subject was to be that day: I'd glance at my syllabus over breakfast (Ah, comparison/contrast essays...), only to forget again by the time I'd driven to work. Luckily, I was teaching a course I'd taught many times and could reach into my filing cabinet for lecture notes and hand-outs to be adapted each week. In class, my memory gaps must have been apparent to students: once, I dismissed class only to be approached by a timid, perplexed young man, concerned that I'd begun lecture by announcing that we'd cover three topics that day and then had covered only two. (*Huh*, I thought.) Another day, I handed back marked assignments and wished the students a fine weekend, only to notice two puzzled young men peering at their syllabus, struggling with the ethical question of whether to remind me they were supposed to write a test that day, or just run off. Several times I walked into class clutching hand-outs, only to find them still in my clutches after everyone had gone. At my counsellor's urging, I took to writing myself notes and lists before class, but that effort ended with me pulling the list out of my briefcase only once I was back in my office, *after* class. Reminder notes can't help if you don't remember writing them.

My headaches escalated to the point that I became pre-occupied with recording their triggers, frequency and duration. But my journal entries are full of doubts and questions: did you take that pill or not? I was interested especially in tracking the effectiveness of Toradol, a prescription analgesic. Unfortunately, by the time I'd sit to record symptoms at the end of each day, I'd often forgotten the details. The entries become ragged, as if thinking in whole sentences were too taxing, as in this entry from mid-February:

10 pm, crashing headache, and numb/dumb. Maybe I took a 3rd Toradol? Don't recall— if so, it's just warn off. Acute head. Sleep now.

And then sadness descended. In an early February entry I wrote,

Last night I thought about suicide for the first time in a long time.... [U]nder perpetual head-fog, headache, fatigue and sense of incredible limitation to what I can do. I'm mostly too tired to want to try, or too unfocussed to remember that I need to try— should want to try. And I'm feeling acutely alone. Lonely.

Sliding swiftly into grief, a week later I wrote,

very sad. Don't care. Headache back..., but maybe 'cause I'm thinking. Just so damned sad. The next day: church on Sunday: weepy over Valentine's day.

The next:

Felt very down again in evening.

Depression is a bleak, lonely place. I suffered many usual symptoms: lack of initiative, distorted perceptions, withdrawal from friends and family. Other symptoms, such as profound fatigue and loss of concentration, had been part of my head injury experience all fall anyway, and of course persisted. I began to break engagements and avoid telephone calls. I felt an overwhelming desire to fade from other people's view. As many depressives do, I felt I stood apart, separate from others who could not possibly understand my world, coloured in its distorting hue of unremitting grief. I spent all my undirected time with tears in my eyes— sometimes a subdued, quiet crying, others a loud wailing.

And yet I functioned at work, if minimally. I could instruct students in the shape of a well-developed academic paragraph, greet colleagues in the hallways. All the time, I harboured the solipsistic conviction that other people's lives were somehow not real. The classroom seemed an artificial environment; looking out from the podium was like looking at fish through glass at the aquarium. I watched students file out of lecture, thinking, "You have no idea what I'm going through." I'd be weeping before I reached the parkade. It seems to me I wept for weeks, crying simply because I was awake. My grief was free-floating, too, yet liable to latch on to any excuse. Looking at a mug, I'd recall the year the Easter Bunny packed it into Erin's basket, and I'd cry over the cruelty of time. The sight of an empty swing at a playground led to instant regret that I hadn't gone often enough to the park when the girls were small, hadn't pushed them high enough, hadn't shared their dizzying thrill at being young and pumping high over the tree tops. Despair weighted me down, a lead stone in my stomach. I feared the girls would outgrow me soon, leave their childhoods behind without enough happy memories of quality time with Mum. I'd wasted my life, I'd done it all wrong. More tears.

Other triggers, perhaps more reasonable causes for sadness, arose from my distant past. I hurt afresh over having been abandoned by my mother when I was five, again when I was fourteen, by my father when I was five, again when I was eight, finally by his death when I was eighteen. Nor could I stop myself from dwelling on more recent sorrows: one of my sisters, mentally ill, has become one of Vancouver's 'lost' homeless; her ex-husband, who'd been in my teenaged years a surrogate uncle/father, killed himself the same week in 1998 that I'd discovered my husband was having an affair. My closest friend was currently drifting away from me into alcoholism. These sorrows vied for my attention as I sat among heaps of unopened boxes. I noted in my journal:

am quite aware...how easily I can be caught in the weepies or sense of despair. I've thought to myself I feel as if I'm on the verge of crying for all the years of grief, and all the losses. I do think it possible that once I started, I would never stop. Never.

The Sunday afternoon before Valentine's Day, I simply failed to rise to my parenting role. I'd told the girls we'd go down to the village shops to buy gifts for the special boy in each of their lives. But I couldn't stop crying long enough to get out the door. I sat at the kitchen table all afternoon, periodically drying my eyes, saying "Soon." While I sat, the "solution" of taking pills crossed my mind. I had lots of pills. Toradol. AlerteC. Sleeping pills. I wasn't so far along in ideation as to be designing a particular cocktail, but I was aware of the flickering image of release, registering the siren-like promise of any kind of end to sadness. Yet such moments only spurred me on to more grief, more tears for the immediate guilt at imagining I might abandon my lovely daughters. I wrestled with the desire to stay alive to their emotional realities, beating myself up at being so selfish as to consider depriving them of the unconditional love parents owe their children, inflicting on them the very abandonment that had begun my own sadness in childhood. But it wasn't a battle I was sure I could win.

To the outer eye, I probably looked comatose, except for the tears; inside, my mind swung like a farm gate on a stormy night—crashing open, smashing shut—as I grieved chaotically, pulled between the medicine cabinet, with its anaesthetic promise, and my shame at harbouring such traitorous thoughts. Eventually, locked at the table in this invisible battle, I told the girls to take my wallet and go shopping on their own. I couldn't go with them this time. They agreed, and as they readied themselves in the hallway, perversely, I began crying even harder—now devastated by their apparent ability to carry on without me, even though I'd asked them to do so.

Then, from behind, I felt the small, soft hand of my eleven-year-old baby, Tillie. She lifted my head out of my hands, wrapped her arms around my shoulders and laid her cool cheek against mine, clinging to me silently for a long minute while I tried to quell the coming sobs.

Hanging on so tight that I couldn't lean back to look her in the face, she said quietly, "I need you, Mummy."

I gasped at her intuitive grasp of the dangerous place I'd gone inside.

"What made you say that?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. But I do."

And she held on for another long minute before joining her sister. Then they were off, in search of candies for their sweethearts. A short while later, they returned with their gifts—and a bouquet of daisies for me. Big Marguerites, they told me. Sunny blossoms named after me.

First thing Monday morning, I phoned a nurse on the Brain Injury team.

Ever the mistress of understatement, I said, “I don’t seem to be coping well.”

She arranged a clinic session in a few days. I made it through those last frightening hours believing relief was near. I credit the intuitive touch of a heart-full daughter. Or maybe I’m alive simply because there was sunshine one dark day, instead of rain. Who knows why one pulls through?

Luckily, my depression was responsive to medication. I found my balance again. With the help of daily pills and regular therapy, I explored and accepted what it means to live inside a changed brain. Despite medical prognoses that further recovery after two years is unlikely, or insignificant, I continued to “come back to myself” well into the third year, post trauma. And as of this writing, I am again alive to metaphor—or it to me—and working happily in the ever-surprising realm of language, symbol, intuition and dreams.