

Remnants: Reveries of a Mountain Dweller

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to look closely at the impact of toxic progress on Place. Focussing on Sumas Mountain in Abbotsford, I use poetic prose and a personal essay structure to draw the reader's attention to social, historical, cultural, and environmental losses suffered at the hands of infringement into natural areas. These infringements have occurred since colonization and continue to negatively impact environments over time.

Through personal explorations, close environmental observations, hearing human and non-human voices, and considering the fallouts of colonisation, this project aims to illuminate the errors of the colonised age regarding environmental impact. This is achieved by showcasing the inherent value of interconnected relationships with and within ecosystems. The project also aims to mitigate further damage to ecological areas often forever altered at the hands of those focussed on growth and prosperity over connectivity and balance.

Keywords: Sumas Mountain; Personal essay; Environment; Embodiment of nature; Interconnected relationships with place; Poetic prose

Dedication

For those who came before, and those still yet to arrive.

Acknowledgements

With acknowledgement and respect, this thesis was written on the unceded and traditional lands of the Sto:lo people, the Semá:th and Máthexwi First Nations.

The initial conception for this project came from a desire to understand the spirit of a place, to hold in writing its identity in all its forms in hopes of passing along the deep interconnection that exists in a place like Sumas Mountain. What it turned into, though, was a wider conversation around sustainability, climate change, the negative aspects of growth and progress, questions of identity, ownership, a history of family, and the hope for a legacy that will outlive whatever changes the future brings, all through an intimate observation of those entities living within and contributing to a complex and important ecosystem.

This project came to fruition not only because I put pen to paper, but because of the many voices, lives, histories, and realities that came together as a foundation upon which the ideas presented here could be realized, cultivated, and nourished to the best of my ability. As such, there are many branches of gratitude that must be acknowledged.

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I must also thank, John Vissers for his steadfast fight to protect this place and his patient voice in telling me much about the history of this area and about the trees. Gratitude goes to my parents, Rick and Sandy Lang for their cultivation of community, willingness to share stories, and who taught me how to respect, care for, and love the natural world. I also wish to thank those residents of Sumas Mountain who honour the land upon which they live, who are considerate of the lives of all plants, animals, birds, and insects in this

area, and who work to understand the deep interconnectedness of the forest upon which all life depends.

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And finally, thank you to Sumas Mountain. Thank you for the hours, days, months and years I have spent wandering through your trees, along the edges of creeks, seated among moss and flowers and leaves and stones and roots. In wind and rain, winter and spring, through flood and fire, heat and ice, through the devastation of land loss and the ever-changing nature of this place, you were always there— thank you for showing me how the forest breathes.

Forever grateful,

Natalie Virginia Lang

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Preface

“The world changes according to the way people see it and if you alter, even by a millimetre the way people look at reality, then you can change it”

James Baldwin

Modern humans have largely departed from lifestyles demanding a close sense of the earth. Many of us live in big cities and rarely, if ever, spend time in truly wild places. Still, we are not completely emancipated from nature. Whether or not we practice a human-nature connection or even acknowledge it, people are closely entangled with the rhythms of the earth. Because of this interdependency, what we do impacts other lives, human and non-human, effecting entire ecosystems and populations of plant and animal life, including our own. Although reinforced by technology, social narratives, and lifestyle choices, our current false sense of separation from natural environments can be replaced, if we are willing, by a collective care and responsibility for the land. The quickening of climate change demands a shift toward an ethos of care, which can be sparked by perception changes — in the way we relate to and understand the close intricacies of the human-nature bond. These perceptions may alter when we perceive, relate to, and discuss the environment differently; when we collectively love nature for its own sake and see it for its stand-alone beauty and dynamic connections, rather than valuing pieces of environments solely as commodities to be bought, sold, torn apart, replaced, and forgotten. As the American palaeontologist Stephen Gould explains, “We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well – for we will not fight to save what we do not love” (Sprintzen 50). An ethic of care must become a staple in how we, individually and collectively, live our lives.

In 1949, Aldo Leopold coined the concept of a Land Ethic in his formative text, *A Sand County Almanac*. As a conservationist, forester, philosopher, educator, writer, and outdoor enthusiast, Leopold grew deeply connected to nature. It was this kindred bond that helped him develop the Land Ethic, which can be defined as a moral code of

conduct or ethic of care based on the understanding that all of life, humanity, the soils, waters, plants, and non-human animals, are entangled by the fate of one another (Leopold). Care “On the most general level... includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’... That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment” (Fisher and Tronto 103). Leopold understood that the relationships between people and the land are intertwined. Just as one loves those in their home and cares for the home itself, they must equally make choices that protect and care for the land and ecosystems they are a part of – an expansion of what is considered *home*.

In opening an awareness to a symbiotic sense of being, with care as our driving force, we may begin to see the world differently and understand how everything is bound together. As Aldo Leopold expresses in *A Sand County Almanac*, in the section entitled “Thinking Like a Mountain,” the ripple effect that proves a connection between entities and environments, is real. Leopold shares a moment as a young man, among a deer hunting party, where he watches “a fierce green light dying” (130) in the eyes of a shot wolf. He had believed that fewer wolves meant more deer and that “no wolves would mean a hunters’ paradise” (130), but he soon came to understand the fault in this perception. Through an increasing emptiness in the mountain that had once been abundant with life, and the wisdom that comes with time, Leopold saw firsthand that when wolves disappear, deer take over the land. Unchecked by natural predators the deer roam, grazing widely as the earth grows bare and lifeless until the deer themselves are found only as dried scattered bones. Starved and dehydrated, the joy in free ranging led to their deaths.

Nature knows that a single rock falling from a cliff will lead to one event and another and another, just as the disappearance of one species throws the balance of the ecosystem off until we “have dust bowls, and rivers washing the future into the sea” (Leopold 132). To avoid cataclysmic dominoes in areas that may never recover, making some land essentially unliveable and contributing to the overall climate crisis, we can, as Leopold suggests, learn to think like a mountain and practice respect for those delicate connections that bind us. We can engage in a *Land Ethic* which teaches objective awareness of all the elements in an ecosystem, communally involved and deeply rooted to one another. When one part is impacted, so is everything else, including us. Rather than cutting down excessive numbers of trees for a better view, spraying pesticides for a bug-less spring, knocking down birds’ nests to avoid cleanup, shooting the woodpecker

because he disturbs our sleep, setting traps and laying out poison for wild creatures so we can leave our trash on the curb overnight, or diverting streams to enjoy a larger pond, we can instead make choices that support connection and inclusion. We can choose to let it be, to grow around and with ecosystems instead of over them, because we care about them. As Leopold expresses, “We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, [and a] long life... but too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run” (133).

With the reality of today’s climate crisis pressing farther into all of life, there is an opportunity to continue what Leopold started in 1949 in igniting a Land Ethic— providing space for care and empathy for the earth. We will each need to discover our own path into this space. Looking closely at specific areas where change is needed, academics and scientists may study and develop technologies to lead us forward. Others will lean on spirituality in hopes of finding peace and comfort in an increasingly difficult world. There are those who will seek to learn and do what they can with their own personal influence, while some will attempt to block out what is difficult to accept. Another way forward, as Aldo Leopold asserted, is to learn to think like a mountain. We can take the time to notice the wisdom of those places that have been around longer than us. They know more than we do about the collectivity required for life and we can allow “this accumulated wisdom that hushes the footsteps of whoever walks under [trees]” (Leopold 87) to help us move into the future gracefully, with empathetic attention. One way to start engaging in this method of embodying place in order to learn from it, is to be observant and personalize the encounters we have with nature. This personalization is crucial, as stated “Ultimately, a durable relationship between we humans and our planetary partners must be built on the kinds of perceptual, epistemic and emotional sensitivities which are best founded on respect, care, and love. ... We must aim to establish better communicative relationships with nature in all its aspects, as a preliminary to learning how to balance human needs with nature’s needs and limits” (Plumwood 142). In sharing those personal encounters, normalizing an ethic of care and placing a value on nature for its own sake, the narrative between how humans and environments are connected, will change. An ethic of care will be ignited, with respect and love for ecosystems at the centre, not in an elusive Romantic way, but with the true connection that all life on this planet is tied to.

In the introduction to his anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate expresses that “the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience” (Lopate xxiii), that there is value placed on the embodiment of experience in the writer’s attempt to connect with the reader. The personal essayist, like Aldo Leopold, will look closely at smaller details, expose contradictions in self and society, and present the complex portrait of what it means to be human, all discussed through a slower, meditative, and self reflexive lens. Through this deliberate approach, and in utilizing an aesthetic style in expressing oneself, thereby offering space for the reader to join in the experience, the essayist may allow for curiosity, openness, reflection, and a deeper perception of place. These are the qualities required to change the social discussion around nature. The project that follows, focussing locally on Sumas Mountain in Abbotsford British Columbia, attempts to do just that – offering space for environmental discussion through the form of a personal essay. Utilizing my own view of nature in a local place, and encouraging the need for Leopold’s Land Ethic, I aim to inspire readers to embody the essence of nature in hopes of igniting a more united existence between human and non-human entities, bound by the environments we share. In achieving this, we may change the conversation of how to work with ecosystems for a more balanced and sustainable future.

When considering an embodied approach, one must select the most influential method in sharing what they come to understand. In 1873, Walter Horacio Pater discussed the power of the aesthetic as a virtue unto itself in his work, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Shocking the Victorian academic community, Pater expresses in the preface that we should push back against the age of reason and immerse ourselves into life and beauty in all its intricate forms. He writes about elements being “valuable for their virtues (Pater 2)”, but to understand this, one must first “realize such primary data for oneself” (Pater 2) by embodying those elements and learning to objectively see the beauty and interconnection of natural spaces. It is the source of each element, intertwined with all others, that adds to our experience and helps us to understand our place in the world and our impact on it. How do we go about seeing this? We slow down. We take long moments to hear the wind and listen to the owl, to walk among wise trees and ponder our place in and impact on the world. Then, we communicate what we find there, not with science or technology, not with force,

frustration, or academia, but with a pure expression of how we are “deeply moved by the presence of [beauty]” (Pater 2).

The cultural critic and writer, Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as bell hooks, utilizes an embodied approach in her study and discussion of social and cultural atmospheres. In her 2001 book, *all about love*, hooks explores the topic of love by asking what it is and what it is not. She suggests that modern societies are lacking both the ability to love along with a clear understanding of what love looks like, growing more afraid of embodying close experiences, leaving many essentially loveless. In the introduction, hooks writes about a mural she passes each day on her way to work. Observing the mural, she openly embodies the sensations of hope and possibility. It was this embodiment, she explains, that gave her “the incentive to think more, to talk about love, and to study popular and more serious writing on the subject” (hooks xx). Through her research, hooks came to see that “Profound changes in the way we think, and act must take place if we are to create a loving culture” (hooks xxiv). These sentiments are weaved through very personal illuminations balanced by writing that is aesthetically pleasing to read, informative, and invites self reflection in the reader. hooks, who allows herself to inhabit the realities and fallacies of love, while confronting her own fears, comes to learn more about the topic and thus welcomes a complete shift of thought and action. It is this shift in perspective that is equally required in moving to a more ecologically sustainable future.

How we think and write about the planet, and our connection to it, matters. The forms used to deliver ideas about progress, development, climate change and their impacts, matter. The goal in this project, which explores the environmental endangerment of Sumas Mountain in Abbotsford, is to offer space for social and cultural change around the human-nature discussion. My intention is to highlight the unique complexities of environmental and human connections and unite social participation through a personal experience with nature. This embodied approach will help to evoke in the reader “that strange, mystical sense of a life in natural things, and of a [person’s] life as a part of nature, drawing strength and colour and character from local influences, from the hills and streams, and from natural sights and sounds” (Pater 3) to illuminate the negative impact of human growth into natural areas. I do this, through the form of the personal essay out of a necessity to repackage how we discuss and deliver ideas about the earth and our place on it. Discussions must take place in a less detached, clinical,

and academic way, and should instead showcase an ethic of care through a total embodiment of place within an objective, observational, reflective, meditative, and aesthetically pleasing form.

Thanks to climate change, it has become important to explore the human-ecosystem relationship from a drastically unified point of view. Rather than dividing our focus between separate elements such as human-animal, human-ocean, or human-forest, we must consider all pieces as part of a whole. We must think, act, and talk about environments as a collective entity that humans will never be entirely separate from. Intentionally integrating oneself into the inner workings of environments like that of Sumas Mountain in Abbotsford, we can begin to see how everything is interconnected – how the very dirt itself supports the trees and the rocks, the plants and the birds and the air we breathe. This is where the discussion must go – to the human-land connection and everything tied to it.

Science, philosophy, and academic theories have their place where the environment is concerned, and yet there is distance between these methods and the social understanding. Therefore, alternate methods of discussion must be utilized. In 1873 Walter Pater shook the academic world with his argument for the aesthetic, suggesting that efforts should be made to idealize in order to bring joy to life, for joy's sake. bell hooks shares the power of embodiment in attempting to shift perspectives for massive social change. Philip Lopate argues for the merit of the personal essay as a way to engage people in a more emotional way, igniting individual sensibilities as part of collective ideologies. And I, just as Aldo Leopold exemplified with his argument for a Land Ethic, will attempt to unite these elements through sharing my observations of the rhythms of Sumas Mountain. As Jeremy Rifkin suggested in *The Empathetic Civilization*, "The tragic flaw of history is that our increased empathetic concern and sensitivity grows in direct proportion to the wreaking of greater entropic damage to the world we all cohabit and rely on for our existence and perpetuation. We are at a decisive moment in the human journey where the race to global empathic consciousness is running up against global entropic collapse" (Rifkin 42). In learning to appreciate and see beauty for beauty's sake, going through life with a touch of reverence, and practicing the embodiment of place, we may contribute to larger movements in the way we talk, write and think about the ecosystems we are tied to. We can create more hope and action for a balanced and sustainable link between humans and the land we come from.

Where we place value and what we decide to care for is relative, just as beauty is relative. It is different for each person, depending on their personal values, what their society values, how they came of age and what experiences they had, which narratives are reinforced, how information and discussions are shared and with whom, and whether reflection is part of their life. Walter Pater writes about “sight experience [that] seems to bury us under a flood of external objects... But when reflection begins to play... these objects are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions— colour, odour, texture—” (Pater 153). To learn to care for the environment, which is necessary in hoping for a brighter and more sustainable future, we must learn to experience the impression of nature in all its forms and come to understand the intricate connections binding its fate to our own— we must learn to see the reality of our delicate bond. Just as Pater knew that “... in aesthetic criticism, the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is...” (Pater 1). I must know how I experience the world, how I internalize it, how it affects me, and how I effect it, just as bell hooks came to understand how she embodied love and what that embodiment did for her life and the lives of those around her. In doing this, I can be transparent in the way I recount and describe my perception to others and will develop the courage to learn and explore and to use my voice in telling what I discover. That is the goal of this project; to tell what I have found so that in you I might spark a desire to see and appreciate the beauty in nature, to ignite an ethic of care for the land, to practice embodying experiences with ecosystems, and to learn and share what we come to learn so that the future may not be as bleak as it is today. The alternative to embodiment and understanding is the domino decimation of environments.

What you will experience in these pages is the delivery of an argument for the environment, for the land itself, and for the value of place not for what it can be turned into and how it can be developed, but place for its own sake. Here, you will find an internal, meditative, and personal reflection of land and place because the academia discussing these ideas tends to separate and compartmentalize when what we need to be doing, in our thought, in our research, in our expression, and in how we communicate our ideas for the world to consider, must change. It must change to become more collective and empathetic, utilizing an ethic of care.

There have been epistemological failures in addressing the climate crisis. This project, with descriptive prose, and high value placed on aesthetics and embodiment, urges readers to pay close attention to what is around them. When we practice awareness, internalize what we see and experience, and embody our world on a deeper self-reflective level, where respect, beauty, empathy, and care are at the centre, we change the way we see the world. Then we begin to understand and experience collaborative ecosystems, rather than isolation. In this understanding, a link of mutual interdependence can be envisioned, beginning with our connection to the earth and the very dirt itself.

Introduction

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquarians chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit— not a fossil earth, but a living earth.

Walden: Spring

Henry David Thoreau (1854)

When I perch on the forest threshold, as I so often do in this place, on a fallen ancient cedar disappearing more each day as the carcass of its mammoth body disintegrates with time, a field of tall grasses stretch out before me. In the distance, a treed wall sways like ocean waves. It glistens and froths as the backside and frontside of millions of leaves and needles flip and shiver in the wind. Kissing each other, they bend and twist, tickle and twitch, reaching left and right and every other way— entangled. Above the canopy, a hawk soars, circling the trees for prey and watching over its brood of nestlings. The sky is clear and blue— not a wisp of white to be found.

I listen as the air dances around me, bringing a bee near, and a butterfly. Suddenly I am grasped by a complete sense of togetherness. I am part of the landscape, hidden from my humanity; a living rock perched here at the mercy of the environment. The moment holds eternity in its palm, only stopping when my mind, difficult to tame for too long, reminds me of what I am— visitor, trespasser, destroyer, seer, rebuilders— human. In claiming this identity as part of who I am, how then, do I “write as a *settler in the wake of colonisation*— how to write, *in this place*, under the signs of liberty and justice, in ways that do not entirely erase the history of erasures? How to locate ourselves in the midst of an unsettling— in the tangle— and try to follow

those threads that can be woven anew into lifelines of mutuality?" (Collis 153). If my existence, my identity, my past, has been part of the problem and the loss of all those most natural and quiet places I hold dear on Sumas Mountain and across the West Coast of British Columbia and beyond, could I not also be part of the solution?

Standing in the mist above Sumas Prairie, where the voices of the past whisper into gathering clouds and the mind of the modern world pushes for progress, is Sumas Mountain— Kw'ekw'e'i:qw. Between Chilliwack and Abbotsford, north of the Sumas border, and south of the Fraser River, in the fastest-changing region of the Fraser Valley, a mountain once solely known by the Sto:lo people and the Séma:th First Nation as home, hunting grounds, and spiritual sanctuary, later occupied by settlers— miners, loggers, and homesteaders who created the Kilgard, Straiton, and Clayburn Village Communities— is a place rich with history and intrinsic merit. A feature in tourism advertisements, a recreation haven, and the way marker around which people of this area situate themselves and their lives, Sumas Mountain waits in a haze for the world to decide what its fate will be.

The Séma:th First Nation describes Sumas Mountain as *sticking up*. Today, gravel mines gnaw at its peaks, leaving gaping gashes visible from the Trans-Canada Highway running through what was once Sumas Lake. Since the lake was drained in 1924, part of a *land reclamation* initiative, the valley has boomed with development. Subdivisions, businesses, warehouses, RV lots, and roads snake their way around and up the mountain, creeping ever farther, as the top is simultaneously chipped away. Soon, the mountain known as Sumas, will no longer be *sticking up*. Instead, it may be a victim of modern urban sprawl, where remnants of the past are limited to the memories we work to hold onto, in desperate danger of disappearing altogether.

In a memoir about his friendship with Canadian poet, broadcaster, and painter Phyllis Webb, Stephen Collis writes in *Almost Islands* about seeking “to understand place in as multifaceted a way as possible— to see it in *n* dimensions” (99). I love all the dimensions of this place. I love the way it breathes and moves in the wind and how it responds to light, glistening at dusk as the sun falls across westward treetops. I love how the light shifts at dawn, gleaming rather than glistening, peeking through the early morning forest. I love its seasons and the subtle changes of each spring, summer, fall, and winter. I love listening to the conversations of wild things living nearby, who call this

place home. I love the snap of cold in the winter, and the fear of frozen pipes, and the hope for frozen ponds and lakes to skate on. I love the warm rain of summer as it whispers to the wind, telling it to take a break so the drops can fall straight down, full and fat, nourishing the planet on very dry days, landing on the earth and working into the soil like a nectar from the Gods. I love the colours and the golden days of fall with crisp mornings and a galaxy of stars peering down at night.

There is a joy this place brings me that remains incomparable to any other. It is home and haven— source of life. It is a teacher, master, bringer of beauty, danger, and surprise. There are forgotten secrets, waiting to be rediscovered by anyone willing to see, or listen. Collis explains that “place is ecosystem and the particularities of flora and fauna... marked by our loss of connection to the land...” (99). Sumas Mountain is one such place and I am seeking connection through the particularities of its ecosystem. Those who will be still, silent, and tread carefully upon the land may have the opportunity to be embraced the wonder of Sumas Mountain. And so, the task here, my task, and “Our task is to respond to and act within a more thoroughly interconnected world, to fashion a broader solidarity” (Collis 104).

The pages that follow here are not the result of a scientific study or a close look into any single part of life, human, non-human, or other. Here you may simply find a story— a perspective— a recognition of the complexity of the histories of this place. It is a narrative that aims to discuss, as Stephen Collis puts it, the “*ethics of the tangle...* [the] ‘*between*’ of active colonisation/resistance— of remaining true to the way different forms of oppression and modalities of resistance entwine and refuse to unknot” (159), written for the mountain and for the trees, for the streams and for the bees, by a neighbour to the Séma:th First Nation, on whose traditional territory she wanders. This is a narrative written by someone who has lived on Sumas Mountain, for the entirety of her life, and continues to return time and time again to the woods, the water, and the earth, in hopes of deepening a personal connection to what has been lost and forgotten by so many through time.

This is a dialogue with the seasons, with those who have come before and those who will come after; a map connecting the dots to begin building a web of understanding and connection between human and nature. This is a tale aiming to create distance from the common view of binaries, us and them, shifting instead to the culture of how

humanity impacts and is in turn impacted by natural spaces. This is a story that calls us to see, to witness, to learn, and to check ourselves and our perceptions as the world pushes forward with aims for progress and growth in ways that may not be sustainable, endangering the mystic world of places like Sumas Mountain.

There is no going back to another time or another path. Yet, there may be a better way forward; a way that questions what it means to be *here*, and what is required to contribute to the vast complexity of life.

I do not pretend to be an expert in the knowledge of this place. I do not pretend to have the privilege of knowing the answers. I “live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing/live not knowing rather than having an answer that is wrong” (Collis 159) and I acknowledge that even my presence here is a direct result of the expansion, colonization, and that sense of ownership I criticize. But there is wisdom in the woods, in the birds and in the trees; in the people whose stories ignite sacredness in Sumas Mountain. I invite you, if you are willing and able, to listen to the voices of the mountain, to awaken your mind and your heart, and to begin to observe an entirely new way of seeing.

Chapter 1.

Spring

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contested with a freedom and culture merely civil— to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than as a member of society. Nowadays almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap.

Walking

Henry David Thoreau (1862)

Transparent golden rays arc early over the canopy, slowly warming the lightly frosted spring earth. A pair of owls call out to each other in yearning. Barely audible at first, the *hoo-hoo* from one to the next, low then high, reaches me in those quiet moments between sleeping and waking; a trace of something nearly forgotten and on the verge of being erased. I decided in those early hours, as I so often do, to take a walk in the woods.

Slipping on an old pair of Merrells, tinged more brown than their original colour in some spots and yellowed in others, from years of wandering these trails, eyes still half wide, I slide open the set of glass doors at the back of our house. Like in a dream, I step onto a red brick patio, thick between each block with the green and yellow tones of fresh spring moss. With a cool breeze tickling my neck and the shy morning casting slim rays of warmth, my toque snug on my head and gloves tucked into my jacket pocket should I need them, I head east across our woody lawn. It has grown thick with moss and clover

and the first signs of yellow dandelions, strewn haphazardly with remnants of winter debris.

Behind our blue and white house, adjacent to a red Dutch black trimmed gambrel barn, on five acres, is a forest trail. The path leads through a tangle of deciduous and coniferous woods, over a wide bridged creek, and around a small waterfall. You can stay there at the cascading plume of mist and feel that certain kind of strength only water contains, as it barrels and changes lanes around rocks and boulders and fallen trees, or you can branch off and onto another route. This path loops in one direction, then another, before circling back again— a network of soft earthen paths meandering from here to the many corners of Sumas Mountain.

With the oxygen of the trail heavy on my mind, at this still early hour, I edge behind a shed filled with fir, cedar, and walnut, enough dry firewood to heat our house for at least five years, and step onto an overgrown logging road carved here in the early twentieth century when the trees were first assaulted. The road, if we can call it that by today's standards, is barely perceptible unless you know how to see it. One edge, set against the rise of the mountain, is unnaturally cut into the earth. The other blends easily into the downward slope. Between the two road edges is a flat walkway, too flat to be a natural forest floor. Although the trees and ferns and various species of underbrush have grown in and around this road, close observation will tell you there is nothing natural about it.

I walk down the reclaimed scar for a few metres, then step into the woods. On an old deer trail, the lush West Coast rainforest of Sumas Mountain closes in around me, abandoning all visible traces of humanity and replacing them with the low vibration of forest life.

It's peaceful beneath the canopy; tranquil and unassuming. A deep belly breath brings the scent of dewy air after a night of rain to the forefront; I become drunk on the freshness. It permeates my bloodstream, running up and down the meridians of my body, nudging sensory reflexes to awaken; attentive to a complete body and mind shift that only this place provides. I feel taller, yet less imposing. I feel wider, yet nimble and light. I am utterly expansive as I tune into the rhythm of the forest. My skin tingles with goosebumps, tiny hairs stand up at the back of my neck, my head grows slightly fuzzy,

and my limbs move into a realm of weightlessness. I am carried along by some unseen flock of forest elves, beckoning me to experience spring on Sumas Mountain.

Weaving along, up and down tilted hills, my boots step amid stark deep green sword ferns and paler deer and lady ferns, over fallen logs, and around low hanging branches and debris. The dull thrum of my heart beats with the pace of the forest. Along the deer trail's edges, fresh greenery is budding. Soon there will be bursts of salmon berries and thimble berries; red, yellow, fuzzy, and smooth. I'll share their sweet and tangy burst of nature with the birds and the bears, careful not to take more than my share.

I am conscious of not wanting to disturb this place any more than I need to. Aware of my presence as a visitor, the latest in a series of hominid interlopers leaving a mark in their wake. In such a complex ecosystem, much of which I am only beginning to fully understand, I can feel the presence of the mountain. I know that my being here is only a burden. Yet somehow this place opens, welcoming me into its warm embrace and helping me through the challenging nature of this life.

Slowly, I advance among freshly unfurled plants. Tiny bleeding hearts whose deep fuchsia will soon turn pale blush colour as the season continues, no bigger than the nail on my pinky finger, are only just peppering the forest floor; their heads bowed in reverie. It would be easy to pass them by unnoticed.

The chitter chatter of newly returned snowbirds pull my eye upward to search for the Northern Flicker woodpecker, or a chickadee, or the owl that woke me that morning. I remember a neighbour of ours who gunned down a woodpecker because, just outside his bedroom window, the bird would alternate between pecking a tree and the tin of his roof, calling out to a long-lost mate. I wince at the memory before my ears perk up, hearing something resembling the tap-tap-tap of the pointy red-headed bird, somewhere in the distance. My eyes search in yearning, but I never find her. Instead, I feel the guilt of humanity. In one way or another, we are all participating in the infringement and decimation of the natural world.

A slight downhill curve and a seasonal mushroom patch nearby, months yet to go before arrival, brings my attention once again back to the path I trod and then to a hand-laid bridge stretching over a wide gurgling creek. Crowded, the water rushes down the

mountain, away from its source, and toward the destined home it craves to be near. Pausing here, I take a long, sweet breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. *Whoosh*. Inhaling the slight misty air of the babbling brook alongside busy beaks of local gossiping birds and giggling chipmunks watching me with caution, I feel like part of the woods. I stop for a moment and crouch low to the ground as trees who shiver in the slight breeze lean toward each other in quiet whispers of last night's secrets. I am thankful for their council. I look into the water rushing beneath the bridge and feel it glisten with shadows as each ray of morning light filters through the nearly translucent green forest. It is springtime on Sumas Mountain.

If I remain crouched long enough, on one side of the creek, remnants of my past come rushing back. I can see myself as a small girl dashing through the trees. I am a mountain goat and a forest nymph. I am an explorer. I am one with the woods; a woodland fairy fiercely loving and protecting the wonder of this place. I am one of Titania's fairies in Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." I see my father, in one moment, clad in torn plaid and well-worn boots, collecting fallen wood for our fireplace from a tree blown over in a recent windfall. In the next moment, he is walking alongside me when suddenly we stop to inspect the gills of a mushroom, or the bark of a tree, or to remove a fallen branch from blocking our path. All the while, as we saunter, he tells tall tales filled with half truths. I also hear my mother's voice, warm and calm, teaching me that we are guests in the forest and that we must be as minimally invasive as possible; the only option for being here. I learn that we may explore and play and experience all that this beautiful place presents. I learn the value of working to protect places like these and the power in keeping them as wild as possible.

"We need to leave the frogs where they sit," my mother told me when I tried, years ago, to bring one home to add to our very frog-free pond. "If a frog wants to live in our pond, that's her choice. But we don't get to displace her just because it suits us," she said. These were the lessons I learned.

When fewer people lived in this area, before developments began to creep up the mountain like the slow onset of disease, this corner of the world was an oasis. Perhaps it could have stayed that way if we had managed to keep the progress at bay; failing to do so, though, feels inevitable. I suppose that even I am part of the disease.

Before me, my family, and our neighbours, there was another understanding of this place that we had encroached upon. Now, the trespass continues.

The comical teasing laugh of a squirrel brings me back to the moment on the trail behind our house. I choose not to use the bridge connecting the two sides of this creek and instead hop lightly along a line of rocks sticking up from the water's surface: a natural bridge.

This creek has changed so much in my lifetime alone. The rocks here now are not the same ones I stepped upon as a child, and which I brought my friends to step upon as we attempted to cross the creek to continue our adventure in the woods; someone always slipping into the cold mountain water. There have been several forms of bridges at this creek over the years too. The first was narrow, constructed in a way that only one person could cross at a time and with extreme care. It was almost safer to gingerly step along the rocks below. In time, however, a wider and more sturdy bridge was forged, with iron bars and thick beams. We had even built raised edges on either side and placed old roofing on the expanse of the walking zone, to avoid any slipping. Dad designed and built the bridge to be strong and wide enough for horses and a tractor to cross. The horses, so that they too could enjoy the forest in all its glory on a ride through the woods, and the tractor which made it much easier to harvest fallen trees for our fireplace. With the convenience of the bridge, however, came four and two wheeled motorised quads and motorbikes, an unwelcome consequence of human expansion and the twisted use of what we believed to be an innocent bridge. We created the circumstances for the destruction of underbrush and tearing up of land to happen. A regret I carry with me.

One year, in late spring on one of these same walks through the woods. I examined just how the trail and creek and trees had recently changed so drastically. The previous fall, in a world grasped by the chaos of Covid and climate catastrophe, a record amount of rainfall in a very short time came to the Fraser Valley. It swelled the creek to a hurtful amount, carved paths where none had been before, wiped out trees, and washed away land not secured by strong root systems. Our small forest trail and creek were altered forever.

When the rains came, rivers surrounding Sumas Mountain overflowed, pump stations nearly burst, thousands of homes were evacuated and destroyed, livestock and produce farmers lost crops and animals as what was once Sumas Lake, began to fill again. Highways were submerged, landslides blocked access to evacuees, power outages were rampant, and entire communities were cut off. On our mountain, the creek's water flow expanded so much in such a short amount of time that our bridge, had been completely dismantled and carried away by the powerful flow and enormous tumbling boulders that made their way down the mountain, carving new edges and depths into this unassuming body of water.

Up the hill, a road washed out where the same creek that crosses through our forest trail, passes. In the depths of the storm, we found ourselves standing on the land's edge, listening to the thunderous roar of wind and rain, accompanied by the terrifying sound of massive boulders tumbling and crashing into each other, stone upon stone, like thousands of crushing skulls.

When the weather settled, and landslides subsided, the creek was entirely different. It had grown wider and deeper and had been cleared of any fallen trees. The water was clear and glassy as it moved around new sets of boulders sticking up for steady feet to hop along where the bridge had once been. Farther down where a small pool and sandy bank once gave us and the wildlife respite from summer heat, the creek was much wider and had become a more tumultuous section. No gentle pool gathered there anymore.

I often wonder how many times this creek has changed, and how much human intervention had to do with this massive shift. The summer this creek nearly dried up, I'd heard rumours of a small lake being built, farther up the mountain where the source of this waterway had been redirected in sections to help fill that lake. Logging is also a major issue. In Canada we engage in block logging; the practice of cutting massive amounts of trees in large swaths; extensive enough to span several football fields. When this happens, the soil has no natural way of managing any excess water. When big rains come, from unseasonably heavy precipitation and the overflow of creeks and springs, it just runs off and overwhelms whatever waterways are in its path.

Whatever accounted for the incredible surge of water that changed the look and build of this creek, climate change, human intervention, or both, it will never be the same. At least until the next event that might change its path and forge an entirely new body of water for someone else to look upon and wonder at its past.

The original trail my father built in this forest behind our home, over thirty years ago, branched out into a web using many deer trails. Each line led away from the first and connected to another and another and another, as unobtrusively as possible. He tried to alter very little of what was already there, aiming not to disturb the natural way of the woods. These unsanctioned trails of yesterday, though, are no longer small and few.

Before the bridge, before the people, before many of the other trails, before the quads and bikes, we had one single loop that began behind our woodshed and made its way into the forest among the trees. A sure-footed jump from one rock to the next and the next took us across that bubbling creek, where the path meandered toward the waterfall, then south to where the white Trilliums grew, then west toward a high ridge and a hidden pond, and then back again to the creek and home. Now, there are many more trails. Wider trails. Muddy trails. The ground has been chewed and pitted in places, first by mountain bikes, who grew bored over time at the limited range. Then, by motorbikes looking for a quick thrill. Then by four wheeled motorised quads who ripped from one end to the other, whipping around the original loop and onto one of many more, their riders thoughtless of the negative impact— thoughtless of the hundred years it takes to build up the single centimetre of soil they rip through so easily.

Those trails remained small for my entire childhood, youth, and early adult life. Then, in a few short years, our small narrow footpaths grew wider and wider. Tire tracks dissolved the soft ground, leaving many areas with a bog-like consistency, nearly impassible on foot. A calm peaceful walk among the birds and whispering trees became one of avoiding deep divots of muck. The echoing growl of gravel mines in the distance drowned out the pulse of the forest. A fearful query began to haunt me as I wondered with each walk: *what new assault on the senses would I experience today, and when would it ever be quiet and still again?*

When the bridge gave out with that single storm, replaced by easy stepping boulders, the presence of motorized vehicles slowed. There is another entrance, though,

recently cut from a road higher up, that connects to many of these trails. In time, it is possible the motors will resume their round and round cycle of destruction. But for now, with the bridge still out, the trail is quiet once again.

Continuing my wander, away from the changed creek and farther into the forest, I come next to a three-pronged fork in the path where a few years ago, a young tree had been hacked down by some unknown visitor, leaving a crude and jagged stump in its place. The centre of the tree sticks up with jarring spikes suggesting the tool of choice may have been a dull handheld hatchet. It would have been a slow death. My body grows heavy at seeing the remnants of the tree turning mould green and black as it adopts a new stage of rot. I know it will regenerate, but I wonder what the trauma of its decapitation might mean for that process. This was not a natural end to its life.

To the right of the stump, I notice a small white plastic baggie tied up neatly and tossed alongside the trail. A printed outline of a smiling dog is just barely visible from where I stand. Something dark and brown is contained within.

I recall Marcus Aurelius who once cautioned to “Leave the past behind, let the grand design take care of the future, and instead only rightly guide the present.” Are you right, Marcus? What if leaving the past behind is the path to complete erasure of important remnants? What came before is what makes the present and creates the future. I worry about the future being created by those who discard bags of dog shit onto the forest floor; the bag’s plastic claiming to be biodegradable.

I pick up the bag, no longer warm, and carry on, doubtful but hoping that I’ll come across the culprit. I never do. Instead, I bring it home with me and put it in the trash. Another item added to our already bulging toxic landfills.

In this modern world, a blindness for development has bastardised the integrity of Place. A place is not only where one lives, works, visits, or seeks to gain and grow from. It is a memory; a living memory just as much part of the past as it is the present and the future. It is a testament and remnant to culture, history, change, suffering, and to those people whose land had been taken and built upon, only for that build to be dismantled and built up again, and again, and again. Place is where a family builds a memory. It is where the earth breathes. It is where life grows and changes among the whispers of tragedies and joys that come with being alive. It is the imperative of the modern world,

struggling to find a foothold while the planet swirls in a cloud of chaos thicker by the moment, to value Place in its purest form. Sifting through perspectives that broaden or narrow our minds in how Place can be seen, experienced, and developed, is perhaps where the answers to my struggles with the changes on Sumas Mountain lie.

Don't it always seem to go

That you don't know what you've got 'til its gone?

They paved paradise

Put up a parking lot

Shoo, bop, bop, bop, bop

Shoo, bop, bop, bop, bop

Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" comes to my mind from some untraceable tangent of memory. It's melodious and upbeat tune bops along with each step I take, matching up with the humming and singing; *shoo, bop, bop, bop*, and then *don't it always seem to go*. I jaunt along and speed up my pace as Joni's bittersweet voice brings me back around the original trail loop, heading for home. I do not take any tangents today and remind myself, as Joni fills my head, that I do know what I have got.

I have had the privilege to develop a connection to Sumas Mountain; a privilege equally cultivated by my family's love and respect for natural spaces, as well as the complex colonial circumstances that have brought us here. There is something in me that is attached to the soil of this place; to all its movements and changes. I have grown with it, seen it damaged and rejuvenated. It is a part of me just as it has been a part of every life form, human and non-human, that ever was and ever will exist here.

With each step that takes me closer to home, I know I might be powerless to stop the coming progress before all that is special here is gone. I wonder what this place might have been like before colonization; before the first batches of mass and pocket logging. I hear the whispers of the past as I walk alone. Remembered voices of this place come to me on the curves of the wind, or the rustling echoes in the trees, or up from the soil along those traces of logging roads reclaimed by the woods, or the vibration emanating up from the roots in the earth below, fighting back against the rumbling of the

gravel mine nearby. I think back to my family history, and then to the history before us. It seems we are all powerless to stop what has perhaps inevitably always been on its way. Yet I still believe that maybe, with knowledge at hand there is a chance to curb the change and create a future that is at once more sustainable and balanced for the environment, and for ourselves by extension.

When Spring arrives on Sumas Mountain, carpets of ferns and flowers populate the forest floors. Heading home from my walk some days, I take an alternate route. It meanders around the original loop, then takes off toward the south side of the mountain, down a hill, along a ravine, across another section of the same creek I had first crossed, up a hill, through an old farm now overtaken by blackberries, and out through our neighbour's collection of forest. In one area along this route, where trees have been permitted since their first cut to grow back naturally; to learn and heal from each other in the wake of torrential logging, zillions of variously shaded bleeding hearts pop up earlier than in other places. With them are often mingled one or two white Trilliums, like diamonds amidst the golden green leaves and pink and purple flowers.

The American poet, Robert Frost, wrote that "Nature's first green is gold." Here in this place, among the firs and cedars and poplars and alders, this phrase rings true. As the spring light shines, green shimmers like gold with rubies and diamonds finishing off the magnificent splendour unique only to this Place.

Walking with my dad on one early day in spring, we chatted about the weather, the world and wisdom of the earth then we cascaded down this alternate trail. Down the large hill and across the fallen tree used as a bridge spanning the width of this part of the creek. These days this watery section nearly dries completely in the summer.

Dad stops for a moment to turn his eye to a bleeding heart and tells me he saw a plant like this in a local shop. Six dollars was the price of one bobbling pink heart, bowed over at the top. He looked around at thousands of six-dollar hearts and exclaimed that he was a millionaire. Then a wistful glimmer enchanted his gaze as his eyes met mine and he told me he could only be a millionaire as long as those plants remain in the ground, and as long as he had the privilege to walk among them.

When sauntering through these woods, no matter the season, no matter the day, no matter the section of trail or how far along the creek I go, I walk through fields of gold.

Not for their dollar value but for the rich intensity of life and beauty that the natural world offers. Peppered with a diamond here and a sapphire there, sprinkled with spices of saffron, the riches of the world culminate on these forest floors. Anyone who walks gingerly, seeing each precious sight, is the lucky one, for each day she ventures out, she walks through forests of gold and is forever a millionaire.

Chapter 2.

Summer

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Walden: What I Lived For

Henry David Thoreau (1854)

Summer on Sumas Mountain is as close to paradise as I have ever known. The forest sings with the abundance of life amid a deep and varied green backdrop so thick with shades of emerald, olive, and sage, that at first glance the trees seem impenetrable. Bees bustle busily, pollinating flowers, too focussed to think about the slow decimation of their population. Barn swallows and their descendants who return each year in the spring teach their babies to soar by early summer. They manage the fly and mosquito populations as they swoop and tumble through the air like nature's original Cirque du Soleil acrobats, taking breaks along white fences looking like tough guys with their wings hunched into absent necks. The atmosphere has a fullness that only a temperate rainforest can produce. Even the assault of the gravel mine nearby, or the building of new houses, developments and subdivisions, and repaving of roads, is muted by the cacophony of warbly birds, summer storms, long hours of warm sunlight, and a forest that breathes greenery into every cell of my body.

On the hottest days, when the air stands still and those long hours of sun that West Coasters wait desperately for each year suddenly becomes too much, I can still take a walk along the reclaimed logging roads and meander down the footpath from our

home. I can ignore the wide rutted parts of the old trail and the screaming motorbikes and quads and remember what this place was like as a child.

When I visit my favourite group of trees, count the last of fading trilliums turned purple before they expire, or sit among the now trickling summer creek, whose water slows to savour every moment of its descent down the mountain, not quite in the same rush as during spring or fall, I feel the magnitude of interconnectedness of this place. Yet, as so often happens while walking these days, on this trail or any other path disappearing from roadsides or backyards into the woods, there are a smattering of realities I cannot ignore. Despite so much noticeable beauty to connect with and the ability of the forest's fullness to largely mute sounds of humanity, there is inevitably a rush of noise, pieces of garbage, a stranger talking on their cell who doesn't look up, or a dead squirrel lying in the path.

A few years ago, with the heat of summer creeping closer to peak temperatures, critters were found dead on Sumas Mountain. With no initial obvious cause, it was eventually discovered that some new homeowners did not want wild critters infesting their property. Therefore, squirrels, rabbits, birds, mice, and an unsuspecting neighbour's dog became victims of poisoning. They had either eaten bait left out along property perimeters or devoured something that had eaten the bait first, or something that had eaten something that had eaten the bait, and so it goes with secondary poisoning. Anyone participating in this natural mealtime chain, died.

Enraged by the apparent lack of consideration for life, and not understanding how one could not know that we are here as guests and custodians, I did what any wilderness lover might do to bring awareness to a pertinent issue. I made posters.

Printed on 8x10 white card stock, were various silhouetted images of critters that might be found in anyone's backyard – squirrel, rabbit, chipmunk, mouse, skunk, rat, raccoon. Next to the blacked-out figures and inside a red circle with a red line running through it, was written the word, *Poison*. Below all of it was:

This is their home too.

Don't poison the wildlife.

Rather proud of myself, in the morning while heading out to start my day, I posted these in high traffic areas— the designated bulletins at the intersection of Dawson and Sumas Mountain Road. By the afternoon, they were gone. Confused, I printed and posted more. The next afternoon, again, they were gone. This only fuelled my frustration and each day for the next few weeks the battle of the posters raged on.

As the war ensued, I envisioned myself dressing in black and parking in a discreet location, waiting for the clearly senseless individual to appear so I could ask what their problem was. This plan turned out not to be necessary. Either my opponent grew tired of the game, or learned their lesson, or was abducted by aliens, but in the end I won. A single poster remained pinned to a bulletin beside the mailboxes. It stayed there until the entire four corner intersection was uprooted by a new subdivision. Mailboxes and bulletins were removed and relocated, sidewalks were paved, trees were ploughed over, a beaver home was dismantled, and new farmed grass was put in at each tiny backyard, butting up along the sidewalk.

The rest of that summer, as has been the case over many summers in recent years, growth and development expanded, bringing more people to the mountain. From new residents to day hikers, mountain bikers, and swimmers at Chadsey Lake, people began to arrive.

I must state here that I also enjoy the amenities Sumas Mountain has to offer. I spend time walking and hiking, visiting Chadsey, driving on the roads, and devouring the last of the salmon berries before they are ruined by the heat or picked over by birds and other critters. I savour food from our backyard garden and smell the sweet aroma of wild roses. Sometimes I intently scour the forest floor for the vanilla leaf plant whose scent permeates the essence of the woods this time of year. There is so much to see and experience on Sumas that it can be enough to forget the subdivisions going in with gates and fences designed to keep the outside out and the inside in.

The joy of summer is almost enough to overlook entire sections of mountain devoured by the ashen grey gravel mine or logged by the timber industry. Not to mention the periodic chemical spraying of native broadleaf plant life in recently logged areas, which according to some is necessary for new trees to be planted by knocking out the competition. It is supposed to be harmless to the creatures and earth in the vicinity.

Others, including author of *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard, suggest this is a toxic and harmful practice that undercuts the longevity and overall health of these forests.

Still, the beauty of Sumas Mountain seems to heartily prevail in many areas and one can easily participate in the abundance of recreation activities, enjoying nature with little thought of the onslaught of progress and destructive profit driven tendencies. Though, with each new development, each fresh cut block of trees, each blast of the mountain sending piles of rocks crashing into dump trucks to be carted away, the magic of this mountain diminishes. I am afraid at how much it will disappear and how fast, until little by little, someday it will be gone indefinitely.

A forgotten 10x6 sign marking the first major subdivision ever built on Sumas Mountain still stands at the corner of Mckee Road and Sumas Mountain Road. Faded and leaning slightly to one side, one wooden leg attempts to keep the sign straight while the other, slowly rotting, sinks into the ground, consumed by invasive blackberry vines. I drove past it one day in July, with a line of cars trailing behind me. The letters and images on that sign, once bright and vibrant, had faded to reveal what looked like a set of eyes framed by circular wiry glasses. At first the eyes homed in on me from within the sign as I drove up to it, emitting a valley of ashes vibe. At a second passing glance, the eyes were gone and only the faded grey and vaguely outlined words and images remained.

It seems with each passing summer, and each strange climate catastrophe, becoming less strange in recent years, the way our communities are developed needs to change. This shift should not only come in green building policies, but also in zoning rules that account for trees and local ecologies, forestry practices, and the use of chemicals and other substances that keep the wild at bay. This must also be accompanied by a societal shift away from how we perceive our relationship with nature, our impact on it, and how the history of a place, beyond human history, is valued as part of its identity. The way we connect to our environment is a direct result of the way we talk about it, write about it, and engage with it. Igniting conversation and respect for what lives and grows, starts with experiencing it.

Embodiment of place has always been at the forefront of my mind during the summer months where I allow myself more time and space to slow down, to observe and contemplate the smallest of details. With the oppression of climate change at the forefront of the modern era, ever pressing upon our current lived experiences, this practice of embodiment is more important than ever. Space must be consciously created in our lives to allow for experiential moments between us and available natural environments. The year Canada experienced its first recorded heat dome, so called for the lid or cap-like behaviour of hot ocean air trapped in a localised atmosphere, amidst the global pandemic known as Covid, a need to connect with and understand local environments grew more desperate.

During the heat dome forests combusted, rivers dried, fish boiled, and towns went up in flames in a matter of minutes. Grandparents and street dwellers and toddlers died in their sleep for lack of cool air and water. Through this and other world events, we held our breath, waiting for a safe time to relax that seemed never to arrive. We had entered a moment of deep stillness that summer, as the long-held inhale of anticipation hung in the air— a stalemate between climate and human.

It was a time gripped by the germ of a global pathogen. One confinement was followed by another and another— isolation from contagion, isolation from heat, isolation from fires, isolation from flooding the following fall, isolation from knowing where we stand amidst it all. Just as we were lulled by the thought of a return to normal, a new threat would appear on the horizon. There was nothing to do when the dust looked like it might settle, but sit with the reality before us, a reality created partly as a natural progression through time, partly from single minded human tendencies where growth and development was seen as an instrument of social progress rather than an annihilation of natural spaces.

On the day that broke historical heat records across Canada, and we first widely heard the term *Heat Dome*, I found myself, like everyone else, hopelessly attempting to escape. Some who were vulnerable and at risk of being exposed to the severe weather, suffocating in apartments and basement suites in cement encased blocks of housing, found relief in cooling centres or large shopping malls.

At Cabela's, our local outdoor outfitting emporium, people lounged on lawn furniture displays, chatting among friends with a can of Coke in their hands. The store had become their neighbour's backyard. They sat together as if we were not in the grasp of a global pandemic. They chatted about their favourite television shows as if the rising temperatures, breaking 45 degrees celsius, were not an issue. They laughed as if the rapid expansion of logging into wooded areas and archaic harvesting practices were not partly to blame. They drank and slurped as if poor city planning did not account for some negative climate change impacts. They gathered as if these issues would not continue if we do not change our behaviour and perception around the way we live and interact with the natural world.

Shops, bars, restaurants, and even schools were closed when the heat dome parked itself over the Fraser Valley. We were not prepared for this kind of sustained weather. A fluke day or two here and there is one thing, but this heat, for this long, was quite another. A sign of more to come, perhaps.

To help keep the animals who live on our property cool, we banished all the pets to the basement of the main house— two cats, Milo and Eva, and our dog Charlie. The cement pour set into the earth normally keeps the temperature low and helps to cool the remainder of the house— a tech free air conditioner. That coolness, though, still had a tough fight against the heat dome and the basement never dropped below 25 degrees. Those of us on the property popped down to the cement floor of the house every now and then to cool off; darts and a pool table, cards, snacks, and naps were common.

In the barn a large fan, covered with chicken wire, was strung up farm style to the ceiling rafters, keeping the swallows, nesting with their babies, and the horses as cool as possible. I wondered how the barns in the valley below us were managing— those ones on commercial farms with chickens crowded under metal roofs, not a shading tree to be found. Later, I'd learn that over 600 thousand chickens and turkeys died in B.C. that week.

As temperatures continue to rise across the planet, I worry about those creatures who do not have fans strung up to help them cope. I worry about the ones living across the world encountering extreme weather as a direct result of a species that could have known better. Humans did and are continuing to add to the problem. Mass logging,

development moving deeper into wooded and other natural areas, inefficient planning, a laughable energy sector, and so much more with consumerism and capitalism at the centre, are largely to blame for the crisis we find ourselves in; locally and globally. We are both individually and collectively responsible for the rushed deterioration of our planet.

I found myself that day, the heat dome day, sitting in the creek behind our property, pondering the state of the world. I know just how privileged I am to have this escape. Barefoot and natural I took nothing with me, grateful to be part of this place for just a short time before returning to the realm of humanity.

I wandered down the path, through the ferns, and among the trees. Careful not to brush up against stinging nettles, or disturb the ground cover too much, the air picked up a breeze, and my skin felt the oppressive temperature ease, just for a moment. The forest canopy was absorbing whatever it could of the saturating heat, as the trees swayed ever so slightly, attempting to cool the air with movement. Even in places where everything seemed relatively still, the breath of the forest was there. Ferns, flowers, and other underbrush, attempted to hydrate and stay alive as the incessant heat kept coming. The plants inhaled and exhaled, one slow breath at a time, nearly dormant under the brutality of this weather. Several leaves had evidence of severe dehydration, their soft foliage stiff and dull, crumbling with the slightest touch.

As I came closer to the creek, the air cooled off even more, though only slightly. The water breathed with the forest, cooling as she trickled and tumbled over and along the crevices of rocks and sticks, running down, down, down, in bubbling excitement. I noticed, when I looked for a place to cross, and had been noticing over the past weeks, that the water was not at the level it should be for this time of year. It had been hot, that is true, and rain that helps to feed this creek had not arrived in some time. Yet, this water level was too low.

Some meteorologists call it climate weirding, or global weirding. Naturally, the earth does what it is supposed to do to keep all the working elements in check. On the west coast this means that seasonal temperatures, the amount of rainfall, and the frequency and ferocity of wildfires, are all balanced and kept relatively under control. When a fire ignites, it should burn through some forested areas, cleaning up the natural

underbrush before dying out, but rarely impacting the trees. The nitrogen created by those fires help to support new forest growth. Rain is also part of this balance as clouds release moisture in a relatively even amount, which settles any natural temperature fluctuation. This even rainfall avoids obscene amounts of rain which cause flash flooding and water run off, damaging entire ecosystems. This balanced circle of life, which includes natural chaos, impacts plants and animals as they cycle through birth, death, and rebirth. *Weirding* is when this natural balance is drastically off and no longer functions as it should. It rains too much, too hard, for too long. The earth is too dry to take any moisture, leaving the land washed out by water run-off and vulnerable to erosion. Then, suddenly, the rain stops. It stops for too long and gets too hot. The creeks dry and uncontrollable fires blaze, ignited by humans or nature; the sustained heat, lack of moisture, and bushy undergrowth burn hot, and entire forests, and ecosystems are annihilated. As more forests are levelled and wetlands are impacted to make way for houses, or roads, or parking lots, or buildings, the more this weirding will continue.

Wandering barefoot up the creek on the hottest of days, stepping where water smoothly glides over larger rocks, it is best to avoid the slippery stones where moss and slimy membranes have built up. When I am trouncing up our creek, I feel the breath of the forest beckoning me onward, panting in the heat. I am followed by flies and mosquitos and beetles, and other winged critters equally enjoying the minuscule difference in temperature, filled with a need to rest rather than bother with me. Birds chime in, either announcing my presence to their neighbours, asking me to leave, or not noticing me at all but instead sharing in the cacophony of the forest with their daily dose of creek gossip. To my left is an animal trail where deer or bear or porcupine creep up and down the sides of the water source. To my right is a rock wall adorned with varieties of moss and lichen paired with ferns popping out of the many narrow and wide rock faced gaps, staggered with larger caverns that look like the homes of those small creatures lucky enough to have prime real estate at this time of year. I used to pretend this wall was where fairies lived. I imagined they would watch me; their translucent rainbow-coloured wings glistening inside stone cracks while they whispered to one another, only coming out to flutter around, ride dragonflies, or catch droplets of rain in the palms of their hands, after I had gone. I wonder about those fairies now. What impact would my imagination have suffered if there had been no creek to go to.

Continuing up the waterfall in search of relief, I discover a pool deep enough to submerge myself into; a large rock at its centre, the water begs me to sit and let my legs float. Today, as on most days when I come here, regardless of the season or time of day, I am completely alone, except that I am not alone. Sitting next to me as I dip my toes in the water, perched on a ledge jutting out from the rock face, is a frog. It is as if that ledge were made for him.

Hovering above me, drinking from the water trickling down the now dribbling waterfall, is a pair of hummingbirds. In the tree five feet away, its branches stretching out over the creek, rest two nestlings of some other variety of bird, whose mother flies out from her perch to find food and drink, then returns to the silent open mouths of her babies. They should be making way more noise than they are. I wonder if they are just too exhausted from the heat and cannot muster the energy to even cry out.

Trying to be part of the landscape, a non- invasive being simply existing with the water and the woods and the wildlife, I do my best to blend in. Perched on that rock in the centre of the waterfall's pool, gazing at the frog, and the rock wall, and the hummingbirds, and the trees, and the spill of water trying its best to cascade as if it had much greater volume, and the nestlings in the tree, I notice suddenly that the mother bird has not returned for some time. I watch and wait for her. Little beaks hang over the edge of the twig crafted home, agape and waiting. Have you ever seen a bird pant? Their heads remain still, beaks open, tongues hanging out the sides. For a moment I fear the worst; the heat has killed them. Then, one head adjusts ever so slightly to signal life. Then another and another. They are alive. Barely.

As I wonder how much wildlife is suffering in this heat, then worry about all the other animals who do not have a creek or collection of forest to keep a small breeze turning the air, a rock comes crashing down beside the tree with the nestlings. I look to try and spot the source of the rock but instead spot the mother bird. She sits some distance from her babies— and from me. She is not approaching her nest, and not retreating. She hops side to side on a branch, focussed on my direction. I suddenly realise that I may be the reason she has not returned.

Try as we might, humans will always stand out against the natural rhythms of wildlife to some extent. We are predators of the most horrific kind. The mother bird,

having spotted me, likely deemed me as a threat. I wait a short moment just to see if she will come back to feed her babies, but as she continues to hop impatiently, the nestlings grow more still. I know that if I remain there she may not return. She is stressed. The forest is stressed. My presence is not helping, and I decide that my time at the creek has come to an end for the day. The frogs may have their pool back. The hummingbirds may wish to venture in other directions. The bird may feel safe to return to her nestlings.

I take my leave to allow the forest to resume its rhythm. I do not belong here. Not really. Gratitude though, seizes me as I take one step farther away from that one cool and restful place. I am thankful for the time I had been given to cool off. Forty-five-degree weather in this part of the world is not normal; everything is suffering. What will happen to these birds, to their mother, to the frogs, or to the creek itself if these forests disappear?

Sumas Mountain should remain a haven— a cooling space. It should have been relieved of human development and perceptions that came with histories like mine and the histories of other settler families. Still, there is another threat beyond humans on Sumas Mountain, a global threat. Climate change is the pressing element bringing the need to look closely at ecosystems and their unique environments. These areas should be protected for their own sake at the very least and for the betterment of humanity at the most. It is within these natural areas where wisdom is held about how to mitigate climate extremes. Ecosystems help each other to cope with stress and can bounce back against disastrous odds— that is, unless we throw them so off balance that they are unable to do what they were designed to do.

That summer, when we saw more than forty days of no precipitation, one morning, the first of August, relief came at last. I had awoken in the earliest morning hours, still dark but with the hope of dawn approaching, to the light sound of long-awaited tinkling raindrops on the tin roof of my house. My mind and body came alive as the dewy scent of moisture wafted with the early morning breeze through my open windows.

Rising slowly, I took in every molecule of freshness. Making my way to the door, almost in a dream, I skipped over a pair of hard bottomed slippers, threw on a light grey bathrobe and, giddy to feel the wet earth beneath my feet, I slipped silently out the door.

Leaving only the trace of my disappearing footprint behind, I padded down the steps and gingerly toed through a gravel threshold until I landed at last on the wet ground. I stood in the light but steady rain and watched as it kissed the land a million times over; a well-remembered encounter between earth and sky. There was a thickness to the air that only swells with a gathering of moisture such as this when life breathes a great sigh of relief after the long wait for rain.

Standing there, moisture crept along the base of my feet and in my toe crevices. I watched the forest bordering our property shimmer in the early morning dawn, felt the earth stretch up to meet my curved soles, listened to the quiet and content chattering of birds and squirrels slowly waking to find the forest slightly changed by this morning of unexpected yet overwhelmingly welcome refreshment.

Watching the land and forest drink this nectar, I spotted, tucked in the trees, a swallow. Beneath a large maple leaf, she looked relatively dry as she watched the water tumble from the skies and land all around her. We stood together, the swallow and I, listening, watching, waiting with caution for the skies to clear. Would we both lament the moment the clouds no longer released their moisture? Would the bird joyfully take flight and meet her friends for a chat? What happens to a bird like her when a drought like this becomes normal and the rains appear less and less frequently until they cease one year to come at all.

For those who have adapted to a largely wet climate such as the West Coast of British Columbia, prolonged dry periods leave us uncertain, uncomfortable, and wishing for rain to return. Will we manage to adapt to longer periods with no rainfall in this area? Those with adequate resources might shift, but this bird may not. What of the wildlife and forests, whose feeding, breeding, and general patterns of existence depend so much on the natural climate rhythms to be a certain way? Will they adapt? Is this change too fast for such an adaptation to occur?

Lost in the thrum of rain, in a near trance like state, I reach out my hand to catch and hold what moisture I can. A spattering of drops land in my palm and then the sky brightens and clears. Slim yellow rays are cast from where the rain has stopped falling. And just like that, the rainfall to break the heat ended. The swallow chirps, calling for her mate, who returns the note from somewhere behind me. She takes off to meet her

partner. They soar in the air; between the two places they had each sought refuge from the falling water.

On my own again, led by the rich fragrance coming from the edge of our property and into the forest, I find myself walking, away from our backyard and further afield into the freshness of the wilderness, seeking more of that wet magic. As I walk, I notice a mix of dampened dryness, partially moistened pine needles, mosses, ferns, and other ground cover on the forest floor, along with vine maples and other foliage and trees. The forest, recently kissed by the rainfall, exuded an atmosphere of absolute rejuvenation. With this magic encasing my body, the start of a brief blissful wander through the woods turned into a much longer walk along the trails that I frequent so often.

As the sun rises, and the deeper I go into the thickness of the trees, the heavier the air becomes, and a greater abundance of weighted scents emerge. I waltz slowly along narrow paths, loving the droplets of water brushing off sword ferns and lady ferns and onto my calves and knees. My hands graze the tallest ground cover and gently move aside branches heavy with rain that are now slightly bent and leaning. The masses of spider webs that were strung up across the trail in this very dry weather are now few; only the strongest, largest, and better placed webs remain. They glisten as the clouds part, letting in more slivers of cool morning light, illuminating the droplets who have found their way into the spider webs, sitting on silk strings like tiny weightless silver orbs.

Wandering through each neighbourhood of forest, different types of plants or trees are dominant, each with their own scent brought out by the rainfall. Somewhere on the south end of the trail circling back to where we began, a new thick scent emerges. The syrupy sweetness of vine maples hits me first, then a heavy warmth of black walnuts. I continue along, breathing wet heat from heavily baked and recently soaked pine needles and saturated fallen maple leaves. It is impossible not to taste the sharp permeating flavour of cedar bark as the hot sweetness grows thicker and I emerge into a once cleared field, now completely overgrown with sparse and spindly trees, wild roses and butterfly bushes, and tangles of invasive blackberries. The flowering seasons of the rose and butterfly bushes are nearing their end, but the blackberries are only just beginning to swell.

Pausing to take in the open space, deciding whether to take the trail to the right or to the left and circle around to the other side of the open field, I notice that the invasive blackberry species already has many large berries turning the deepest purple whereas indigenous varieties, difficult to start among the tough tangles of its rival, are still green.

Himalayan blackberries are a well-known scourge in many parts of Western British Columbia. They seem to grow in abundance everywhere. If left unchecked, loving the wet temperate climate, the *Rubus Armeniacus*, or Himalayan blackberry, originating in Armenia and northern Iran, will take over entire fields and engulf derelict buildings. It can increase chances of flooding, suffocate other plant species, and act as a barrier for larger animals, making it impossible for them to move along their routes and putting them in danger. Its thickets, with aggressively large, strong and thick stocks and equally menacing barbs, can produce up to 13,000 seeds for every square metre of growth and live a relatively healthy life, developing, when the season comes, millions of large bulbed berries.

These invasive plants in this once upon a time field, and once upon a time old growth forest, are in direct competition to the trailing blackberry, or *Rubus Ursinus*, Indigenous to Sumas Mountain and other parts of British Columbia. The story of these two berry varieties battling it out here is tied to a much larger, colonial story.

According to some sources, an American horticulturist, Luther Burbank, can be credited with the role of introducing the now invasive Himalayan blackberry to North America. An inventor of new fruit and vegetable species, experimenter with plant breeding, Burbank was an avid seed trader, a popular and well-known individual in North America.

One day, as the story goes, Burbank received seeds for *Rubus Armeniacus*, Himalayan blackberry, in the mail. Since the package had come from India, Burbank believed the seeds came from India and thus named the variety the Himalayan Giant, on account that the stalk and berries were much larger than the native species. Burbank introduced the plant to North American soil in 1885, first in his own backyard. In 1894 he began targeting customers with fliers throughout the Pacific Northwest—the beginning of mass spreading.

On Sumas Mountain, if you look closely, the difference between the invasive blackberry species and the Indigenous varieties are easy to pick out. The Indigenous vines, creeping mostly along the ground, have tendrils with a relatively small circumference. The common name is the trailing blackberry because the variety keeps a modestly low profile, trailing along and appearing in patches that do not overwhelm other plants nearby. Its leaves, unlike the wide and more oval-shaped broadleaf of the invasive kind, are slightly narrow and long, producing smaller, sweeter berries that were traditionally used by local Indigenous peoples, fresh or dried. This unassuming species is in stark contrast with the large white flowers, generally pink in the centre, with sizable berries produced by the invasive variety of the Himalayan, whose fruits can be flavourless and woody.

Everything about the trailing blackberry is slightly more delicate. It belongs, blending into its environment and complementing other plants. It is connected here to the way this forest works. On the other hand, Burbank's introduced variety simply takes over. It muscled around and over other plants, in some cases engulfing and suffocating entire trees. Its massive thick and deep-rooted stalks with sharp barbs, bully the forest into submission. The very nature of colonialism is encased in every seed spreading from one place to another, every stalk that takes root, every flower that blooms, and every berry produced.

As I walk around this once upon a time field, in the wake of such oppressive heat, especially on that rainy August morning, on land that had hosted ancient forests and was sacred to the Semá:th First Nation, turned settler's home and farm, turned public and private land that makes up what Sumas Mountain is today, I know that my history is attached to the blackberries covering the ground and overwhelming trees and other bushes and plants.

Coming around a bend in the trail, a slight wind picks up, carrying with it the heavy rain-soaked scent of the greenery. It is saturated with the sweet fruitiness of berries. Is it the invasive species I am smelling, or the Indigenous variety seen trailing patiently along, gently asserting itself here and there like the whispers of the past heard on a gentle breeze? The Himalayan stalks are obstructive and menacing, filling the eye immediately; they are easy to notice. Yet, the trailing berry or, sqw'o:lmuxwulhp, or skwilmuxwukhp, or sqwi'il'muxw, depending on whether you are upriver or down river or

island bound, has a steady strength unmeasured and untethered. Its beauty and persistence are inspiring.

When I walk this trail, no matter the season, the hour, before the rain, during, or after, at sunset or sunrise, even during a heat dome, I see the trailing blackberry and I am filled with awe and respect and love for the fight against its overpowering aggressor, the menacing invasive Himalayan species. Both varieties may look the same at first sight, and it may even appear that the Himalayan has won the battle, but when we take a moment to look— really look—it is easy to see the quiet steady strength of what refuses to be overtaken or stamped out. All it takes is a pair of eyes, some patient steps, and the willingness to see more than what is first presented.

Those of us who experienced the oppressive heat that summer are likely never to forget the challenge that it brought, as well as the flooding that followed in November. It is important not to forget what this struggle was like. It is important to see the bigger picture of how the *heat dome* came to be and what humans contributed to cause it. It was, in part, technology and progress that got us here in the same way that it was progress that allowed for the invasive blackberry species to spread and take over entire swaths of land, suffocating Indigenous species. In this way, I wonder if *tech fixes*, which are often pedalled as the solution to a problem, will further alienate us from nature and add to the cacophony of environmental catastrophe. Instead, connection should be the goal.

We must begin to see and understand root causes to these catastrophes and illuminate the holistic solutions available. Such solutions may consider Indigenous wisdom and traditions, for they are the original caretakers, as well as what we can learn about climate change from around the world, engaging in the knowledge of other cultures, following the science, and opening our worldviews to perspectives that are non-binary, collective, multifaceted, and interconnected.

Experiencing climate disaster, like heat domes, fires, and floods, may be the access point for us to see and acknowledge the value of diverse ecosystems in how they contribute to balanced environments for plants, animals, and humans, and to mitigate the damage caused by climate change. What comes out of these experiences, though, must be a shift in what we thought we knew. We must open ourselves to alternative

ways of being and seeing, and thus alternative ways forward that embrace a sense of embodiment and connection with the natural world. This new world view starts with an awareness of place in all its intricacies, that we on the west coast are so fortunate to have an abundance of. To lose the opportunity to connect by eliminating ecosystems and environments would be one of the most wasteful tragedies of our time.

Chapter 3.

Fall

It concerns us all whether these proprietors choose to cut down all the woods this winter or not.

Journal

Henry David Thoreau (1852)

Regardless of what the calendar or newspapers or almanacks state, each year on Sumas Mountain, I know fall has arrived when the light in the forest shifts. The hot bright sun of summer dims ever so slightly and begins to filter through the changing colours of the leaves as they morph from the shades of green to earthy oranges and reds and browns, allowing the shape of the trees to shift from full and alive to dormant and sparse.

The transition here is a fast one. If you cannot get out into the woods for a week or two, you might miss it. But if you are diligent in walking, slowly and calmly with an observant eye attached to every single step you take, you might see the first leaf change and fall. Or at least it feels like that some years. Other years, the colours are burned into my memory and last all winter long— something about a quick coolness in the air versus a slow gradual shift from summer to winter. Regardless, whether the change in season is extended or cut short, as soon as the first leaf detaches and flutters to the earth, there is a cascading crescendo of diffusing light. The underbrush scent fills the forest as all the maples and birch and walnut shed their foliage for critters to make their comfortable quarters and wait out the winter. Beetles scurry across paths and squirrels gather the

final remnants of seeds and nuts to burrow away into their hidey holes. What foliage and food remains on the forest floor acts as a cover for flower bulbs deep in the dirt, lying dormant until spring comes again.

Along with the fall comes the rains. As the years have passed since I have known this place, fall in the Fraser Valley seems to be getting dryer and dryer, yet still true to form, Sumas Mountain exists in its own microclimate. From the valley below and the roads that run through the skeleton of Sumas Lake, just north of the United States border, looking up to the mountain called Sumas, often while the sun shines in the valley, the air and fog and weather hug the mountain. It encloses the peaks and valleys and vast treed areas in voluptuous mist. Sumas joyfully weeps with rain.

Creeks and streams begin to swell, and the plants and trees who have been dried and tested over the summer months begin to green again, filling out in colour and life in a last hurrah before the cycle of time catches up, sending them dormant into the fall and then finally the winter season. This is the beginning of autumn on Sumas Mountain, and as I wander, as I so often do, along the trail among the trees and leaves and earth, I breathe deeply the sighs of relief from a long drought and feel on my skin the breath of the forest exhaling and inhaling, helping itself and all the myriad of plant and critter species to prepare for the cold. Each year this preparation becomes more difficult as the inconsistencies and surprises brought by climate change and human expansion into forest spaces make it a great challenge to anticipate what is to come; the natural rhythms are breaking, replaced by a weirdness of uncertainty that few are prepared for in the end. And in this time of climate crisis, where ecosystems are challenged to the extreme, and forests continue to be hunted for their lumber, it is the trees we must look to. It is the trees that will get us through, that will teach us the ways of the earth and how to manage the crisis we have exacerbated in our time.

Here and there, scattered amongst second and third growth trees, where the presence of people is scarce, old growth trees still stand. They are hidden from view with secrets and tales of the past; another world veiled in mystery and unknown to the new world creeping up and around them.

One morning, in early fall, John Vissers, a spry sixty-something neighbour who has seen me through all the stages of my life, took a walk with me to find the last patches of old growth trees on Sumas Mountain.

John lives on Charlie Spruce Place. Third house on the right. Refusing to bring in much fill to build up his property when he bought in the eighties, going over to the Vissers' is like wandering through Narnia. It is likely that fairies drink tea under toadstool mushrooms, and creatures watch from the looming trees lining the property as you walk by them, down the driveway, away from the road, and toward the house. Near the marshy pond and saturated earth around it, behind the house, along mossy laden undergrowth, there is a soft quietude permeating the senses of any visitor willing to pay attention.

On that misty cool Sunday in early October, my electric car and I picked John up at the mouth of his driveway. With a slight wiry build and hair that seems whiter with each greeting, John is an unassuming character with a humble wealth of knowledge of Sumas Mountain. It had rained profusely all night and today we anticipate it will rain again, but like any good West Coaster, we go out into the woods anyhow. Clad with rain jackets and hats, snacks and water, and John with a very old backpack, we set off.

From Charlie Spruce Place, we take a left at the stop sign and coast down Dawson Road to the four-way intersection where Dawson meets Sumas Mountain Road. To the left is a new subdivision sitting on land that once housed a bright yellow one room schoolhouse. It was built when the area settled in the early 1900s, after clay had been found and micro-communities and homesteads popped up around the mountain; Kilgard at the southern base of the mountain, Clayburn at the western base, Heritage Valley, and Straiton Village, named for Thomas Bell Straiton and his family. The Straiton Community Hall is all that is left of the village. What once was a collection of large properties, a post office, general store, school, and community centre, located in the opposite direction of where John and I are headed, is now a series of subdivisions, an oil refinery, and a gravel mine.

I remember the day the schoolhouse came down to make way for subdivisions. The trees and grassy knolls that once made it a home long after the school was closed, were removed as well. Like a shock to the system, I drove past the property one

afternoon, feeling something was missing but not knowing what until I glanced in the rear-view mirror to see the remaining shards of yellow wood piled next to a wrecking ball and a dump truck. One day it was there. The next it was gone. They named the street going into that new subdivision, Diane Brooke. I'm told it is named after the creek running in the ditch alongside Dawson Road. Who is Diane? I wonder if those who live there now, or will live there in the future, will ever know a schoolhouse once stood there, a symbol of the community who once flourished here. I wonder if they will ever know that before the schoolhouse was erected, this mountain was a sacred space for the Semá:th First Nation. Will the story of Sumas be lost in a sea of homes and yards with fake grass and paved roads?

John and I turn right, heading North up Sumas Mountain Road, away from the lost Remnants of Straiton Village and all that this area was before.

Ten minutes along our way, going up, up, up, we pass many homesteads and remark on families whose ancestors have lived on Sumas Mountain since the beginning of the colonial state of this place, and on new builds with neighbours who install tall gates and high fences. We reflect on the spiritual significance of the mountain. We are grief stricken at the lack of respect shown here.

Sumas Mountain Road winds along a crest in the mountainside, then turns downward at the North Side overlooking the Fraser River and Mission in the distance. The road turns to gravel. We drive briefly down the backside of the mountain and pull a u-turn where the road widens at one side, and park along the North-West Edge, the nose of the car facing up toward where we had come. Known in another life as *Wades Trail* and before that a pathway used by Indigenous people, Sumas Mountain Road is the incarnation of the first route that wound from one side of the mountain to the other. It was the only way to get from the Fraser River to the Sumas Border as the surrounding area, what is now Sumas Prairie on one side, Matsqui Prairie on the other, and Abbotsford in between, was marsh and lake. Before dikes, drainage, and pumps were put in to make the land suitable for farming and development, the river flooded each year, making the base of the mountain entirely impassible, even for the Semá:th people who lived, hunted, and traded in the area. As a result, trails were carved over the mountain, not unlike the one that John and I are about to embark on in search of one of the last remaining pockets of old growth trees on Sumas Mountain.

Built in 1967, the Centennial trailhead originally started further down near the base of the mountain. It was the project of retired loggers and locals, eager to create something in appreciation of the spectacular beauty of this area. Time, circumstances, tree lots, logging, purchasing of land, and the creation of park boundaries caused the route to change over time. It went out of service for many years before being rekindled and rerouted into the modern way that we ventured out into that October. Today, the trail avoids some unsafe sections that once took hikers past *lover's leap* and other deadly cliffs. Much of the trail, though, still follows the original logging roads that made their way up to the top at Chadsey Lake, known by some as Lost Lake. The trees were once all so massive, some measuring fifty feet around, that when originally logged, way before my time, they were driven down the mountain one tree at a time.

Slinging our pack across our backs, crossing the road from where we parked, John and I step over the threshold from the gravel road onto the trail. We passed a notice indicating there are bears and sensitive habitats in the area. A metal box is stationed on a post with a counter inside, tracking the number of users entering this area each day. We cross the threshold and into the woods, instantly enveloped by the moist air only a temperate rainforest in fall can offer.

Marching up Sumas Mountain with John is a bit like tracking into a wild place with a mythical creature. His words are filled with wisdom and experience, excitement and colour. He holds an insatiable optimism and appreciation for Sumas Mountain and, despite its sordid colonist past, new developments, and some attitude against preserving the wilderness of the area, he believes it will be okay in the end because there are those who wish to protect it.

My mind relaxes as we begin to walk through the deep green and fiery orange forest. I breathe in the drizzling October air, heavy with misty particles as ancient as the area itself. The ground is soggy, mud tracing the outlines of our boots with each new step. Water trickles down the path in many places and we know, despite the smart footwear we chose that day, our feet will be damp by the end of our adventure. We do not mind. We are looking for one patch of old growth trees that help to make up part of the less than two percent of old growth left standing in all British Columbia; wet feet is an afterthought.

Among these hidden sentinels, Sumas is also home to a collection of unique creatures. Crossing a wide bridge over a tumultuous October creek, water crashing into rocks and the mountain above, below, and under us, John is animated with excitement. He tells of the day he and a group of researchers found a Red-Tailed frog there. “We didn’t think we’d find any!” He exclaims. “It was right over there”, he points to the south side of the water’s edge, across from where we stand on the bridge.

John tells me that Sumas Mountain is a microclimate that sits at the Northern edge of a larger and more biodiverse area, home to many species. The edge of a species’ bubble is where the most genetic diversity exists, allowing multiple species to be collectively healthy. “These are what we call,” John says as we step off the bridge and back onto the wet and narrow footpath, in his usual colourful tone, “keystone species.” He goes on to point out as we walk that many might wonder why the protection of a species here even matters if it exists in other parts of Western Canada. “The problem arises,” he says turning his shoulders slightly to talk to me as we continue up the trail, “when the edges of a large biosphere start to fall,” due to climate change, invasive species, or general human existence, “over time a new edge falls, and another, and another.” On and on it goes until the entire species as well as others dependent on it, tumble like dominoes.

John’s passion for this place gives me pause. I wonder about the trails and spaces around my family’s property back on Charlie Spruce Place. I mourn the loss of the yellow schoolhouse in what is no longer Straiton Village. I wonder what it was like where we are walking now, at the tip of Sumas Mountain, before the Centennial Trail was built. I know this forest does not look like what it did, before loggers and settlers and miners came up the river from New West Minister and landed at the base of Sumas Mountain, wandering up Wade’s Trail, and taking large swaths of land for the price of the paperwork involved. I picture what the space would have been like. Allowing myself to become entangled there, I look around as we hike, listening to the whispers dancing through the trees and along the bottom of trickling waterways, the voices of the forest. With each step, growing heavier with memory, I see the past through the wet, foggy air closing in around us as we ascend.

This vision of the past sees soft earth with minimal ground cover. A spaciousness expands along the base of tall, straight, and wide footed trees with thousands of

varieties of ferns, mosses, lichen, and fungus spreading out and plugging into the network of conversation that starts deep underground in a tangle of roots— a single organism feeding one another and helping the system breathe and grow as one. The canopy above lets golden light shine through the enormous treetops, lighting up the multi-shaded green turning everything into millions of jewels. The air is misty and cool, simultaneously hugging my lungs with thick oxygen and helping each fresh breath to expand. A fresh flow of air in through the nose, and out through the mouth, intoxicates a person with the breath of the forest. There is no end to the reach of this old growth image as communities of trees are tied together beneath the ground, in the canopy, and in the very air everything breathes. The only sounds are the winds in the leaves, the rustling of ferns, the chirping call of birds, and the scurrying of red squirrels. Even the sunshine brings the sound of reverie as it helps this forest to glow, unaware of the destruction that is coming for it. This is an old growth forest. This is what has been stolen. Today, this experience can only be found in pockets, scattered and cut off from each other. This is what John and I have come to find in the shadows of logged areas on Sumas Mountain.

About an hour into our hike, John and I pause at a bend. The trail goes east. We are headed west, into the thick, off trail, to find the last grove of ancient trees left behind by loggers. I take a long drink of water and John and I turn in the direction of an entirely different form of forest from where we are standing.

Gingerly stepping off the path, careful not to disturb the undergrowth, we take two separate routes through ferns, around rocks, past stumps and fallen debris. John continues to tell stories. He talks briefly about the difference between old growth forests, planted forests, and logged forests that had been given time and space to repopulate themselves. Most of Sumas Mountain's second or third growth forests had been allowed to return on their own. In doing this, the death sentence of being a mono-culture forest is avoided; a crop planted entirely consisting of one type of tree, growing up much like a cornfield where biodiversity is largely non-existent. The trees in a monoculture aren't as healthy as other forests. Like the falling edges of a biosphere, the entire area lacks the diversity necessary to protect it from disease, pests, and forest fires.

At the crest of a small hill, the path we left behind fading into the backdrop, the sight before us is the entry into another world. Thousands of enormous ferns fan out

across the earth. Stepping among them, it is difficult to know where the ferns end, and the ground begins. I walk slowly, following John's confident lead, fearing my boot may discover a hole and I would be lost amid the forest floor, doomed to sleep' in the underbrush of this strange transitional terrain.

Beyond the ferny plateau, a large maple has fallen, its burl had been poached and the tree left for dead. This is an unfortunately common occurrence in forests across British Columbia. This body is the gateway marking the entrance to a forest that looks quite different from where we started. I am drawn inward, toward the depths of the woods, seeking whatever quiet power has transfixed me. Then, suddenly, the fog and mist that had been following us upward since we started our hike, lifted and there in the near distance, stood a dozen enormous Fir trees, the grandmothers of a forgotten world. A profound silence permeates the spaces, quiets my heart and my mind, and takes up residence in the very air I breathe.

Stepping into a depression in the earth, surrounded by the looming sentinels, the mountain seems to change entirely. Have I wandered through a portal? The light filters differently. The mist settles slightly askew; its particles drifting in a hardly perceptible breeze. The canopy above is vast and grand, while the foliage below is open and airy. There are no brambles to walk over and around. There are no stumps or debris. There is no thicket blocking our way. There is only the same earth from when this mountain was born; unchanged and untouched. I close my eyes and breathe.

The sweet scent of fall, decaying leaves, damp moss, and a cooling in the air, pervades every sense available to me. Hearing shuffling next to me, my sight returns, and I see John stepping toward one of the massive Douglas Firs. Watching him, in this ancient forest, I feel at once out of place and completely at home, as if we had entered another realm that had been lost to the past, waiting to be rediscovered. We had walked through a portal to a time when giant Cedars and Firs were bountiful and majestic; entire cities of trees with an interconnected network of conversation and understanding. I feel their presence so absolutely, looming over us like great grandfather storytellers, waiting patiently in the mist for their tales to be told.

John looks at me. He looks up at the tree. I ask him why it feels so good to be here. Why do I feel so rested and at peace? Why, regardless of effort, am I never quite

at ease in the same way anywhere else? “Cultural experience versus natural experience,” he says. Perhaps we are instinctively hard wired to feel good in the forest. “You can’t stand next to a tree like this,” he continues, his gaze climbing the massive Douglas, “and not feel some kind of emotion.” He goes quiet for a moment, his head tilted, before explaining that in experiencing this place, we have an opportunity to remember there are other ways of being. We can see that trees are not like us, but maybe we can learn to be more like them. Maybe we can learn to be a community, to work together, to help each other grow and develop in a powerfully sustainable and aesthetically beautiful way, taking lessons from the remnants of the past.

Despite the spitting rain, foggy ground, and my damp feet, on this October Sunday, the overwhelming beauty of the forest is astounding. The grove of remaining giants left behind because they were too small to log, or loggers already had what they wanted, or the Great Depression hit in the 1930s and these trees were no longer worth the trouble, stands still and quiet. They are a remnant to that ephemeral time, slipping farther into shrouded memory. They hold the remaining secrets and stories, the joys and the hurts. If I stand still long enough, letting their voices hum around me, perhaps I can hear them whisper. As archetypes of an ancient world, the grandmothers tell of their lost brother and sisters, and Opa, the largest and oldest Fir of the bunch and measuring fifty feet around, overlooks the entire forest calmly, with a great knowing, like any great grandfather would.

On the descent of our expedition, and all the way home, John and I talk a little bit less. Instead, I consider the weight and example Sumas Mountain must set for other areas in British Columbia, Canada, and the world. I consider the voices of the trees, the spirit of the mountain, the pains of colonisation and the impact of my presence that day, or any other day, had on the forest. Above all, I question, “What right had [I] – settler, intruder, displacer, to these highest joys” (Collis 53)?

There are moments in history, where decisions are made. They decide the fate of a place. Like a wave crashing into the shore, dismantling a sandcastle, or flooding a snail’s shell, or erasing footprints or paw prints or bird prints, we can let water wash over an area and change it with little evidence of what came before. This is the reality of Sumas Mountain today. The story of its history is being severed from what it was, from who was here, and from what it could be. The mountain itself is not gone; it has not died,

yet parts of it have even torn out by logging, subdivisions, mining, and a general pillaging, simply for what it can provide for profit. It is alive, but the light within is fading. It is a fragile ecosystem, in the way it breathes and moves, and is in danger of decapitation, never to be resuscitated. Even if all of humanity disappears, and Sumas recovers its wildness, it will never be quite the same. It will never replace what was taken. Its geography is altered, forever. Change is inevitable, I suppose, but what that change will mean, what it will become, is in part up to us every single one of us. We must start somewhere in our effort to understand, and in our action for a more balanced and interconnected future. Perhaps, "The Settler's contribution to decolonization might be said to begin with recognition of and respect for the complexity and autonomy of these lifeways. Their priority. Their *inheritance* in this place settler-colonists have, at best, stumbled into" (Collis 53).

Each morning, as fall slowly descends into winter, and the deciduous trees lose their leaves, exposing the grey branches beneath, I try to capture the peace and beauty of this mountain. I try to recall a remnant of what was and am often shaken into reality by the sound of growth that never seems to end. From the house on my family's property, I hear the rock quarry digging into the lungs of the mountain. The memory of that profound silence in the grove of old growth trees becomes dim as the sound of modern expansion explodes into my consciousness. Louder. Louder. Louder. They blast. The house shakes; bottles and glasses *ting ting ting*. Silence for a moment. Then their machines continue to grind and crunch and move about on the broken face of this place. It can almost be confused with the crashing of waves, but we are far from the ocean. The beeping of trucks, growling of machines, and blasting of rock, make it clear that there is nothing about these sounds that are as peaceful as the ocean shore.

In walking on the trail in those final days of fall, as October slips into November, I come to the edge of the forest. Beyond it I can see the rock quarry. There is a great empty space leading up to the expansive grey whose ashen shade filters into the muted sky above, which bends above me and folds into the empty arms of newly naked tree branches. The more this mountain is dug up and carted away, the larger the chasms become between what was and what could be, and the cold greyness of progress grows ever more expansive as the memory of what was and what could be slips further into the shadows of a dream.

Chapter 4.

Winter

The wonderful purity of nature in this season is a most pleasing fact. Every decayed stump and moss-grown stone and rail, and the dead leaves of autumn, are concealed by a clean napkin of snow. In the bare fields of thinking woods, see what virtue survives.

A Winter Walk

Henry David Thoreau (1843)

On the southwest coast of Canada, winter is often cold, rainy, and grey. On Sumas Mountain, if we are lucky enough to get snow in December, or January, or February, and the gravel mines are not running, and the four wheeled quads aren't screaming through the woods, there is a quiet stillness that falls over it all, bringing peace to otherwise obtusely noisy days.

One New Year's Eve, a great silence fell over the fields and the trees and the burrowing hideaways of wintering critters. Snow had been falling gently and silently for hours and as the day wore on and turned to dusk, then night, with the fading light and the rising moon, a graceful white blanket covered the earth, leaving in its wake, distilled silence.

As I stood in the white grass behind my house, that night as the year turned, looking out into the trees, the dim glow of lights in houses, seen only in the periphery of my vision, went out. Like a light switch, the entire mountain lost power and the dull thrum of electricity permeating the soft energy of the air was still. Relief washed over me as the constant pressure of electric power lifted. It is amazing how the nearly unnoticeable buzz

of electricity is extraordinarily distinguishable in its absence. The silence from the snow, from the dawning night, and from the power outage was profound. I stood, hushed, watching snowflakes, among the millions, flutter around me. The purity of a natural winter quiet does wonders to unburden human minds and hearts.

After a breathless eternity, where the clock neither moved forward nor backward and time seemed to remain suspended in the moment, the snowfall ceased, and the lights went out. I turned to walk back to the house and stoke the wood burning stove that would keep me warm on a likely powerless night and cast a bright glow on the quiet that would lull me to sleep.

As I walked, a shadow emerged in the distance. A neighbour had stepped outside for a moonlight walk down the silent street. A raised hand of acknowledgement came my way as they recognized my shape in the moonlit snow, in the same way I recognized theirs. Then, like the fluttering of snowflakes in a light wind, other neighbours emerged from their warm and cozy firelit homes. They came down their driveways or across lawns, weaving past dormant fruit trees and frost covered flower beds, emerging onto the street.

Snow-booted or snow-shoed, one on a pair of cross-country skis, we met under the glow of the moon and remained silent for a time. Together, we breathed in the quiet coolness of the night until, in speechless agreement, we walked to the end of the road, taking in the white covered trees, and trackless blankets of snow. In the company of those who appreciate these moments, as I do, my mind was allowed to drift.

The crunch of the frozen water beneath our feet and snowshoes, the glide of the skis, were the only sounds we heard. What would it have been like, I wondered, to be here in the winter some decades ago, when electricity had not reached the mountains for the settlers, and even farther back to before the arrival of colonists with their destructive tendencies and desire to fall in step with the “colonial era...striking out into the beyondery– to shrink and enclose it– to bring it into ‘the market” (Collis 142). Would those Indigenous to these lands have noticed the stillness of winter? What will it be like in years to come when light pollution irreparably sullies the moon and starlit sky? Will this silence I felt on that New Year’s Eve disappear completely or will the “willful blindness” (Collis 143) remain steady, further alienating human from nature?

It is of course inevitable that the white cool snow will turn brown and dull, and the lustrous sheen of a crisp winter will become saturated with notorious West Coast rain. The mine will run, grinding, crunching, beeping, and blasting, spewing grey dust into the atmosphere. On those days, the magic of winter fades and the reality of the mountain as a resource and space to expand into, settles farther in. The sound from the mines and roads and houses seeps into the bare winter forest, reverberating off stark trees. With no lush green summer to dull the sound of progress, I am reminded on my walks through the woods that change is here. It has arrived in a ruthless way, endangering the spirit of this place, where little or no remnant of what was, will be left behind.

Where science, nature, politics, and humanity are concerned, each disciplined area has their own narrative. Multiple points of view surrounding the state of the planet, and the human action involved in healing or destroying it, often exist within each of those narratives. They continue to evolve with the needs and focus of the time. For example, scientists have been discussing and studying climate change for many decades. In 1962, the American biologist, Rachel Carson, published her book *Silent Spring*, catapulting the environmental discussion into the social sphere. There were those who criticized her work, setting a personal vendetta against Carson with a narrative suggesting she was *hysterical*. Despite this, she sparked a discussion. Carson created a platform for environmentalism, changing the way society saw and understood the state of the planet.

Whatever is at the societal forefront of the day, by way of development over time or with radical social shift, narratives can be either reinforced or criticized by entrenched and publicly accepted biases. Today, the overwhelming desire by a powerful portion of humanity to expand farther into the *beyondery* and “bring it to market” (Collis), dominates many perspectives. This heavy-handed sway makes it difficult for narratives not interested in marketing the environment, but protecting it instead, to take hold. For example, in 2021 the forest ecologist Suzanne Simard, published *Finding the Mother Tree* in which she documents how forests communicate and rely on far-reaching and complex root systems. When forests are levelled in large swaths, those root systems and modes of communication, necessary to mitigate disease, develop new growth, and balance weather systems, are destroyed. What we are left with are gaps in ecosystems. It is these gaps that contribute to climate change, impacting every living thing on the planet, including us. Despite Simard’s lifetime of research backing up the need for

societies to shift the narrative around climate change, and how further extraction from and development into nature impact everything, there is still social and political resistance.

Just as Rachel Carson ignited the environmental movement, Simard has continued the conversation by helping us to see just how interconnected ecologies are and why there are imperative for a healthy planet. Still, public policy, mainstream media, social dialogue and ideologies, and even the way communities are designed and built, appear to not follow the science. Instead, narratives that support the long lucrative monetization that comes from the extraction of natural spaces, continues. These contrasting perspectives, one that connects with and understands environments and one that takes from it, are even more troubling when we realize a lack of willingness to collaborate.

Any discussions held between the two binaries, and even sometimes within the same camp, are often muddled by a cacophony of voices touting multiple solutions. The result is a complex discussion filled with so many perspectives that it is difficult to be clear about what exactly we are experiencing and what to do about it. We are unable to tell, definitively, the best way forward. As a result, we may accept the world as it is, ignore our role in contributing to its current state, and focus our attention elsewhere, on something we can control and understand. This is a terrible mistake.

Sumas Mountain, Kw'ekw'e'i:qw, east of the Greater Vancouver area and south of the Fraser River, sticking up into the sky and looking over the heart of the Fraser Valley, is one such example where narratives tell of the growth and progress, as necessary. We are told that development is unavoidable to accommodate the increasing population gravitating toward this place. Unfortunately, that development is too often at the expense of natural spheres, animal habitats, plant species, and delicate biodiversity unique to the area— all required for a healthy ecosystem upon which we all depend on. And yet, many continue to do nothing, participating in the farce that natural spaces are a necessary sacrifice for our own growth, and ignoring that there are other ways forward.

While technically following guidelines and protocols, rather than logical considerations in how landscape, forests, migration patterns, waterways, non-human interdependent communities of plants and animals who have called this place home for

centuries, builders, city planners, and policy makers still have a habit of clear cutting, diverting, and making creatures homeless, ending entire ecological ways of being, in order to develop gluttonous structures aiming to satisfy a growth of wealth and abundance deemed as *deserving* by the incoming population. The trouble lies, not in development itself but in the way developments occur.

How one perceives the value of an area, what narratives go along with those perceptions, and how a space is consequently cultivated, must be called into question as we move forward in expanding our heavy human footprint. We, you and I, can start that process of questioning. Rather than attempting to work with nature or let some areas alone and develop others that have already been touched by mans' tainted hand, there is a story surrounding a person's sense of *deserving* permeating the minds of consumers. This tired narrative, dating beyond the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s, continues to hold with today's policy makers, developers, and short-sighted companies, where a reinforced culture of accumulation, expansion, want versus need, and toxic growth and independence is perpetuated by public blindness to the damage these narratives incur. Negative growth patterns are encouraged at every turn, in an eagerness to win a high price, at the expense of the natural environment's own right to its own bio-diverse life.

Born on Sumas Mountain in Abbotsford B.C, a location expected to absorb seventy percent of a growing Fraser Valley population over the next thirty years, I have been privy to increased development of the area over many years and decades. At first, it crept slowly up from the valley, beginning even with my own family's purchase of land in the early 1980s.

The trickle of Sumas Mountain development, of course, began with stolen land and the first settlers in the area in the 19th century. In the past several years, though, an explosion of growth has compounded; a never-ending ribbon of development. This haven, once quiet and so far out of the way that, as a child, friends' parents would refuse to drive out to our house on account of the remoteness, had turned into a busy and highly desirable destination.

Neighbourhoods and subdivisions, with gates and without, pop up at various points along and off Sumas Mountain Road. The growth seems insatiable. It appears

that with every turn, a corner of forest has been pushed over and torn out, habitats are replaced by large modern homes with fresh farmed grass rolled out onto the small front yard of the city sized lot, contrasting starkly against a backdrop of vast mountainous beauty.

Mine is a complex relationship with Sumas Mountain. I try to protect the space I knew as a child, paired with the regrettably colonial reality of how I came to be here in the first place; how our family home was a dream come true as a paradise in the trees. We are part of a story that tells of commandeering space, privatising and altering to suit our own needs and narratives. How then, do I go about the telling of these stories from my point of view? Stephen Collis, in *Almost Islands*, questions what standards writers must be held to when writing about places like Sumas Mountain, or the West Coast, or Canada, or any colonised place for that matter. He acknowledges, as I do, that “[We are] living in times when the actual tangle of history is sacrificed in the name of a simplified right/wrong ethics we contort ourselves to patrol” (Collis 148). Collis states that perhaps we do not have a sufficient body of language to use in working our way through how one writes about a land that has become so entwined with Indigeneity, colonization, and immigration. And yet, he explains, “we must nevertheless struggle to find such a language.”

No single group of humans truly *owns* land. We are visitors. Here for a time before moving on. We can contribute to this place and impact it, leaving it better or worse than when we found it, but we always leave it in the end, passing that stewardship on to others. Ownership is a colonizing idea and one that does not capture the reality of how life exists on earth. Even the acknowledgement of stolen land suggests a sense of ownership. People are constantly moving over the land from one place to another, as a result of war, food scarcity, climate change, or overcrowding. We settle in one place and then move on to somewhere else. This had been the pattern of all life, until the concept of ownership took the world. What then do we do about this? Do we relinquish our perceived “rights” to places? I don’t have an answer. I’m not sure I even have, as Collis expressed in his own struggle with place, the vocabulary or the right to decide what to do about place and ownership. What counts, perhaps, is the stewardship one employs in the places they find themselves in. We can choose to cultivate narratives that either support connections with where we are, embodying every aspect of Place with respect,

gratitude, and balance, or that help us to extract from it and move on when there is nothing left to take.

I suppose all relationships are complicated when narratives that help to create them are examined closely; when pasts are acknowledged for their darkness and faults, and when the stories we grow comfortable with prove to be broken with missing pieces. Perhaps narratives are created and bought into and encouraged to help manage what we do not understand, or what feels uncomfortable. Perhaps they ease a sense of guilt; of intuitive knowing of what humanity is destructively capable of. A reality that some would like to put on the shelf and ignore. And so, we develop culturally sustained and socially enforced dialogues that allow for the continuance of what has been, to get us here to this point, and to keep us moving in the same direction.

As Rosi Braidotti, the contemporary philosopher and feminist theorist, would say, land does not belong to people, not really. We belong to it. We are *renting*, for lack of a better description, this land and this earth. Land goes back beyond all humans. The thing about a place is that time is always changing it, and the narratives shift ever so slightly. With each new generation, the way a place is known and remembered alters and we continue to start from an already shifted understanding of where we are and what this space is and should be. I wonder, from time to time, if Sumas Mountain remembers what it used to be. I wonder if she carries the hurts of outside forces and hopes for abundance for the future. I wonder if the narratives will ever shift in favour of the natural state of Sumas Mountain over the invasive expansive footprint of humanity.

If Sumas Mountain could speak, what would she say? Perhaps she would talk of her past, of the glory of who she has been, who she has housed, and how she has changed through time. She might likely reveal scars of natural disasters, heat waves, plagues, catastrophic lightning bolts that ignited fires which raged from one side of the mountain to the other, or great floods separating communities of trees, wildlife, and local people. Perhaps though, she would also speak of regeneration, of connection, of networks of forests with highly intelligent root systems; of animals and water sources, of the wind and all living entities who work together, from bacteria in the soil to owls in the trees, to develop the biodynamic place we call Sumas Mountain today. Would the mountain, though, wonder why nobody listens when she speaks out in protest of large swaths of logging, rendering her bare, and mining which digs deeper and deeper into her

core. Would she cry out at the erection of more and larger tanks to house oil? Or at the buzzing business of old roads teeming with vehicles, and the construction of new roads, required to satisfy the influx of people needing to reach their subdivisions with large gates, designed to keep the wild out of carefully cultivated yards?

Maybe the Mountain has been beaten down so long that she can only whisper; a small voice set against a backdrop of noise, distraction, and political gaslighting. How can a person learn to listen to a mountain, to see her in all her glory, and to respect her for precisely who she is, and not what she can be used for, if the voice of that mountain is silenced and overlooked? How can a narrative change if there is no access point to recognize even the possibility that there is another way of being? Perhaps the way we see gets in the way. The solution then, is to learn to see all over again.

The next chance you get to walk in the forest, to smell the trees, and feel the air shift as you wander about, take a moment and close your eyes. Block out the visual of what you think you see—illuminate other ways of seeing. Isolate yourself from the distraction that sight so often blocks us from truth. Distance yourself from expectation and what you believe you are supposed to be experiencing; what you've been conditioned to notice, see, and sense. Breathe deeply and exhale the reinforced conceptualization of the space you are in.

With so many visually stimulating elements in our everyday lives, valuable in their own ways, we are often deaf to other senses, other ways of being in the world, and other narratives that exist. We are cut off from the stories of spaces we are undeniably connected to, though unable to hear. Because of this, we often miss what we should be both in awe and in fear of in these wild places.

Closing your eyes in a natural space, enveloped by stillness, what do you feel? Are these your own experiences of the woods running through your mind? Or are they narratives carefully cultivated by socially and culturally reinforced ideologies and perspectives?

If Sumas Mountain, or any other mountain, grassland, lake, or ocean, spoke to you or tapped you on the shoulder, nudged you, led you by the hand, or tried to express an alternative narrative than what you have been conditioned to know, would you notice? Would you listen? Would the narratives of want versus need or necessity of

growth and progress, or the sacrifice of natural spaces to support expanding populations, all agreed upon because *it is just the way it is*, perpetuate a complacency in you to see a road put through a national park, or level a section of trees because it is more profitable than to build around them or somewhere else entirely, or to practice selective cutting rather than clear cutting? Would the distraction of your life keep hidden from you an alternative narrative surrounding ways of being and ways of doing, that includes the voice of the forest, the water, the mountain, and wildlife?

There is always another way, another narrative, another perspective. If one is willing to learn to see beyond seeing, to listen, sense, and feel more than what they think they know, expectations can transcend the narratives of what a place is, could be, and should be. We, the ever-adaptable species, can shift to support a fuller connection that mutually benefits the earth, humanity, and the creatures we share the planet with. Right now, right here, ancient moss species, bugs and spores, water and plants, mountains and trees, are looking to you to listen, to see, and to do what we are so aptly able to do; change the narrative.

Thought and thoughtlessness equally lead to action in some form or another. The kind of action spurred by a collective thoughtlessness over how humanity interacts with a natural environment, how we consume and how we live, what we respect and honour by default rather than by deep thought is unalterably changing our planet. The narrative of a natural space is only as good as how the story is told, and what action comes out of that new narrative.

One day, perhaps, we will tell stories of how the world came together and learned to see. Or, if we remain on the path we proceed to promenade down, the story will be one of how the planet became one of vast emptiness. Gaps and spaces will be created where so much is simply gone, missing, eradicated completely, and forgotten. This void will exist in the phantom owl hoots and quiet streams no longer there to greet us. It will exist in the hot suffocating heat domes and uncontrollable wildfires. The co-existence of the planet, of this place, of Sumas Mountain, will no longer exist collectively. The animals and birds and bugs will suffer then cease their calls altogether. The plants will wither and die. We will wonder where the beauty of this place went. The narratives we will tell ourselves will unlikely do justice to what was here, what was done, and what

could have been, had we altered the story a little earlier to change the outcome in the end.

There is hope, still. Hope exists in learning to see, not just to look but fully and completely see nature and how she connects and transforms. There is hope in the changing of each season, with a fresh outlook on what has passed and what has yet to come. There is hope in a fresh coat of snow, covering the fallen leaves of autumn; in the spring melt and first peep of a pink bleeding heart; in the arrival of swallows and songbirds as they call to for their partners in hopes of continuing their family line; in the first leaf that turns from green to orange and falls, starting the great decay that will give life new life in months that follow. We may yet learn to go beyond what we know, changing the narrative, changing the names, and changing what we look for. As a result, we may change the outcome of the path we began centuries ago. Where does one begin to look though when they are ready to start seeing? We can turn our eyes to each fresh season and to the remnants of what was and the hope for what could be in the days to come.

Epilogue

The Mountain sat upon the plain
In his eternal chair,
His observation omnifold,
His inquest everywhere.

The seasons prayed around his knees,
Like children round a sire:
Grandfather of the days is he,
Of Dawn, the ancestor.

Nature, Poem 21: *The Mountain*

Emily Dickinson (1896)

In the West, where rugged shores meet rugged land and mountains groan under the weight of snowy caps, where wildness overtakes the people there are remnants being erased in the pursuit of what one believes they deserve. While some stories and places, deemed economically valuable are still preserved and protected on mountains like Sumas, others are rewritten and revised, taken apart and built back up again. Each time, what was created or remembered is stripped bare, all its pieces chipped away until eventually there is nothing left but cold newness. New people, new structures, newly divided land, new policies, and a weakened heart at the core.

Each year and at every season, I walk up the Centennial Trail to Chadsey lake. More often, though, I find myself on the well-worn trails behind my family's house. While

some areas stay the same, so much has changed. The land is overgrown with invasive blackberry bushes, drowning out the native breeds. The sounds of the forest are too often crowded by a parade of gravel trucks, blasting, beeping, and grinding. There is even a geocache box hidden in the hollow of a tree by the creek; placed there by a modern treasure hunter and posted on the Web with coordinates for fellow geocachers to seek out. With the return of spring, after the snow melts to reveal the earth beneath, and the first green and pink buds pepper the paths once more, I wonder who else walked here in the decades before.

On a new section of the trail, looping behind a neighbour's house, I pass a split rail cedar fence post, almost completely reclaimed by young cedar. I recall the Semá:th people and the settlers. I recall the families and communities whose lives are captured in old photographs in black and white clothing against a forested backdrop. I recall those whose ancestors are embedded in the very earth I walk upon.

"What you find, depends on what you look for," my father once told me. If I look hard enough, I can see the remnants of the lives that passed through this place. They walk here and hunt here. They hide and explore here. They build and they live here. They die here. I see what they thought in their time, what they may have known or imagined or dreamed. I see that some were part of the process that started us down the road toward the development we are facing today. Maybe it was always meant to be this way. Maybe, growth and change are inevitable. Maybe, though, at some point, we get to decide what this place will become based on what we start to see, based on the names we use, and based on the values we implore.

Coming up a hill, my feet stepping heel-toe on the dirt path, I smell the accretion of the seasons. The trees in spring are at once bare and blooming, their sweetness permeates the airwaves. The ground is strewn with the remnants of fall leaves trapped beneath winter snows, now giving way to new life. For a moment, I am stationary and feel the earth beat beneath my feet. I close my eyes and hope to listen to the whispers of this place once more.

Silence. Then, the chitter chatter of birds and chipmunks. The scurrying of something in the underbrush. A breeze teases the ends of my hair. A thunderous *boom*. The crunch and grind of machines and gravel trucks mining for rock wails through the

still stark forest. I can hear the *beep, beep, beep* of a reversing truck in the distance to the right and the *pop, pop, pop*, of a nail gun building a house off to the left. The rising motor of a car accelerating up Sumas Mountain Road, and a motorbike, or a quad, breaks sharply into the remaining quiet moments. Lawn mowers cry in the not so remote area beyond where I stand and music from some house over a hill accentuates the rest. The ambient noise is everywhere, carried along by the slowness of the wind and the light rays of the spring sun, or by the sheer power of the sounds themselves. I wonder when growth will overpower everything natural here, for good. I wonder when I will no longer be able to hear the chatter of chipmunks and squirrels, and when the wind in the trees will stop whispering to me, and the owl simply leaves.

That day will come, I am sure. I'll be gone, but life will move on and it is my hope that we, and the many faces of who "we" represents— "some are a privileged... persecuting colonial 'we', while others are resistant, persistent, exploited and oppressed 'we' – and sometimes [shifting] between one 'we' and another as our perspectives and positions shift" (Collis 158), will be able to hold onto a remnant, and to look for something worth seeing and worth saving. I hope we will recall the power of what came before and what caused us to be where we are now. When the trees stop whispering, I hope they still stand tall and proud, waiting for a time when their voices can be heard again; as remnants to the greatness of this place and the keepers of memory to those misplaced ways of being, intertwined with the threads of the past, present and future— an imperfect entanglement of mutual responsibility and acknowledgement that we are all here and we must actively work toward a more sustainable ecological future that both sustains environment and culture . To do this, we must step forward together, "cautiously with respect and humility. Ask. Listen. Be quiet and stand back, when that is called for" (Collis 163).

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