

Home:
Will a house make it all okay?
– and –
The Power of Idealized Images

by

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ABSTRACT

“Will a house make it all okay?” is a personal reflection essay of how I construct a definition of home. Through sensory memories of home, I reconstruct my childhood definition of home and then look at how my childhood is reflected in my adult understanding of home.

Keywords: Home; House and Home; Place; Sensory Connections; Childhood Memories; Autobiography

“The Power of Idealized Images” uses Margaret Atwood’s novel, *Cat’s Eye* to address the power that idealized images have in shaping our understanding of home. By tracing the protagonist’s, Elaine Risley, understanding of two distinctly different childhood home environments, I show how her childhood understanding of home is reflected in her artwork as an adult.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; *Cat’s Eye*; Home; Natural Environment; Family Relationships

DEDICATION

To my boys, Benjamin and Jacob, who remind me on a daily basis that home is whenever I am with them.

To my brother, James Chutter, who paid for my first semester of GLS because he believes in me.

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1:
WILL A HOUSE MAKE IT ALL OKAY?

Personal reflections on the ideas of house and home

After the birth of my first son in 2003, family and friends kept asking me, “so when are you going to buy a house?” “When are you going to buy a house?” “When are you going to buy a house?” This persistent question left me with the feeling that raising him in an apartment was somehow depriving him of a wholesome and healthy childhood. It preyed upon my fears of not being able to recreate my childhood home. It fueled my anxiety that I didn’t know any parents who had successfully raised their children in an apartment. This myth of the house with a backyard as being a prerequisite for raising children is largely a North American idea--most of urban continental Europe lives in apartments.¹ Growing up, I fully bought the myth. The persistent question of when I was going to move into a house indicated that the myth of house becoming a necessary requisite for raising children left me feeling conflicted. I grew up in the suburbs and I did not want to move back there and yet I assumed that I would automatically be able to buy my dream house before I was thirty. When I turned thirty-five, I panicked. I have two children. We are living in a two bedroom apartment. Where is my backyard? My extra bathroom? My extra space in which to put stuff I no longer want or need?

The wishes and fantasies of owning a house lingered in the back of my mind as I did the laundry, washed the dishes and tidied the toys, but it wasn’t until the spring of 2010 that I started to ponder the ideas connected to the phrases of “going home”, “being home”, “finding home”, and also “tastes like home”, “smells like home”, “looks homey”. What do these phrases actually mean? How I define

¹ Alison Blunt and Robyn M. Dowling, *Home* (London: Routledge, 2006), 109.

“being home” is not necessarily referring to the place where I am currently living, nor is it the same as someone else’s definition, yet we each know what the other means in using that phrase. What I wanted when I started my research on home was a nice tidy answer, a blueprint, a guide. I wanted to be able to follow a method or a system. What I uncovered was a muddle.

So in the spring of 2010, I began by exploring my own childhood memories because at that point in my life the idea of home seemed clearer. I was beginning to recognize that much of my stress and desire to own a house belonged to a fantasy world I was having difficulty letting go of. I hoped that by looking backward, I would discover what Gaston Bachelard discusses in *The Poetics of Space*, the past that I have unconsciously brought into my current home.²

Bachelard looks at home from a phenomenological perspective and discusses the importance of memories and dreams intermingling to form an understanding of home. In his opinion, “memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams” and as a result “these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time.”³ Owning a house, in my mind, was having a home, but an apartment, in my mind, was not a home. An apartment was merely a dwelling. Yet, Bachelard argues, “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.”⁴

Even though I have lived in my apartment for close to ten years, it had always felt like a temporary stop. However, Bachelard’s discussion focuses on houses

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 5.

³ Ibid., 6.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

specifically, and while his ideas of memories and daydreams interested me, his discussion of houses did not help to answer the questions I was asking.

As I was doing my research, I was struck by the realization of how my own understanding of home has shifted since my childhood. In *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Witold Rybczynski traces the history of the idea of home. According to Rybczynski, the modern day view of home began in the Netherlands one hundred years earlier than elsewhere in Europe. He states that the early Dutch view of,

‘home’ brought together the meanings of house and of household, of dwelling and of refuge, of ownership and of affection. ‘Home’ meant the house, but also everything that was in it and around it, as well as the people, and the sense of satisfaction and contentment that all these conveyed.⁵

Rybczynski’s definition of home captures both ideas of home as a ‘place’ as well as a ‘state of being’ by including the emotional and relational attachments we have to home. In my early childhood, we would go to the Chutter family home, as Rybczynski defines home, owned by my great-grandfather and his second wife. Their house was large enough to hold the entire extended family for Christmas parties and his mid-summer birthday parties. Great-grandfather was the patriarch who delighted in having everyone in his family around him. With his death, no one else in the family was able to carry on the tradition because they lacked the physical space to entertain the entire family. His furnishings were parceled out to family members and his mansion on South West Marine drive was sold. With my great-grandfather’s passing, there also went the sense of extended family and

⁵ Witold Rybczynski. *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking, 1986), 62.

the family myths and lore that keep people connected because I rarely see them all together. My own grandparents moved several times in my lifetime, and while the furniture, paintings and curtains have remained constant, I do not have the sense that I am coming home to something that has been stable my entire life. When my mother's parents died, I did not miss visiting their house or even long for pieces of their furniture because their domestic objects were not attached to any specific memories of comfort or security. My own parents divorced when I was an adult and have remarried and I do not talk of "going home" when I go to visit either of them. My children will never see my childhood bedroom or the growth chart penciled on the kitchen doorframe. I wonder if the idea of the family home really does matter. Yet these ideas of going home and being with extended family for important family celebrations in the family home of grandparents has played a significant role in the lives of my parents, both of them talk fondly of their own childhood Christmas and Easter dinners with aunts, uncles and cousins gathered together. With the death of my grandparents, the gathering of extended family members has dwindled in my lifetime, and I suspect it will be non-apparent in the lives of my children. Even though the idea of the stable family home has shifted in my lifetime, North American advertising especially in Christmas and summer magazine issues and in many movies still draws on the images of extended family gathered together. I wonder if my own children will have the same sense of place, of belonging, of roots and of family lineage without a specific house in which to anchor it.

Clare Cooper Marcus, an American environmental psychologist, who explores the social and emotional ties people have to their home, in *House as a Mirror of Self* writes, “we hold on to childhood memories of certain places as a kind of psychic anchor, reminding us of where we came from, of what we once were or of how the physical environment perhaps nurtured us when family dynamics were strained or the context of our lives fraught with uncertainty.”⁶ Marcus looks at the importance of home in our development and growth. She acknowledges the Jungian approach has been widely written about in reference to relationships and life events guiding people to a sense of wholeness, but she argues, “places themselves have a powerful effect on the journey toward wholeness.”⁷ In her interview process, she combines Jungian theory with a Gestalt approach in order to help her interviewees explore and discuss their attachments to their dwellings both past and present. Through a series of interviews, Marcus explores the emotional ties that people have with their home and their belongings. I was particularly drawn to Marcus’ discussion of the importance of childhood home environments shaping our adult understandings of home.

According to Marcus, regardless of culture, social context or gender, children play at creating their own version of a home. Whether it is a fort in the back garden or one in an abandoned lot, a house made out of couch cushions or a large refrigerator box, children claim a territory separate from their childhood home as their own in which to practice creating their own sense of home. By

⁶ Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*. (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1995), 20.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

molding their physical environment children are learning about their sense of self. As Marcus observes, “they all seem to serve similar psychological and social purposes--places in which separation from adults was sought, in which fantasies could be acted out, and in which the very environment itself could be molded and shaped to one’s own needs.”⁸ From these hiding places separate from the adult world children develop their own emerging sense of self because they are allowed to practice creating a home. They gain a sense of possession over these places and give them names, rules and boundaries. According to Marcus, this form of play is essential in creating and defining a sense of home in adult life because children have already practiced creating a safe and secure environment that they find pleasing.

Using Marcus as a guide, I explored my own childhood and adolescent understandings of home. When I was three, I made a “Charming House”. It was in the basement and it was made from a decorated refrigerator box that my dad had cut windows in. Anyone who came over was invited to come and sit in my “Charming House” while I explained my various decorations. It is my earliest memory of creating a space separating me from my parents. I spent most of my childhood playing at home with my brother, and many hours were spent building forts out of couch cushions or out of boards in the a backyard. Even as a teenager, with dreams of becoming an architect, I was more comfortable at home than going out to movies or parties. I read home magazines and *Architectural Digests* from the library scanning the photos obsessively looking for clues as to

⁸ Ibid., 27.

what could create perfection in a home. Stacks of blueprint books stood by my bed with perfect rooms circled. I would sit at my drafting table and draw and draw and draw--I was going to design the perfect house. For the majority of my life I have practiced building different versions of home, designed different homes and read about house design, but my playing with ideas as a child had not created the sense of safety and security I was longing for as an adult.

Home by Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling critically examines the ideas of home primarily from a geographical perspective, but also incorporates work from post-colonial, feminist and cultural studies scholars. They state while houses or specific dwellings have a clear place in our memories, there exists a distinction between house and home. House is the physical dwelling and home is a more nebulous emotional attachment that is important to our sense of identity and self. Home is a fluid and porous concept that is connected to our social relations, our lived experiences and our emotions and is “a contested site shaped by different axes of power and over a range of scales.”⁹ My apartment could be my home, even though it is not a house. Yet Blunt and Dowling also acknowledge, “within the frames of contemporary western domesticity, an ideal home is considered to be a suburban one.”¹⁰ So I began to shift my understanding of home as something separate from a house.

⁹ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

What I started to uncover in my research was the idea that “home” is fraught with tensions--it is a place of refuge, but also a source of confinement, a place to escape from and a place to run back to. It is the intersection of many concepts: memory, identity, belonging, location, and time.¹¹ Our character today is a product of the experiences of our childhood, and much of our childhood is spent at home. Yet it is not just the geographical location, the placement of rooms, but the essence of something that is not clearly defined that determines who we are.

According to Bachelard, our sense of home begins in childhood with our first sensory understanding of the world. We come to understand our place in the world from the perspective of the smells, sounds, sights, textures and tastes around us. These sensory experiences become the foundation upon which we continue to build our understanding of home. As we grow into young children, our play takes on our understanding of home. In my reflections of my own life, my understanding of home is not the specific childhood houses I lived in, but more the emotional experiences that have gone on there. Part of the difficulty in defining what exactly home means to me is that my definition is context as well as subject specific. There is a lack of completeness; I merely have glimpses of home. I want something permanent and stable to hold onto, so that I know what to do in order to create a home.

¹¹ Ibid., 1-14.

In an attempt to figure out what was wrong with my understanding of home, I started to think more closely about my own memories of home. I did not have a stable and unchanging home environment growing up, nor did I want that, but I am craving stability amid all the pieces of home. I realized that my most of my dominant memories of my childhood are grounded in sensory experiences.

Marcus encourages her students to write their “own environmental autobiographies” and to reflect on their “own special places of childhood.”¹²

Through my own writing I have tried to explore the idea how my idea of home is grounded in my sensory understanding of the world. I furthered her idea of writing an environmental autobiography with her thoughts on the importance of our senses. Marcus states that “our senses have a way of reconnecting us, without warning, to memories of times and places long ago, and in particular to memories of childhood.”¹³ I feel ill at ease or out of place when my environment assaults my senses in some way. In order to feel truly at home, regardless of my environment, my senses need to be soothed because I often feel overloaded when I walk outside--the traffic is noisy, there are too many indistinguishable smells, colours, and objects race by me. Home is being comfortable in my environment. The following is a collection of vignettes that illustrate my sensory attachments to home.

* * * * *

¹² Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self*, 42.

¹³ Ibid., 19.

*TOUCH: the tips of my dog's ears, rose petals, pussy willows,
finely sanded mahogany, pewter teapots, velvet ribbons, satin
edged blankets, peach skin, new socks, cat tongues, chains on
the swings, marbles, skipping stones*

I am hiding in the front closet of my grandparents' house. I am hoping that my cousin doesn't find me because I am exhausted. She talks too much and all I want to do is hide and read a book for the afternoon. I suggested that we play hide-and-go-seek with my little brother as a distraction, even though at nine she feels she is much too old to be playing such games. I adore my brother and would rather be spending Easter holidays with just him. He always wants to play my games, hear my stories and listen to my ideas. 6...7...8...9...I burrow my eight year old body deeper into the closet. I am hiding behind my grandma's red fox fur coat. I rub the fur slowly back and forth across my cheek. I think fondly of the time, three years ago, when I was squashed next to her in the backseat of my grandpa's two-door 1977 silver Thunderbird. I was overheating and feeling slightly carsick and we were going to the mall. I hated shopping, so I wasn't anticipating that I was going to be feeling much better any time soon. But as I quietly stroked the arm of her coat and pressed my snotty nose deep into the fur inhaling the musky scent intermingled with all-pervading odour of Peter Jackson cigarettes, I felt calmer and a little less carsick. At five years old I had not yet come to the realization that a fox fur coat meant that it was made out of dead foxes. Even after I knew, I still couldn't hate my grandma for wearing such a divine coat. I merely snuck into the closet and looked for hints that they had once been animals. Bits of claw, eyeball sockets or ear tips. I scoured for evidence

slowly and meticulously savouring the soft silkiness of the fur, rubbing it back and forth so that the fur stood against the grain, giving it volume but losing its lustre, and back again to smooth and shiny. It was an expensive coat and all I could find was a hard bit near the cuff, but that could have been a bit of leftover lunch; it was not enough to prove the coat had once belonged to small animals full of instinct and desire. This coat transformed my grandma into someone she was usually not. She seemed taller, calmer and more stately surrounded with the lush red fur undulating into bronze and brown streaks. I wished my mom had the same look, as she did not seem tall, calm or stately in a teal and cream ski jacket. I spent years looking for a coat that would transform me into someone new, different, strong.

I needed to feel strong because we had moved during the summer when I was five and my dog was not allowed to live with us in our new place; he was sent to live with my grandparents. Willy had been my companion, my protector and my best friend since I was ten months old; he was the heart of my family. He fought off big dogs who got too close to me. He never tired of running up and down the hill behind my preschool with me. He knew all my secrets. In our new townhouse at UBC's married student housing, I looked for my dog. We no longer had a backyard; he no longer walked me back and forth to school. Sharing a room with my brother for the first time was not the same as sleeping with Willy. James snored differently and while he would often get out of his own bed and curl up with me, he wasn't as soft or as still.

I had always slept with my dog when we could both get away with it. My dog would curl around me and let me drape my arm over his body my fingers drifting slowly back and forth hypnotizing me to sleep. As I got bigger and my dog got older, our relationship changed. The space and distance of him living with my grandparents didn't allow us to age together. When he visited, he had difficulty leaping onto my bed and I had difficulty spooning him, so that I could feel the warmth and fur touching my whole body. My legs got cold, he didn't like being squeezed, his head came well under my chin and I could no longer burrow my face in his fur without craning my neck. On bad days, days when the world seemed too heavy for me to carry, I would coax him to my bed and with great effort heave his backside up onto my narrow single bed and would rub his fur until my heart stopped beating so wildly. The loss of sleeping with Willy on a nightly basis was so acute, that decade later when my best friend moved away it reopened the deep wound in my little tender heart.

Hiding deep in the closet stroking my grandma's fox fur coat, I had the same sensation of being small and safe with my protector curled up next to me. I wondered how I could sneak the coat downstairs to sleep in it. Would it protect me from bad dreams? From my cousin who talked too much? From the weight of knowing I should be enjoying time with my family at Easter when I was not?

TASTE: cheddar cheese, crunchy granny smith apples, soft warm bread, cottage cheese, grape juice, buttered popcorn, apple pie, chocolate ice cream, toffee, warm chocolate chip cookies, cold milk, blackberries, mangos

I walked proudly into James Gilmore Elementary School. I was going to eat lunch at school today with the rest of my grade six class. For the first time in my life, I was going to stay all day at school. All the other kids ate lunch at school. I was convinced allies were made, friendships were strengthened and rules were established over food and play over the noon hour. Coming home from school for lunch was ruining my social life in some indeterminate way. Immediately after entering room 12, I went up to inform my teacher of my momentous news. “Miss Smith, today I am having lunch at school!” “That’s nice dear.” Nice, I thought, is that the best you can come up with? If we use the word nice in our writing it is efficiently crossed out twice with a red pen. I went to the back room to hang up my coat and backpack summoning all the words I would use rather than nice—stupendous, magnificent or superb. Clearly, Miss Smith needed to expand her vocabulary rather than picking on the writing of twelve-year-olds. I sat at my desk mentally expanding my list of nice words to include fabulous and fantastic. I looked on the right hand side of the blackboard and scanned the agenda for the day. I envisioned the sentence “Jennifer’s staying today” next to Lunch from 12:05pm to 12:55pm written in Miss Smith’s pointed and sharp cursive writing.

I had very strict demands on my mother as to what would be a suitable lunch for me after weeks of peeking into lunch bags of my classmates at recesses. One

sandwich—peanut butter on Wonder bread. It had to be white bread and not homemade. No one ate homemade bread. One drink box—preferably frozen the night before, so that it would be cold and slushy by lunch time. One apple—everyone had fruit in their lunch, no one ever seemed to eat the fruit, though, based on the number of mushy apples and spongy oranges rolling around underneath the cubbies in the back room of our classroom. One snack—something in a shiny package or three store bought cookies wrapped in saran wrap. I listed off my lunch needs and was met with eye-rolling, but when my mom came home from Safeway, she unloaded a loaf of white bread, Super Socco drink boxes and a small box of fruit roll-ups. I was confident I would have a best friend by the end of lunch hour.

Finally, the bell rings and the mad scramble begins as twenty-nine eleven-year-olds leap over desks and crowd to grab their lunch bags. I follow them, bewildered, taking cues from everyone around me. I pull my precious brown paper bag triumphantly from my backpack. My lunch falls out the bottom and scatters all over the dirty back room floor. I drop to my hands and knees scrambling for my sandwich, apple, drink box and fruit roll-up. I did not know that the thawing drink box would turn the bag into mush. My apple is bruised and has a brown smudge on it. Determined not to let this bother me, I blink back a few tears and walk confidently back to my desk. I unwrap my sandwich from the wax paper and take a bite. The white bread and peanut butter stick to the roof of my mouth and I struggle to get it down. The bread is disappointingly tasteless. It

does not melt on my tongue. I choke down another bite. There is a weird smell, unwashed hair, wet mud and dried glue, in the classroom; I try not to smell it. I take a sip of my drink box. I gag. What is this drink made of? The unpleasant bitter taste on the back of my tongue spreads down the back of my throat. Why do kids drink this when they could have milk or homemade grape juice mixed with cranberry cocktail? Looking down at my dirty desk--the pen lines, the graphite smudges, the dried bits of glue--I work my tongue from the front to the back of my mouth, trying to scrape the bread and peanut butter off of it, wishing I was at home sitting at a clean table with a placemat. Furtively, I scan the classroom. The other kids seem to be actually enjoying themselves. They are smiling and joking and eating their sandwiches in big bites and chewing with their mouths open. I try not to look; it is bad manners to stare, but I know it is worse manners to chew with your mouth open. Barbara turns around and mumbles something through a mouth full of peanut butter. I smile politely and with great effort get another lump of bread and peanut butter off the roof of my mouth. I sip my drink box--the acid seems to dissolve the bread a little. I watch boys dare each other to drink their entire Super Socco drink box in one go. I am madly trying to figure out how to make a best friend; no one is talking to me. I have never talked to anyone at lunch. I don't know what to say without the structure of efficiently executed lessons and an opportunity to raise my hand to speak. I feel awkward and alone. I abandon my tasteless sandwich in favour of my apple and bite gingerly around the bruise and the brown smudge. The bell rings at 12:20 pm, signaling the end of eating and the beginning of play. I stuff the remaining

two-thirds of my forlorn sandwich into my desk. I still have thirty-five minutes to make a best friend. I grab my fruit roll-up and toss my apple and drink box in the garbage on the way out. I follow behind the cool girls, Tina, Amanda and Carrie. They lean against the school wall. I lean near them and open my fruit roll-up. "Do you think Ryan is cute? I think he is so cute." Amanda and Carrie both nod. I remember when Ryan peed his pants in grade one. I do not comment on whether I think he is cute. I tentatively take a bite of my fruit roll-up. Amanda declares that Craig is really the cutest boy in the whole school. Craig is a legend; girls are always talking about him. He is in grade seven. I know that much about him, but I really have no idea what is cute about him. Tina and Carrie are gushing about his lips and the way he flicks his hair off his shoulders; I nod as I pick sticky red goo out of my back teeth. I watch two boys from my class climb the trees by the school fence. I long to run over to them, but I know they no longer want to play with girls. I have lost track as to which boy is cute now and I don't care. I don't want to play with girls either. They are boring. I don't know how to drift away from Tina, Amanda and Carrie. I am starving. My lunch was terrible and I don't want to be best friends with them. I stand awkwardly half-leaning against the wall dreaming of grilled cheese sandwiches and crisp homemade dill pickles. I imagine eating chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven and gulping cold milk to wash them down. I imagine the quiet, and my mother reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe*, or *Charlotte's Web* to my brother and me as we eat. I want to feel calm, cared for and full. Carrie, Tina and Amanda lean in to each other to whisper and giggle as Craig walks by. I take

my moment and run. I run fast out the school driveway, down the block and into the comfort of my own backyard, feeling the wind whistle past my ears and through my uncombed hair. I race to my swing set and pump madly and chant all of my favourite foods.

SIGHT: tall douglas fir trees, wide open spaces, tiny inviting corners, full bookshelves, new crayons, empty notebooks, picnic baskets, fireworks, helium balloons, stormy oceans, park benches, mountains, fat snowflakes

As we pull into the driveway off S. W. Marine, I know that I am entering a different world. A mystery envelopes us as we pass the large wrought-iron gate and wait for the house to appear. The house has a name: Wessex. Where we live no one's house has a name and knowing someone's address is essential because all the houses look the same. Rectangular BC boxes--an architectural specialty of south Richmond. The driveway curves and my brother and I look for the lawn animals nestled under the shrubs. The deer stands proudly in the circular lawn; the ceramic rabbits poised to scamper away. Slowly the grey and cream Tudor style house comes into view. The sound of traffic is a distant hum as we hop out of our rusty red 1977 Acadian. We are reminded of good manners, politeness and speaking loudly when talking to old people. I wish I had my bike because doing loops around the circular drive with my handlebar streamers flapping in the breeze would be more thrilling than going up and back on our short straight one.

The brass lion knocker is lifted and dropped against the plate, announcing our presence to great-grandfather and his housekeeper, Mary. The four of us crowd awkwardly in the tiny vestibule waiting for the formidable black door to open. I stare at the green Wellington boots that never seem to change appearance or placement and wonder if they are like the lawn ornaments—an item necessary to the aura of the house. The door creaks open and Mary invites us into the high ceilinged entrance. The lighting is dim and oppressive. The furniture is heavy, expensive and foreign. Coats are whisked away into an unseen closet by Mary, and great-grandfather ushers us into the den, which is in between the sunken living room and the expansive dining room with cut glass decanters that sparkle. (It was only much later that I learned great-grandfather filled them with cheap Scotch. He liked to play with people's assumptions about beauty and quality.) Tea and fruitcake are served and Mary discreetly disappears. I long to follow her into the kitchen, to ask her questions about what it is like to live here and to spy into the forbidden rooms. Instead I sit awkwardly on a tiny needlepoint foot stool and try not to fidget.

The rules are very clear. We are not allowed to touch anything. We are not allowed to go upstairs, but we may sit on the landing. We are not allowed to go into the basement. We are not allowed to go into the kitchen because we are not servants. After listening to grown-ups talk about people we don't know for what feels like several hours, my brother and I quietly leave the den and tip toe through the dim living room. The lights are rarely on, but the curtains are open

and windows look out into the garden at both ends of the house. Behind the Chinese screen, we know there is an elevator, forbidden to small children wanting to explore. At Christmases, Santa always arrives down the elevator and pops out from behind the screen both terrifying and delighting all the great-grandchildren. Knick-knacks, stories of how they were acquired unknown, cover the end tables. I gently touch the small bowl of porcelain flowers. When I was very small, my great-grandfather's second wife used to lead us quietly through the living room and let us hold the paperweight with the dandelion puff inside. It was so smooth and beautiful. I wanted to keep it. Later, when I had read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I understood why Winston risked so much for a paperweight. She got Alzheimer's and stopped talking and would sit in a chair in the den with a cup of tea in her hands until it got cold and Mary would take it away. My brother and I easily navigate our way through the furniture. The placement never changes. The seating is clustered into three groups. In our living room we have one couch and a recliner. The dog sits on the recliner and dares my dad to kick her off. The couch is old and the cushions often become life rafts, shields or fortress walls. We frequently jump off the big IKEA coffee table scattering library books and magazines in our wake. The coffee table flotsam and jetsam become stepping stones in order for my brother and me to make it across the green carpet, which we imagine is frequently infested with crocodiles and snakes or oozing with lava or alien slime. Somehow here the lack of dust and clutter slows our pace and we would never dream of sitting in the living room, let alone creating an adventure in which we are the heroes, the defenders of justice.

We wind our way to the landing and climb the six stairs to sit and imagine what the upstairs is like. We know there are bedrooms up there, and a study, and sometimes great-grandfather takes my dad up there to look at some papers he is working on. We wait patiently, hoping to be invited. We know that the elevator ends up there. From our vantage point on the landing we can see the end of one bed. It has Vilas maple legs and a pale blue bedspread. A small corner of a low dresser peeks out from behind the door. The room seems too small for Great-grandfather to sleep in; we assume he must sleep in the room with the elevator. No matter how tall we stretch our little bodies and crane our necks, we cannot see around the corner at the top of the landing. We are normally very daring and I would think nothing of defying my mother in order satisfy my curiosity, but there is a fearful hush to great-grandfather's house as if God himself might be summoned down to slay the sinners--small children with active imaginations and busy bodies. I imagine that upstairs there is a magical wardrobe that could take me away to other worlds to have adventures in, where I am endowed with the immense responsibility of governing a vast kingdom. I will wear long flowing robes with silk trim and a rabbit fur collar. My long golden hair will be encircled with a golden crown gleaming with jewels. My brother imagines he will ride a tiger. We will rule together. Our adventures will go on and on. In our rectangular house, there are no secrets, no mysterious rooms, no magical kingdoms. Every room has a clear purpose. We have searched every square inch hoping to stumble into something magical, but peeling back the carpet by the heat registers

has only revealed hard wood floor and not secret passageways. Our closets all have backs to them even after being tapped three times. We do not have an attic, a basement or even a crawl space.

On the landing in great-grandfather's house, the sunlight streams in the leaded glass windows making diamonds of red and blue and amber all over the stairs. We count them and invent games, but we want to go home and put on our capes and jump from couch to coffee table slaying dragons, fearing sharks lurking evilly and laughing so hard the record player skips.

SOUND: whispered secrets, waves crashing, children laughing, wind chimes, bracelets clinking together, fizzy drinks, bubbles popping, happy sighs, thunder, dog kisses, ice cubes clinking, leaves rustling, fires crackling

A hand on my shoulder wakens me just as a lightening flash fills my attic bedroom. It is dark and late, but I am suddenly wide-awake. The crash of the thunder fills me with excitement. I scramble out of bed dragging my blanket behind me and follow my mom downstairs to the living room. She has already opened the curtains, and we curl up together on the gold velour couch and watch the trees whirl and dance in the storm. The Mountain Ash tree softly scrapes against the window in a counter rhythm to the rain pelting down. Flash. We count together 1...2...3...4...5...BOOM. The thunder peals out and the wind picks up with a vengeance. Flash. We count 1...2...3...BOOM. The storm is getting closer. The Dogwood tree in the front yard loses some of its leaves and they swirl away

down the street--more fly off the weeping willow, the mountain ash, the birch and I lose sight of the leaves from the dogwood. I lean against the window trying to watch whose yard they end up in. I lean back against my mom and listen to her heartbeat, so quiet and comforting against the noise outside. There is something forbidden in this late night storm watching with my mother. We are awake when no one else is. Up and down the block, the lights are off, the neighbourhood playmates asleep and the cars are safely tucked in garages. Flash. We count together 1...BOOM. It is overhead. The windows rattle. Wind screams down the chimney. Dishes clatter in the buffet. The picture on the wall above the fireplace lists to one side. I hold my breath and burrow deep into my mom's dark green housecoat nestling into the softness of her warm flesh. Flash. 1...2...BOOM. The dogwood in the front yard leans over and I fear it will snap. The leaves are torn off the tree and race up the street faster than I could follow. I am filled with excitement and a longing to race outside to feel the rain pelt against my body and to have the wind scoop me up, and carry me down the block. There is a wildness, a disorder, a chaos that I crave. At times I feel like I am the storm without the majesty, just the noise. However, tonight the rain pelting the windows and the wind whistling in the chimney contrast with the calm and quiet I feel sitting tucked in my mom's lap. It is in this moment that I have her all to myself. No crying baby brother needing to be tended to, no dinner needing to be cooked, no laundry needing to be folded. I want the storm to last forever.

As the storm begins to fade, we leave the comfort of the living room and enter the brightness of the kitchen. I sit perched on my chair, bare feet tucked under my pink flannelette nightie. My mom expertly prepares a snack. With the snack in front of me, I hop off the chair and turn off the overhead light, content with the small light above the stove; we watch the storm leave. The sky loses its dark grey rage and softens into purple as the sun begins to rise. The leaves still whirl across the backyard, but they lack the intensity of earlier during the storm. Silently, we drink hot chocolate and eat buttered toast sprinkled with cinnamon and brown sugar. With the first fingers of dawn stretching across the sky, I sleepily pad off to bed.

In the morning, I awake to the sun streaming in through the window. I pull back the curtains and assess the street. Leaves are strewn everywhere. There are newspapers scattered up and down the street, clinging to fences, wrapped around trees. There is an unnatural quiet and stillness even though the neighbours are up, the cars are busy traveling up and down the street and my playmates are busy with balls and bicycles in their front yards. In the distance, I see a few leaves whirling languidly above the storm drain.

SMELL: sunscreen, woodsmoke, cherry blossoms, ripe nectarines, salt water, rocks, iron, leather, beeswax candles, yellow cedar shavings, new books, bubble gum, newborn babies' breath, grapefruit, pencil shavings

Every house has a smell that tells you about the people who live there; however, you cannot identify what your own house smells like. Houses smell like Pine Sol, hockey gear, cinnamon, perfume or aging skin. My childhood house smells like containment. Containment of emotions, ideas and truth. The summer cabin we go to smells of freedom. Freedom to be noisy, dirty and silly. We arrive on the May long weekend to open it up after a winter of mice having the free reign to nibble the bar of soap left by the sink and spiders given space to grow big in the sink, their long legs stretching over the drain. The first inklings of freedom greet us as my brother and I hop anxiously from side to side at the Horseshoe Bay terminal. The salt air fills our nostrils as we watch the ferry loom into view. Its doors creak open like the jaws of some huge beast ready to swallow us up. We are willing to be swallowed, knowing that in forty minutes we will be spat up on the beach where we will eat cereal out of little boxes and hot dogs in store-bought white buns and roasted marshmallows squashed between sandy graham crackers. Our tiny bodies vibrate as we watch the cars unload. We are almost there—the diesel fumes of the eighteen-wheelers off-loading remind us that we are going to be free. Out on the upper deck, my brother and I stand allowing our bodies to be buffeted by the wind. My hair swirls wildly around my face and I am glad I didn't pack my comb. We sing loudly, our words drifting into the wind.

We arrive and race down the driveway to the cabin. The scent of cedar trees beckons us to swing on their branches and peel the tree bark and hold it under our noses pretending that we have mustaches. I secretly want to figure out how

to make cedar bark permanent on my upper lip in order to fully immerse myself in the smell. The huckleberries are just beginning to blossom; their miniature buds are nestled in the tiny green leaves. The earth beneath the trees is flourishing with mushrooms and fungi without small fingers prying at them to discover their roots, their secret attachments to trees. As we open the double doors of the small three-roomed cabin, we are assaulted with a musty staleness, the odour stands in sharp contrast to the scents of our clean house. We giddily soak in the air and race to roll up the blinds and open all the windows. The couch still has remnants of sand from last summer and the table has hosted a small party of mice.

By mid-summer the cabin has aired out, but if I stand long enough with my eyes closed in the kitchen, I can still smell the mice, the aging walls, and the spider's webs. The smells of summer are intertwined with sunscreen on warm brown bodies, with Noxema soothing our sunburned shoulders, with wet, sandy dog. It is the scent of low tide in the morning mixed with bacon cooking on a wood stove. It is the smell of the salt water and sand and beach fire and burnt marshmallows in tangled hair as I fall asleep. It is the sweet smell of my brother's breath as he falls asleep next to me in our musty sleeping bags, sleeping side by side on the pull-out couch.

By late August the smell of blackberries and dried out grass fills the air, but in the evening there is a crispness that indicates school will be starting and life will involve socks, being on-time and cleanliness. We race down to the beach with

hoodies on in the early evening. I gather shells to take home and place on my desk in order to sniff them later when I am working on homework I can't see the relevance of. I press them up to my nose hoping to find a trace of the salt, the sand, the freedom.

* * * * *

It is 2006: My brother and I are standing on the beach at Langdale; he is throwing a stick into the ocean for my dog. It is quiet with just the two of us. This is the first time we have been up here together in well over a decade and the first time either of us has been up here since my parents separated. We are staying in my dad's uncle's cabin, as my grandparents sold their cabin years ago. We have escaped from the cabin, where we have been with my dad, his wife, my stepsisters and their husbands. They will be coming down the hill shortly, as we have all been waiting for a break in the rain. I have left my husband in charge of getting our kids ready to go out. I am tired and I don't feel like talking any more. I have spent weeks shopping for and preparing food for eleven people for three days in an effort to give my dad what he really wants—his new family together at Christmas. Since my stepsisters don't live in town, the responsibility has fallen to me because I am the eldest, the mother, the caretaker, the strong one. Though I fell apart a few days ago, and revealed that I am not as strong as other people imagine. My brother swooped in and picked up all the pieces by loading up his

car and going to the cabin early and getting it ready, taking the pressure to do everything off me.

My brother picks up the stick and heaves it into the ocean. We are standing in the same spot, doing the same thing we did as kids. Throwing a stick for a dog, looking at the mountains, listening to the ocean lap the shore. It has a surreal quality to it as we watch steam rise from the wet logs as the sun's rays finally peek out and touch them. I pull my hood down tighter, as I can hear the family that does not really feel like my family talking noisily up the hill. My dad is whistling Christmas carols.

My brother picks up the stick and heaves it into the water again. We both watch my dog swim after it. Turning towards me, he states, "you know, this is home." It makes me want to cry because he has expressed exactly what I had been feeling for months. I don't have a home or even a house; I have an apartment. I want the feelings of comfort and calm that standing on the beach with my brother brings. There is a safety and security in being in his company that I haven't felt for a long time; he creates a sense of home for me. He is also right in saying the beach at Langdale is home. My most positive dominant memories of my childhood include playing with my brother at the beach at Langdale. I feel safe and secure there.

Why is this place home? What is it that makes both of us exhale in a way that living in the city doesn't? Both of us love living in Vancouver, and can't imagine

living on the Sunshine Coast full-time. Yet, it is home and not a favoured vacation destination. He puts his arm across my shoulders and I lean into him as we watch my dog swim towards us with the stick proudly clamped in her jaws.

In my search to understand what makes the beach at Langdale home, I turn to a human geographer, Tim Cresswell's, definition of home. He defines place as something that "must have some relationship to humans and the human capacity to produce and consume meaning."¹⁴ The central question Cresswell seeks to answer is what makes a place a meaningful place? Cresswell uses the term place interchangeably with home; both generate the same feelings of safety, security and belonging. He asks, why do we imbue some places with value that become part of our understanding of the world and other places hold only a passing significance in our lives? Why do some places become a dwelling that leads to a greater sense of self and others do not? I am intrigued with Cresswell's ideas of place and home, because I am attached to living in Vancouver, but I grew up in Richmond and Tsawwassen, so it is not nostalgia for my childhood environment that is fostering my attachment to the city. However, living close to the ocean and the close proximity of the mountains reminds me of Langdale. Cresswell narrows down his ideas of place from wider geographical areas to neighbourhoods to personal dwellings, home. He writes, "home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness"; a place "where you can be yourself."¹⁵ For me, home is living in the city and not the

¹⁴ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

suburbs or a small town. I enjoy the anonymity that the city provides as well as the choice. As I walk through my neighbourhood, I get glimpses of downtown and of the backdrop of the mountains. When the wind is blowing in from the ocean, I can smell the salt in the air and I know I am home. While I can't spend hours on the beach contemplating my life, I can look at the mountains and be reminded that some things are permanent in the midst of a myriad of transitions and the chaos of change. Living in Vancouver is important to me as I can still maintain the sensory connection to Langdale, which does remind me of my childhood sense of home.

I do not consider my apartment my home because it is no longer the safe haven I had imagined in my mind. The month I found out I was pregnant with my second child, our apartment was declared a leaky condo. The restoration started ten months later. As I sat groggily nursing my two-month old one morning, the jack-hammers started; I felt like I was being physically assaulted. By Christmas 2006, we were four months into what appeared to be a never-ending process. The lingering sensation of Langdale being home stayed with me for months as I dealt with the overwhelming stress of living in a leaky condo for two years. As the months progressed, the noise was never far from being overwhelming. I spent days out with the boys taking them from place to place, longing to go home and rest, but knowing I wouldn't be able to. My exterior walls were stripped, my door replaced, and my windows replaced. I lost the war on dust. I was constantly exposed to toxic smells that permeated my walls, my couch, my clothes and my

skin. I lived for months with holes in the wall and unfinished plastering waiting for an inspector to come and give the decree that it was fine. I would come home to the front door wide open and guys named Doug or Chris would be measuring, dry walling or caulking. They were very nice men, kind and considerate, but they were not invited and I felt powerless in my own home. It took two years for the exterior of the building to be complete. Throughout the process I managed to escape to Langdale, to borrow my great-uncle's cabin for a few days every three or four months. It gave me the strength to endure the noise, dust and chaos. I would sit on the beach with my children and listen to the waves lap at the shore. We made sand castles and sang loudly and let the salty wind cleanse our souls. In the evenings I would sit staring out the window at the North Shore Mountains and the ocean and watch the sun set and enjoy the peace I felt.

Through reading a variety of autobiographies,¹⁶ I came to an understanding that our childhood sense of “home” profoundly shapes who we are. Yet it is not home in the specific sense of a childhood house, but also an attachment to the natural world. Yet it is not just the geographical location, the placement of rooms, but the essence of something that is not clearly defined that determines who we are. The contrast between environments in which we felt “at home” versus not feeling “at home” helps us to come up with a clearer definition.

¹⁶ These include the autobiographical writings of William Wordsworth, Virginia Woolf, and Mary McCarthy.

In her autobiographical work *Belonging*, bell hooks asks, “what does it mean to call a place home?”¹⁷ Throughout her essay she attempts to figure out the “extent to which [her] sense and sensibility was deeply informed by the geography of place.”¹⁸ She had spent much of her life running away from Kentucky because it did not nurture her academic nature, yet she carried with her a quilt her grandmother made her. It became a reminder of home. As an adult in her early fifties, hooks realized that in order to become what she considered a “whole” human being she needed to return home to Kentucky. She states, “living away from a renewing natural world I felt a deep sense of soul loss that was traumatic.”¹⁹ I wondered if I too felt that same sense of loss of not spending my summers at Langdale as a young adult, after my grandparents sold their cabin. hooks explores her feelings of living in a self-imposed exile from home, when living in San Francisco and New York, which transformed her “perception of the world of home.”²⁰ All her “efforts to start over always ended up taking [her] back to the past, allowing it to serve as foundation for the present.”²¹

hooks sought to understand the impact her childhood sense of home had on her by returning to rural Kentucky in her mid-fifties. She states, “healing that spirit meant for me remembering myself, taking the bits and pieces of my life and putting them together again. In remembering my childhood and writing about my early life I was mapping the territory, discovering myself and finding

¹⁷ bell hooks, *Belonging*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

homeplace.”²² I started taking myself on the similar intellectual and emotional journey by continuing to read about how others defined home in an effort to find my own sense of belonging, or place.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, describes home as a “refuge, retreat, grotto, womb, it gives shelter from outside dangers; it is this confused outer world that becomes unreal.”²³ Home becomes a shelter in which to nurture our sense of self. In the *Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton, a contemporary philosopher, states, “those places whose outlook matches and legitimates our own, we tend to honour with the term ‘home’.”²⁴ From this place of safety and security we are able “to recover the lost, significant parts of ourselves.”²⁵ Home then becomes a place of renewal. Botton continues in his definition of home by saying, “a home is merely any place that succeeds in making more consistently available to us the important truths which the wider world ignores, or which our distracted and irresolute selves have trouble holding on to.”²⁶ Our concept of home is essential both to our understanding of ourselves and the development of our feelings of security.

In reflecting on my experiences of home, I realized that it was in the periods I left home as a teenager that my understanding of place was more sharply focused.

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. (NY: Vintage Books, 1952), 450.

²⁴ Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*. (NY: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), 107.

²⁵ Ibid., 107.

²⁶ Ibid., 123.

Shifting my sense of security by living in a distinctly different country sharpened my own sense of home. I recognized my sense of place and home attached to living in Canada when I left the country. I have still felt “not at home” when I have travelled as an adult, but never as sharply as I did when I was seventeen and eighteen.

Life as a teenager in Tsawwassen was heavy with the weight of social expectations that I was unwilling to meet. Grade 11 was a tiring year and I was bored with my high school; the thought of spending one more year there was feeling unbearable. The summer between grades eleven and twelve promised an escape from the narrow-minded and materialistic views of the small, white, middle-class suburb: a friend of my parents was organizing a trip to spend six weeks on the Amazon as a cultural exchange. He was planning on taking sixteen North American kids and pairing them with sixteen kids from southern Brazil and taking the combined group down the Amazon for three weeks stopping off at different villages after spending three weeks in Manaus. My brother and I would be going without my parents for six weeks. It was a life-altering experience to witness the lush jungles as we travelled down the Amazon River. We slept in hammocks, were bitten by unfamiliar bugs and knew there were boa constrictors in the hold of boat to eat the rats. All of these things added to the adventure, but it certainly did not create a sense of home. I did not feel a sensory connection to the muddy Amazon, to the lush rainforest; it was not the salty ocean or dense

cedar trees. The air was too humid and the sun set too quickly. I missed the mountains.

One night, however, as we all crowded around a tiny television in Manaus, we watched a rerun of a McGyver episode, which was filmed in BC. I saw glimpses of the rainforest that is familiar and loved. I saw a shot of the blue ocean and the sandy beach, which was in such stark contrast to the muddy water with trees growing right at the edge that I had been watching for days. I tried to explain to my Brazilian friend Vanya, that this is where I am from; this is my home, but she did not understand how something could be filmed in one location and called something else. As far as she was concerned, it was America. My Portuguese was too fractured and stilted to explain the finer nuances of home. I could not explain why certain trees are more comforting than others or why the smell of diesel fumes, garbage and burning rubber in Manaus was claustrophobic to me but to someone who had never left the city it was comforting. How do you explain traffic rules, the importance of sidewalks or ideas of personal space to someone who does not value the same things? Vanya could see that the surroundings in the show were different than where we were, but she could not smell the differences.

A year later, at eighteen, I hopped on a plane bound for Perth, Australia. I had found a job performing in puppet shows in elementary schools for free room and board and travel expenses in lieu of getting paid. Working two jobs for four

months in order to save up for my airfare and unanticipated expenses for seven months was exhausting, but I knew once I stepped on the plane it would not matter. My friends had all started university that fall and I had refused to go. I had endured several lectures from teachers, school counsellors and friends about how I was throwing my life away. I was confident that I would go to university. I just needed a break from my friends in Tsawwassen, and thought that travel would broaden my mind. I picked Perth because it was the farthest place away from home that was English speaking and was politically peaceful. I left in January during a snowstorm and arrived in Perth thirty hours later to be greeted by 30°C+ temperatures. My body was confused. I found that I couldn't keep track of the months while I was there because the weather was opposite to what I was accustomed to. My mental map of what was normal was scrambled. Shorts in February was wrong; after two weeks of a 40°C+ heat wave, I longed to wear a sweater and sit by a fire. While I attempted to create a sense of home with my roommates in our tiny apartment, it did not work. I felt an unidentified sense of longing. One very valiant friend spent several hours one afternoon tracking down a tiny jar of Kraft peanut butter and a box of Smarties in order to make me feel at home. It was more than just familiar tastes I was longing for. It was more than the seasonal variations that I was missing. This experience was different because I wasn't living out of a suitcase. I had an address, I had an apartment, and I had neighbours, yet I did not feel at home in Australia because I wasn't from there. This was the first time I realized that I considered Canada home. Home was now beyond my house and city; it included my birth country. In *Space and Place*, Yi-

Fu Tuan discusses the attachment people hold to nations. He states, “it is a characteristic of the symbol-making human species that its members can become passionately attached to places of enormous size, such as nation-states, of which they can have only limited direct experience.”²⁷ My attachment to being Canadian was strengthened every time someone mistook me for being an American and then proceeded to say, “well isn’t it just the same thing?” after I had explained that I was Canadian and that Canada was part of a continent called North America, but it did not make me an American.

My understanding of what it means to be a Canadian was further challenged the first time I saw a map of Australia. I had never seen a Pacific centred map before in which the projection was skewed towards the bottom to make Australia bigger and North America seemed small and skewed towards the right hand side. It was simply wrong. North America had always been the centre and Canada was always bigger. Our largeness is part of our mythology. After weeks of debate with a friend of mine over the size of Canada, I was positive it was bigger, but the map didn’t support my point of view. I finally found an encyclopaedia, which proved to my friend that Canada was indeed over two million square kilometres bigger than Australia. Even though Australia is a Commonwealth country, its mythology is built on its large emptiness, the queen is on the coins, the mailboxes are red and they speak English, it didn’t feel like home. My understanding of what it means to be Canadian was further challenged when Kim Campbell being elected Prime

²⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 18.

Minister made the front page of all the Australian papers. Many people I talked to felt it was laughable that a woman, “a Sheila,” as they would say, which is the equivalent to saying “a babe” or “a chick,” was running the country. I found this attitude offensive and grating. The more I argued about how it was more than acceptable and in fact it was about time that a woman became Prime Minister, the more people laughed. I missed the tolerance and open-mindedness that I had taken for granted at home in Canada.

Everywhere I have gone, I have sought to create a sense of home. I started as a young child building forts. At seventeen, I backpacked peanut butter down the Amazon river, but the humidity and the lush jungles reminded me that I was not from there, nor could I ever be at home there. At eighteen, I baked cookies in a 40°C heat wave in Australia, and even though I was living on the West Coast of Australia and the sun still set on the ocean, I was not at home. There were no mountains surrounding me to frame my experiences and the sunset did not linger over the ocean. I missed the crisp mornings and the noticeable changes in the seasons. I realize now that my sense of home is deeply connected to my senses. Eight months later, stepping off the plane in Vancouver, I knew I was home. I am the fourth generation to live here. I have roots here. I am also Canadian, which further defines my sense of home. There was a comfort upon returning to the simple things such as grocery shopping and recognizing the packaging of my favourite foods. The idle chit-chat of people around me sounded familiar. The street signs, mailboxes and fire hydrants remind me of where I am from. It is also

the attitude of tolerance and acceptance that I have come to appreciate as being the norm rather than the exception.

Epilogue

I view my sense of home as a series of concentric circles with me in the centre, Vancouver farther away and Canada the outer circle. Since my two outer circles had not changed in the last fifteen years, I realized that my sense of home felt unstable because there was something wrong with the core. As a result of living through a leaky condo renovation, we were left with the open wound of debt that crippled our finances and our dreams. While the work was now completed on the exterior, the interior still did not feel like home. I slowly came to realize that the man I had married did not want to or did not know how to create a home with our children. While we went for marriage counselling, and tried talking, it was a painful realization to come to. How did I marry someone who did not understand home?

As I divided our belongings, three weeks after he moved out, I realized that we hadn't bought anything of value together. After ten years of living together, we had not created a home in the physical sense and we certainly hadn't created a sense of emotional safety or security with each other. We were still two separate people who had temporarily merged our belongings together. There were no fights over a treasure item we purchased together and both loved; there were no

compromises in the separation of the domestic objects. Packing boxes was a swift, painless and guilt-free process.

I did not marry a prince and we did not live happily every after in my Charming House--maybe it is because I am not a princess or a damsel in distress needing to be rescued. I am on my own with two boys and a dog in an apartment, trying to write a new definition of home. It is part exhilarating and part terrifying. I have been purging closets and hidden corners of old ideas, old habits and old belongings that no longer fit my emerging definition of home, and redefining my space on a limited budget. My sense of security and safety has been shattered, so I cling fiercely to the notion that I am “home” for my boys and that magic can be created in any environment.

Without the weight of my ex-husband’s discontent in my apartment, my children have started to dream and now infrequently have nightmares. I frequently wake up to hear them laughing in their sleep or talking animatedly. When they dance to music, their movements are free and unselfconscious. Sitting in my rocking chair, I get to witness them coming into their own—I hope to create a sense of safety and security to allow them to go out into the world with the greatest sense of self. They don’t fight as much and hug each other more. We play more, we laugh more, we enjoy each other’s company more. While I am spending more time enjoying them, the apartment is tidier. I haven’t had to make the choice between playing or cleaning very often. I feel like I am gaining the vision of motherhood

that I had always imagined, where I delight in being their mother rather than wishing for them to grow up and be less attached to me.

I was searching for a fixed definition, some clear points of determination, but what I am learning to realize is that home is no place I can go back to; it is fluid and porous. My understanding of home will continue to evolve over the course of my entire life rather than being a fixed or stable entity I can hold onto. It does not specifically relate to the size of the dwelling or the domestic object used to decorate it, but is woven into the stories, the moments and the senses. I am home with the mountains and salty air surrounding me, with my dog at my side and my boys laughing as they eat the muffins we have just made.

While having a sensory attachment to place is important to me, I realize that home is also an intangible feeling created by the intentional, positive emotional connections between the people living there. While I do realize that bulk of responsibility of that rests on me as the mother, I have tried to instill the values of care and respect in my children, so that hopefully, when they are older and create their own homes they will know that home is both a physical space and an emotional one.

I still dream of owning a house with a yard, but it no longer weighs on me. I take comfort in Bachelard's discussion of dream houses. He states:

Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have

time to achieve it. For a house that was final,...would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.²⁸

I am not willing to give up dreaming. I am actively creating a sense of home and believe the feelings of safety and security that home generates can occur in any environment. I practice now in my apartment, by inviting kids over to make gingerbread cookies at Christmas and hosting Monday night pizza parties. We build forts in the living room. Our walls are covered with art. I hope to create a sense of magic, an atmosphere of safety and security, so that when the boys are older and we move into my dream house, they will already feel at home.

²⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 61.

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2: THE POWER OF IDEALIZED IMAGES

Reflecting on the underlying theme of home in Margaret Atwood's novel

Cat's Eye

When you re-read a classic you do not see in the book more than you did before.
You see more in you than there was before.
Clifford Fadiman

I first read Margaret Atwood's novel, *Cat's Eye*, when I was nineteen just after finishing my first year at university. While it was a stimulating first year and I loved the intellectual high I got from learning, I felt slightly lost at the end of April. I had no job prospects for the summer and no social life to distract myself with. I bought my copy at a used bookstore in Tsawwassen down the hill from where I was still living at home with my parents. It was unusual that I bought a used copy as I hate used books. I hate the smell, the lighting and the shelving in used bookstores. I feel claustrophobic, trapped and anxious.

Strolling down the hill that beautiful April afternoon with \$6 in the pocket of my cut-offs, I convinced myself there seemed no harm in at least browsing at the used bookstore until the dust made me sneeze and I started to panic that the shelves were about to topple on my head. I stood outside Mike's Books and took a deep breath wondering if it would be my last, but as I stood there with my hand on the door knob the allure of something new to read overcame my fear of precarious shelving and I opened the door. The smell of the store immediately assaulted me; it was mixture of body odour, emanating from the large man perched on the stool near the till, and dust and mildew, wafting from the rows and rows of books. I nearly gagged; however, the draw of undiscovered worlds and hidden truths overpowered my revulsion and I stepped into the store and started

at the A section. I told myself that if I couldn't find anything by the end of the section then I would leave and buy a Slurpee instead.

My finger traced over the spines and I paused a couple of times to look closer at the titles and once or twice pulled one out to look at the cover. I really wanted a new book. I wanted the intoxicating pleasure of falling into a novel, like I had with *Rebecca*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jane Eyre*, but I was starting to gag from the odour. So I grabbed the next book my finger rested upon, *Cat's Eye*. The cover was intriguing, with a lady dressed in a black cloak floating over a bridge holding a large cat's eye marble. I decided to risk it and judge the book completely by its cover and get out of Mike's Books before my lunch decided to mingle with the already pungent odour of the store.

I put the book on the counter and dug my change out of my pocket—man, I hope I have enough, I thought. Mike leaned over and smiled a large toothy grin.

"Atwood, eh, so do you, like, wanna be a feminist?" I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, so I smiled politely. He leaned over closer, I could see a trail of sweat trickling down the center of his chest, "that'll be four bucks" I swallowed hard willing my lunch to stay put. I counted out my loonies and quarters and gave a backwards wave out the door. Phew...I made it without losing my lunch and I have change left over for a Slurpee.

That afternoon as I stretched out on the chaise lounge on my back deck sipping my Coke Slurpee, I fell in love with Margaret Atwood. It was a chance encounter that I found her, as I had out of desperation strayed far from my comfort zone. Atwood created a world that I immediately knew about. I fell into the novel, but this time not as a minor character, I realized that I was Elaine Risley on many levels. I knew the taste of blood from chewing my cuticles. I knew the gnawing sensation in the pit of my stomach. I understood what Elaine meant when she said, “I want some friends, friends who will be girls,”¹ only to discover once she made her friends that she was “not used to girls, or familiar with their customs” (52). When Elaine states in the early pages, “until we moved to Toronto I was happy” (22), I mentally replaced Toronto with Tsawwassen and hoped I was going to find some truth that would change my life. While I had only taken the train through Northern Ontario and never stayed there, I knew what it was like to feel that sense of place in the natural world as Elaine did in her early childhood, for I spent most of my summers on the beach at the Sunshine Coast with my brother exploring the underbrush, going on secret adventures and looking for snakes and bugs. I knew the sharp contrast of not having a sense of place, living in a town that I hated and yet couldn’t clearly identify why. I recognized aspects of my own mother and brother in the characterization of Elaine’s family.

Elaine Risley, was the first character in a novel I identified with. That summer began, what Wayne Booth in his work, *The Company we Keep: An Ethics of*

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Cat’s Eye* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988), 30. All further references from the novel occur as in-text page references.

Fiction, calls a friendship.² I have been reading Atwood ever since, though I only ventured back into Mike's Books one more time to buy *The Robber Bride*. There is a comfort in reading Atwood's novels. I am "at home" in her words and the worlds she creates. I see aspects of myself in her characters and her landscape is familiar. In times of stress and turmoil in my life, I have reread Atwood's novels. Immersing myself in her words has always brought a calm and clarity and I emerge at the end of the novel with a clearer understanding of the decisions I need to make in my life.

Two years ago, my life started a slow tailspin and I turned back to Atwood for comfort, for a sense of security and safety. I wanted to read something where I already knew the characters and the ending because I didn't feel emotionally able to deal with any kinds of surprises. I reread *Cat's Eye* for the fourth time, but this time as a thirty-five year old mother of two boys struggling with my sense of home and I identified with Elaine Risley all over again.

This time I was struck by Elaine's adult reflections on her childhood rather than her childhood itself. I became fascinated with how Elaine described the different places she lived in during her early childhood and in Toronto and how those significant points in her childhood were reflected in her artwork. These fascinations made me question the novel and myself. What do we take from our childhood understanding of place and try to recreate in adulthood? What gives

² Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 170.

places meaning and value? How does Elaine know she is home in Northern Ontario and not in Toronto? I needed some clues; I needed a guide because the home I had created for my children showed few markers from my own childhood. I was challenged by Martha Nussbaum's claim in *Love's Knowledge* that "people care for the books they read; and they are changed by what they care for—both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern."³ Since Atwood generally, and *Cat's Eye* specifically had held personal significance for me for close to two decades, I decided to explore the novel more closely. Rather than using Atwood as a philosophical or ethical guide, I used *Cat's Eye* to help me understand the multifaceted definition of home. I was confident that Atwood would reveal new truths to help me define my sense of home.

Beginnings

In her first person narrative, the protagonist Elaine Risley starts each of the fifteen sections of the novel in the present and then switches to the past. This narrative style is effective because it reveals how people remember events in their lives. Something small in the present day transports us back to the past and through reflection and hindsight we attempt to grasp the significance of the past event. As in the novel, reflections on life do not occur in a linear fashion and it is only through the reflecting on the various dominant memories of our childhood

³ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 231.

that we are able to construct meaning out of the whole. While the protagonist does not interpret events for the reader, the reader gains a sense of the significance of specific events and people in her childhood through the descriptions of Elaine's paintings. It is in the paintings that Elaine reveals her understanding of home. Much of the academic criticism⁴ of *Cat's Eye* focuses on the negative relationship between Elaine Risley and her three friends Carol, Grace Smeath and Cordelia. I have chosen to look at instead the underlying thread of home, which I think is apparent in the majority of Atwood's work.⁵

⁴ See, for example, the works of Nathalie Cooke, Molly Hite, Laurie Vickeroy.

⁵ In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Offred, the protagonist, is confined as a handmaid to the commander. Her movements within and outside of the house are very restricted, yet within the house she experiences freedom a degree of freedom in having an affair with the driver for the Commander as well as getting access to forbidden magazines, clothing and food when she is the company of the Commander.

This theme of home providing both freedom and confinement is also explored in Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). In *The Robber Bride*, each of the protagonists, Tony, Charis, and Roz have their house as well as their sense of home violated by Zenia. Each of the characters invites Zenia into her home, offers to provide her with a sense of safety and security and to nurture Zenia's broken sense of self and then loses her lover to Zenia. *The Robber Bride* challenges the idea of home as a safe place as "Zenia shatters the sense of comfort, safety and sanctuary attained by Roz, Charis and Tony in their homes" (Elenora Rao, "Home and Nation in Margaret Atwood's Later Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103). The characters painfully try to reconstruct what had been lost without physically moving away and starting again.

In *The Blind Assassin*, (2000) Atwood "destabilizes received notions of home with their conventional meanings of comfort, security and custom". (Elenora Rao, "Home and Nation in Margaret Atwood's Later Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100) Atwood creates a home environment where the Father's rage and anger pervades the atmosphere of the house. This is layered with the Mother dying in the home. The two girls are left grappling with the loss of safety and security that home should provide.

In the historical novel *Alias Grace* (1996), the theme of the violation of safety and security is further developed with the murder of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, his housekeeper, taking place at home allegedly at the hands of the domestic servant Grace Marks. Grace has been given a trusted position within the family. Since she is intimately aware of all the domestic details much of the novel centers on others trying to rationalize how or understand how someone the family trusted could violate an intimate space.

In *Cat's Eye* Elaine Risley, as a middle-aged adult, is struggling with her definition of home as she “returns to hometown Toronto” (254) for a retrospective of her artwork. In her return for the retrospective, she is attempting to understand why she hates Toronto so much, where she lived from age eight to early adulthood. Growing up, Elaine has two distinctly different home environments, initially Northern Ontario as a young child and later Toronto. In her early childhood, the notion of home has a transient quality as they “never stay in motels for more than a night at a time” (31), and the rest of the time they tent or stay at abandoned logging camps. She remembers that shortly after moving to Toronto, “I want to be back in the motel, back on the road, in my old rootless life of impermanence and safety” (35). Elaine feels at home, even though she has a rootless life because their “low-slung, boat-sized Studebaker” (22) contains her family and all of their domestic objects and becomes a permanent and stable fixture in her life. She is comfortable and safe in the backseat “among the suitcases and the cardboard boxes of food and the coats, and the gassy, dry-cleaning smell of the car upholstery” watching “lake after lake, hill after hill” (22). Even though her life is transient, it remains predictable and her family is kind, which provides a sense of security for Elaine.

Throughout the novel, Elaine wrestles with the notions of house and home. She lives in a house in Toronto, yet it does not generate the feelings of home she

In *Surfacing* (1972), the sense of home is closely tied to the natural world rather than a specific house.

feels camping in Northern Ontario. Her understanding of home also contrasts with the idealized notion of home as presented in her school reader: Elaine states her reader “is about two children who live in a white house with ruffled curtains, a front lawn, and a picket fence. The father goes to work, the mother wears a dress and an apron, and the children play ball on the lawn with their dog and cat” (31). This image and the surrounding stories, Elaine explains is nothing like her life and yet “they have an exotic appeal” for her (31). The school reader image of home, along with the images of girls in dresses, becomes idealized in Elaine’s mind. According to geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling in *Home*, “a central feature of imaginaries of home is their idealization: certain dwelling structures and social relations are imagined to be ‘better’, more socially appropriate and an ideal to be aspired to.”⁶ They further expand on the idealization of home by explaining that it is “culturally and historically specific” and I would argue, also, reinforced by images in magazines and books.⁷ The move to Toronto forces Elaine to confront her idealized view of home as well as her idealized view of friendship with girls. Both the house and the girls leave her disappointed and longing for escape to Northern Ontario. Throughout the novel, Elaine’s memories and recollections reflect the tension she feels between the idealized traditional notion of home and the reality of her own life. It is her confrontation of the idealized notions of home that intrigues me about the character of Elaine.

⁶ Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (London: Routledge, 2006), 100.

⁷ Ibid., 101.

Atwood's depiction of the traditional ideal of home in *Cat's Eye* is significant because it rests on two ideas: first, the physical construction of the house itself and second, the behaviour of the people who inhabit the house. In this essay, I deconstruct both the idea of house and of relationships as presented in the idealized image and show that the force of contrasts between Elaine's friends' houses and her own leads her to a greater understanding of home. I look at Elaine's understanding of home from both her perspective of the house itself and from her perspective of the relationship she has with her parents and brother and how this contrasts with the family relations of her friends. For the purposes of this essay, I am focusing on Elaine's early childhood. Through the characterization of Elaine, Atwood explores the tension Elaine feels when she attains the cultural ideal of living in a house with a front lawn in Toronto, and sees the ideal reflected in the lives of her friends, yet finds that it does not generate the feelings of safety and security she feels living a transient life in Northern Ontario. Significantly, Elaine also reveals, "nothing in these stories [in her school reader] is anything like [her] life" (31). The sharp contrasts between the two different kinds of home environments combined with the longing for an ideal, which is not obtained, strengthen Elaine's understanding of home. It becomes evident to Elaine that "home is both a place or physical location and a set of feelings."⁸ However, the idealized notion of a "white house with ruffled curtains" does not reveal any emotional attachments to home or the importance of relationships in defining a sense of home. The static image of the ideal does not correspond to Elaine's

⁸ Ibid., 254.

understanding of home, which is based on a close attachment to the natural world, and her relationships with her parents and brother and not on a house itself. These personal connections create the feelings of safety and security for her. Atwood's novel illustrates Clare Cooper Marcus' observation in her work *House as a Mirror of Self* that "as we change and grow throughout our lives, our psychological development is punctuated not only by meaningful emotional relationships with people, but also by close affective ties with a number of significant physical environments, beginning in childhood."⁹ Throughout the novel, Elaine describes the emotional relationships she that have impacted her psychological development. However, it is through her artwork, that Elaine, as an adult artist, portrays the significance of her definition of home as being shaped by the landscape of the North and not of an urban environment.

House does not equal Home

The idealized image of home in Elaine's school reader where the house is described as "a white house with ruffled curtains, a front lawn and a picket fence" (31) captivates Elaine because it is foreign and contrast sharply with her early transient childhood. The white house is pristine and unsullied, which contrasts with "flimsily built" (30) housekeeping cottages or the dirty abandoned logging campsites the Risley family stays in. According to Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, "a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind

⁹ Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home* (Berkley: Conari Press, 1995), 4.

proofs or illusions of stability.”¹⁰ This illusion of stability is further reinforced, according to Blunt and Dowling, by the idea that home ownership also provides a more stable base on which to raise children.¹¹ They further indicate that it is “‘home ownership’ rather than ‘house ownership’, signalling that ownership is synonymous with home.”¹² Yet, Elaine does not feel at home in Toronto, when she actually gets to live in a house that her parents own. Throughout the novel Elaine reveals a slow understanding that living in a place that creates a sense of home is not directly linked to living in a house. Through the contrast of living in Toronto and travelling in Northern Ontario, Elaine comes to understand that home is not static; it evolves over the course of her life.

Her understanding of home is forced to evolve as her attachment to the transient life in the North merges into a more stable home environment in Toronto. The house itself, since it is unfinished, initially resembles their life in motels rather than the image Elaine has constructed in her mind. Moving to Toronto is not a complete break from her previous understanding of home; the transition takes place slowly. When the family arrives to the unfinished home, they temporarily maintain their nomadic life. Elaine’s parents move their camping life inside the house in order to create a sense of home. Her mother “unearths a primus stove, which she sets up on the kitchen floor, since there is no table” (35). For “the first [few] nights [the Risley family sleeps] on the floor, in [their] sleeping bags, on top

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 17.

¹¹ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*, 93.

¹² *Ibid.*, 93.

of [their] air mattresses” rather than sleeping in proper beds (35). The family burns “scrap pieces of wood left over from the construction” in the fireplace (36). While the children are at school new domestic objects appear and “in his spare time [their] father hammers away at the interior of the house” (36). The acquiring of possessions signifies a shedding of their old life of transience as previously everything fit into their Studebaker. The car itself was a house of sorts, as all the domestic objects and the family fit inside.

This transition occurs slowly over several months to the amazement of Elaine’s new friends. “Carol comes to [her] house and takes it all in—the unpainted walls, the wires dangling from the ceilings, the unfinished floors, the army cots—with incredulous glee” (54). In contrast she shows Elaine “around her house as if it’s a museum” (57). Elaine comments, her “house begins to look more like a house. But it takes a lot longer than [she] would like: [they] are a far cry from picket fences and white curtains” (36). The public parts of the house are decorated first, and the private parts last. Prior to the move to Toronto, Elaine had little understanding of public and private parts of home. In the motels, tents and loggings camps all parts were integrated into once space—cooking, eating and sleeping occurred in the same room.

Paralleling the gradual finishing of the house in Toronto, Elaine’s understanding of home develops slowly, as the family still spends the summers up North. From Elaine’s references to going up North, the reader gains a clear sense of her

feelings of home and the lessening of the importance of house. Elaine remarks, “the north smells different from the city: clearer, thinner. You can see farther. ...I’ve forgotten about these things all winter, but here they are again, and when I see them I remember them, I know them, I greet them as if they are home” (72). As they leave Toronto she says, “we drive north. Toronto is behind us, a smear of brownish air on the horizon, like smoke from a distant burning” (162). Her description of the city indicates not a longing to stay, but rather pleasure at an escape.

Elaine does not feel a sense of attachment or a sense of place living in a suburban house in Toronto. In *Cat’s Eye*, Atwood represents her protagonist’s wrestling with the duality of house and home being two distinctly different entities. In *Home*, Blunt and Dowling explore the complexities in defining home: “a house is not necessarily nor automatically a home, and personal relations that constitute home extend beyond those of the household.”¹³ As Blunt and Dowling suggest home is an idea that is both fluid and porous. It encapsulates our emotions, our lived experiences, our social relations; it is both a concept and a metaphor. Elaine comes to realize that a house does not equal a home. Her sense of home becomes attached to a much wider geographical area.

Geographer Tim Cresswell has studied the sense of place and home people develop with wider geographical areas. In his work, *Place: A Short Introduction*,

¹³ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*, 3.

he states, “home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness”, a place “where you can be yourself.”¹⁴ In her adult reflections on Toronto, Elaine realizes she associates the behavior of her friends, Grace, Carol and Cordelia with the city itself. In the opening pages of the novel Elaine remarks, “the fact is that I hate this city. I’ve hated it so long I can hardly remember feeling any other way about it” (13). The city of Toronto and her house do not generate the feelings of home because she is constantly judged by the girls and does not feel safe. Iris Marion Young, a feminist scholar, explores how the emotional environment can create a sense of home in her chapter, “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme” in her work *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*. She states “home is where a person can be ‘herself’; one is ‘at home’ when she feels that she is with others who understand her in particularity.”¹⁵ Since much of Elaine’s school day and free time is spent with the girls, her understanding of being ‘at home’ in Toronto is shaped more by her relationships with the girls than with her parents and brother. While her house itself provides a sense of safety and security, she associates Toronto as an emotional home with the girls rather than her family. The changes in her physical body when the family leaves for the North every summer indicate her ease with being in the natural environment and the relief she feels being away from Carol, Grace and Cordelia. Elaine observes, “I’ve begun to feel not gladness, but relief. My throat is no longer tight, I’ve stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have

¹⁴ Tim Cresswell, *Place: a Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 24.

¹⁵ Iris Marion Young, *On Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 146.

healed partially” (163). These changes in Elaine’s physical body are indications of her feeling safe and secure.

Home is built on Relationships

I argue that in *Cat’s Eye* the relationships occurring between family members within the home are more important than the physical structure itself in creating a sense of home. In the idealized notion of home in Elaine’s school reader there is little apparent connection between parents and children, yet I think it is the connection between family members that creates her feelings of home. As Victoria Rosner argues in *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, “few spaces are more formative than a childhood home. It is a crucible of identity, a place that teaches both overtly and implicitly who we are, what things mean, and how life is to be lived”.¹⁶ According to Rosner, it is not the house that creates an identity but rather the relationships that take place within the house that teach young children about the values of the home. Peter King reiterates Rosner’s argument in his work *Private Dwelling: Contemplating the Use of Housing*. He argues that “what is more important are the emotional and ontological links we form in dwelling” rather than the physical structure alone.¹⁷ Even though it is clear that relationships form a sense of home, in the idealized image from Elaine’s school reader focuses more on a description of the house. It is through

¹⁶ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 59.

¹⁷ Peter King, *Private Dwelling: Contemplating the Use of Housing* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 150.

the connection between her parents and her brother that Elaine gains a greater sense of self and by extension a greater understanding of home.

Fathers and Home

I will begin with the father figure: Atwood's characterization of Mr. Risley suggests that fathers can have an integral role in creating a sense of safety and security and therefore a sense of home. Elaine's father creates a sense of home for Elaine by including her in his work, by engaging the family and their friends in meaningful discussions, and by creating a household based on mutual care and respect.

The idealized notion of home presented in Elaine's school reader, "the father goes to work," is nothing like Elaine's experience of her father until they move to Toronto when he becomes a university professor. She watches her father change his clothes from windbreakers to jackets, from flannel shirts to white shirts and ties and from "leather boots waterproofed with bacon grease" to "galoshes that buckle on over his shoes" (37), as if he is turning into a new person. This apparent transformation may add to Elaine's insecurity at this point in her childhood because she remarks that after the first year of living in Toronto, when they go North again in the early summer to study caterpillar infestations, her "father has shed his city clothing, turned back into himself. He has on his old jacket again, his baggy pants, his squashed felt hat with the fishing flies stuck

into it" (74). Prior to the move to Toronto, Elaine's early childhood is spent traveling throughout Northern Ontario documenting various insect infestations for her father's job as a "forest-insect field researcher" (37). The family continues to go back in the summer months until Elaine is a young adult. When they are traveling in Northern Ontario collecting insects her father plays "touch-tag" in the evenings with Elaine and her brother, Stephen (166). In her early childhood there was no separation from her father as his work life and domestic life were merged together. In this relationship, Atwood shows the disruptive effect of the move to the city on the family. Rather than spending all day together following insect infestations, the family members are apart during the day with her father going to work at the university, her mother staying home and Elaine and Stephen attending school in separate grades.

Yet, even once they move to Toronto, Mr. Risley continues to include his children in his work by taking them to the Zoology building on Saturdays to look at various slides and specimens under microscopes. He trusts them to be responsible with expensive university laboratory equipment; Stephen and Elaine spend hours on Saturday morning looking at scabs, hair, snot, and earwax, along with other slides. Elaine remarks "our curiosity is supposed to have limits, though these have never been defined exactly" (40), demonstrating that Elaine's father wants them to explore. Even when Elaine is a teenager she continues to go to the Zoology building to look at specimens under microscopes and "draw them, delineating the structures with different coloured pencils" (278). Although she is

encouraged to pursue a career in biology, her vocation as an artist seems to be closely related to her interest in her father's work. He teaches Elaine to observe closely and to pay attention to small details.

Mr. Risley includes his children in the discussions of his work and talks seriously to them as if they are adults. " 'Remember this,' our father says. 'This is a classic infestation. You won't see an infestation like this again for a long time'" (74).

Elaine observes that he discusses the caterpillar infestation with "respect and wonderment mixed in with the sense of catastrophe" (74). At home, Mr. Risley draws Elaine into his work by marking his student papers "in an armchair in the evenings with a board across the arms of the chair and the drawings on the board" (37) rather than in a study or den away from the children. Elaine stands "behind his chair, watching the drawings" (38) as her father explains the mistakes his students are making and how to draw insects in cross-section. In contrast to Mr. Risley, Elaine observes, "with Carol's father, with Cordelia's in the daily life of houses, fathers are largely invisible" (110). Elaine further reinforces her point by stating that "all fathers except mine are invisible in daytime; daytime is ruled by mothers" (187). Elaine shows no understanding of what her friend's fathers do for a living. Mr. Risley's behaviour towards his children shows his desire to be with his children, which creates feelings of safety and security, as well as encouraging their intellectual growth.

At the dinner table while they are camping in the North, Mr. Risley further engages his family in meaningful discussion about the state of the world. Sitting “at the table made of planks left over from the loggers” her father discusses “caterpillars: their numbers, their ingenuity, the various methods of defeating them” (74-75). As Elaine is sitting there listening to the discussion on caterpillars, she has a vague memory of making a scrapbook of images of domestic objects with Carol and Grace, and yet she comments, that “already it seems implausible” (75). In light of the significant conversations with her father, the activities and conversations with the girls appear trivial with their emphasis on the material domestic objects found in the Eaton’s Catalogue and the continual denigrating of their own meticulously cut and pasted scrapbooks and false praise for one another. Elaine is beginning to understand that having a sense of home is built through meaningful conversation and not through the collection of domestic objects.

Mr. Risley continues his connection with his children during dinner at the house in Toronto, Elaine’s father “explains why the human race is doomed” (243) and “that a species a day is becoming extinct” (279) as he traces arguments to their logical conclusion. The content of dinner table conversations supports Mr. Risley’s firm belief in not “brainwashing children” (108), as he discusses issues seriously; the conversations have a lasting impact, though Elaine realizes that “this is not what people are supposed to talk about at the dinner table” (280). Mr. Risley further demonstrates his inclusive nature by inviting Mr. Banerji, his

student from India, home for Christmas dinner. The food and customs of Christmas dinner are foreign to him, so Mr. Risley engages him in the “shared world of biology, which offers refuge from the real, awkward world of manners and silences” (147). Years later, Mr. Risley expresses his anger at Mr. Banerji not getting a permanent position at the University and his subsequent return to India. Elaine recognizes her “father’s view of human nature has always been bleak, but scientists were excluded from it, and now they aren’t. He feels betrayed” (322). Elaine’s father believes Mr Banerji should have been recognized for his academic contributions and that he was mistreated because of his race. In the dinner table conversations, Mr. Risley creates a home environment that is inclusive.

Here, as elsewhere, Atwood uses the domestic life of Elaine’s friends to provide a contrast with Elaine’s own home life, which sharpens her own understanding of home. The characterization of the fathers of Elaine’s friends Carol, Grace and Cordelia more closely align to the idealized notion presented in the school reader. All three of the fathers attempt to engage Elaine in discussion, but in each case the talk is stilted and awkward. Mr. Smeath attempts to align Elaine as a conspirator against his wife and sister-in-law by speaking jokingly during the formal Sunday dinner. Elaine does not know how to respond to him. As a teenager Elaine is able to joke with Cordelia’s father about the Atom, but she recognizes that Cordelia is “frightened of not pleasing him” (280). In contrast, in her own home Stephen openly disagrees with her father about the nature of the

universe and the future of the human species (244). The conversations in the Risley house create a comfortable, equitable home environment where the children are respected and included, not intimidated or dismissed. Mr. Risley takes a clear role in creating a sense of home.

Her friends' fathers stand in contrast to Mr. Risley. The other fathers are clearly the disciplinarians in the family, which creates a sense of fear in their daughters. Elaine remarks "fathers come out at night. Darkness brings home the fathers, with their real, unspeakable power. There is more to them than meets the eye" (187). Carol's father only appears in reference to spanking Carol with "his belt, buckle end, right across the bare bum" (186). Grace's father is humoured on Sunday dinners and by the little girls agreeing to watch the trains, but Elaine notes that he is "hardly ever seen" (110). Cordelia's father is the disciplinarian; he is large, craggy, charming, but we have heard him shouting upstairs" (81), though he "is charming to [the girls] on the rare occasions when he is seen" (187). Elaine is not afraid of her father, but does not want to disappoint him. When Cordelia tricks her into calling her father a "bugger" (154), she responds by wondering, "What have I done to my father?" (154). She understands that she has said a bad word, without fully understanding the meaning of what she has said, but she feels a profound shame at being disrespectful towards him nonetheless.

Thus, Elaine's feelings of safety and security develop with her relationship with her father because she is included in his work life and in conversations with him.

Her father also actively makes the house into a home by finishing the house himself. In the Risley household tasks are not divided along traditional gender lines. He gardens with his wife and he “picks out the furniture” (240). The feelings of safety and security are further reinforced as Elaine’s father creates a house that is based on care and mutual respect rather than on the patriarchal role of a dominator. His caring nature is evident when her mother has a miscarriage. Rather than hiring a housekeeper to take care of the children and the house while his wife is in the hospital, he takes on these tasks himself. After her mother’s miscarriage, it is the first time that Elaine no longer feels safe within her own home; there is no reference to either Stephen or Elaine suffering punishments meted out by their father. Rather, Elaine’s perceived lack of safety is a result of seeing her father “frightened as well” (189) at his wife’s weakened state. Mr. Risley creates a home environment that is inclusive and safe.

The importance of the relationship of Elaine’s father in her life is revealed in her in her artwork as an adult. In the paintings at the retrospective of her work, she includes details of plant and insect life done in cross-section, similar to what she was encouraged to draw and observe as a young child in the laboratory on Saturdays. Her father “thinks [her] talent for drawing is impressive, but wasted. It would have been better applied to cross-sections of stems and the cells of algae” (321). Her painting *Deadly Nightshade* features “a glass jar, with a bouquet of nightshade rising out of it like smoke....The stems twist and intertwine, the branches cluster with red berries, purple flowers” (379). The plant represents the

duality inherent in nature, which can be something both beautiful and deadly at the same time; it is from the plant family that can provide food and medicine, but also can be fatally toxic. Elaine does not seek to overly romanticize the natural world into something pristine and beautiful, but recognizes its destructive element as well. This understanding of nature has been shaped by the dinner table conversations held with her father; he expresses a great wonderment and love of nature, but also he fears the destruction of the world as a result of human greed and advancement (279). In the four panel paintings of Mrs. Smeath, titled *White Gift*, demonstrates a different aspect of Elaine's understanding of the natural world. The last panel shows Mrs. Smeath's "one large breast sectioned to show her heart. Her heart is the heart of a dying turtle: reptilian, dark, red, diseased" (396). Another painting of Mrs. Smeath shows her "flying, with Mr. Smeath stuck to her back, being screwed like a beetle" (456). While the paintings of Mrs. Smeath are unflattering, Elaine depicts the human body realistically, much like her father encouraged her to draw as a child. She puts "a lot of work into that imagined body, white as burdock root, flabby as pork-fat. Hairy as the inside of an ear" (457). Elaine, as an adult artist, uses the skills of observation and attention to detail that her father taught her as a young child.

In the painting *Three Muses*, which also includes her father's student, Mr. Bannerji, Elaine paints "spruce bud worm eggs in section" on a purple disc; she muses she "would not expect anyone but a biologist to recognize them" (459). The inclusion of Mr. Bannerji in her work is significant in demonstrating an

understanding of home because Elaine felt safe and secure with him in her own home as well as in the lab. The feelings of home extended beyond her immediate family members, and this sense of safety was a result of her father's inclusion of him. This attention to detail was encouraged when she, as a teenager, would "go down to the Zoology Building on Saturday afternoons to use the microscopes in the empty labs...delineating the structures with different coloured pencils" (278). The significance of her conversations with her father and his encouragement that she should pursue a career in biology is evident in the biological details included in her paintings. While there is no specific reference to home in her paintings, the references to the natural world are a reflection of time spent with her father. Her paintings also reflect important moments of being with her father by showing clear and specific details of the small aspects of plant, animal and insect life that he encouraged her to observe when they were traveling up North and also to draw while he was marking his own student papers. While she doesn't overtly demonstrate home or domestic spaces, Elaine has illustrated examples from her childhood when she felt safe and secure—two aspects she does associate with home. The attention to detail indirectly shows the importance of Elaine's father has in creating a sense of home. He created an environment that is safe, secure and nurturing.

Mothers and Home

Within the novel, Atwood creates a series of female characters as she explores the roles that women play within the home. She creates characters that represent what Coral Ann Howells calls “the endless complexity and quirkiness of human behaviour, which exceeds ideological labels and the explanatory power of theory.”¹⁸ In the novel, there are five different mother figures who create a sense of home in very different ways. Elaine compares and contrasts her own mother to each figure. Like her father, Elaine’s mother also creates a sense of home and also like her father she does not fit the tightly defined role of gender expectations in her dress and her behaviour. Elaine cannot accept the idealized image of the mother in her school reader, “in a dress and apron” (31), because it is contrary to Elaine’s own mother’s style of clothing, which is intrinsically tied to Elaine’s own understanding of femininity. Elaine’s mother is not easily defined by her clothing because what she wears varies according to where she is living and what activity she is undertaking. In the idealized image, the mother’s behaviour is static—fathers work and children play; mothers have no verb attached to them. The mother is defined by her clothing and not by her emotional contributions to creating a sense of home or activities done in order to make the home. As Blunt and Dowling note, the implied value in the “imaginings of suburban homes and home-making practices within them position women as mothers and as primarily responsible for the domestic sphere.”¹⁹ In Elaine’s early childhood, Mrs. Risley,

¹⁸ Coral Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke MacMillan Press, 1996), 19.

¹⁹ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*, 110.

dressed in more masculine clothes, does fulfil the traditional expectations of motherhood, cooking and caring for her children, but she does so in a non-traditional domestic setting in the transient settings in Northern Ontario. Once they move to Toronto, Elaine's mother adopts a more feminine style of dress, and continues to cook and care for her children. However, she does not become static like the idealized image from the school reader and is active outside of the home, gardening, walking and ice-dancing. While Elaine's mother recognizes that she must conform to a certain extent to societal expectations by wearing dresses while in Toronto, she does not feel confined by the domestic setting as she is frequently depicted outdoors. Elaine's understanding of her mother's role in creating a sense of home is strengthened by the contrast of the mothers of her friends.

Elaine's understanding of femininity is constructed from her school reader and not from her mother. She idealizes the notion of little girls and draws them dressed in "old-fashioned clothing, with long skirts, pinafores and puffed sleeves, or in dresses like Jane's [from the school reader], with big hair-bows on their heads" (32). In contrast to what she draws, Elaine herself dresses in her brother's hand-me downs and remarks, that "many of [her] clothes were once his" (29). Elaine describes her own mother's dress as masculine, "wearing grey slacks and a dark-blue plaid shirt," or similar in dress to her father (37). The move to Toronto marks the shift in Elaine's understanding the different expectations for dress for women. Elaine observes, "our mother's legs have

appeared, sheathed in nylons with seams up the backs. She draws on a lipstick mouth when she goes out" (37). Elaine's mother, however, does not fully embrace the societal conception towards female dress, as she is often seen wearing slacks while gardening or walking in the ravine. Elaine's mother also remarks that her husband picks out her dress clothes as "all her taste is in her mouth" (240).

Elaine's mother in her masculine dress with "her hair pinned back at the sides with bobby pins" (22) stands in sharp contrast to Carol's mother, Mrs. Campbell, who wears "twin sets" and gets "a cold wave" done at the hairdresser's (57-58). Mrs. Smeath, Grace's mother, "is not like Mrs. Campbell. For instance, she has no twin sets, and views them with contempt" (63). With her "print housedresses" (64) and "bibbed aprons" (64) she closely resembles the idealized image from the school reader. Elaine is drawn to the Smeath family because their style of dress closely resembles the images from her school reader. Outside of the traditional characterizations of mothers in *Cat's Eye* is Mrs. Finestein, the Risely's next-door neighbour. She is depicted as fashionable in pierced earrings and fancy slippers. Mrs. Finestein, as Elenora Rao points out, "can happily ignore the prevailing Christian conception of what a wife and mother should be" because she is Jewish.²⁰ When Elaine is a young teenager, she turns to Mrs. Finestein for fashion advice but offers no further comment on her as a mother.

²⁰ Elenora Rao, "Home and Nation in Margaret Atwood's Later Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, ed. Coral Ann Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 102.

With her flare for fashion, she provides Elaine with a variant model of femininity in her early adolescence. Altogether the various versions of female dress that Elaine observes in the mothers she meets as she is growing up provide her with a complex sense of gender that affects her developing understanding of the relation between gender and the domestic.

The characterization of Mrs. Risley also challenges the idealized image in the school reader because she is active. She is “doesn’t linger over housework, she’d rather be outside raking up leaves in the fall, shovelling snow in the winter, pulling weeds in the spring” (138). The other mothers in the novel are depicted only within the domestic setting. Elaine remarks, “my mother is not like the other mothers, she doesn’t fit in with the idea of them. She does not inhabit the house, the way other mothers do; she is airy and hard to pin down” (177). The passivity of domestic life is further reinforced with the scrapbook game the girls play in which the girls “sit on the floor of Grace’s room with piles of old Eaton’s Catalogues” and “cut out the small coloured figures out of them and paste them into scrapbooks. Then we cut out other things—cookware, furniture—and paste them around the figures. The figures themselves are always women” (59-60). This activity reinforces the expectation that the girls are preparing themselves to live their lives only in a domestic environment. Their main role is to collect domestic objects; however, Elaine finds “this game tiring—it’s the weight, the accumulation of all these objects, these possessions that would have to be taken care of, packed, stuffed into cars, unpacked” (60). Elaine’s understanding of what

it means to be female and in charge of domestic objects contrasts with that of Carol and Grace because her early childhood is transient whereas the other girls “have never moved anywhere” (60). Unlike her so-called friends, she does not view the collection of domestic objects, such as those in the Eaton’s catalogue, as being especially interesting or important. After all she has watched her own mother “packing [their] food into cardboard boxes and [their] clothes into suitcases” (33). Elaine’s mother does not conform to the idealized image of the mother as feminine and settled instead she is active, physical and independent.

Atwood’s treatment of the different mothers also heightens the sense of the importance of the mother in creating feelings of safety and security within the home. Carol’s mother frequently disapproves of Carol’s behaviour. She does not warmly embrace Elaine. She appears to have a high need for order. Grace’s mother is also disapproving and does not want noise. Cordelia’s mother seems clueless. Mrs. Finestein demonstrates the most nurturing role in Elaine’s life. She encourages Elaine’s independence in entrusting her with the care of her son, Brian. She demonstrates care and concern for Elaine when Elaine tells her she can no longer babysit Brian. Does she hug her? This care and concern for Elaine continues until Elaine is in adulthood—suggesting clothing is drab.

Elaine’s conflicted response to the role of the mother within the home is illustrated in her early artwork. In the depiction of mothers in her artwork, Elaine addresses the idealized image from her school reader. Shannon Hengen argues

in *Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* that "Mrs. Smeath clearly stood in for Elaine's mother during the first year Elaine spent in Toronto, and her reclamation of the mother image."²¹ One of her first paintings of Mrs. Smeath is titled *Rubber Plant: The Ascension*, which features the reclining Mrs. Smeath "wearing nothing but her flowered one-breast bib apron" surrounded by angels rising to Heaven (96). Mrs. Smeath considered her role as mother as involving self-sacrifice, so that it took on a pious religious importance. In *AN-EYE-FOR-AN-EYE*, Mrs. Smeath "stands in front of her sink, her wicked paring knife in one hand, a half-peeled potato in the other" (396). This painting with its biblical reference, refers to Mrs. Smeath inviting Elaine to church and Elaine identifying with her as a mother figure (108). Mrs. Smeath also features in the paintings titled *Torontodalisque: Homage to Ingres, Leprosy*, and *White Gift* in a variety of pseudo-sexualized poses, but still clearly attached to a domestic setting. The depiction of Mrs. Smeath in the paintings is unflattering and suggests Elaine's resentment towards her failure to provide a safe and secure home environment when Elaine was a young girl. Mrs. Smeath invited Elaine to come to church with them and to have Sunday lunch. The inclusion into their family life implied an extension of their home to Elaine. Yet, Mrs. Smeath "has known and approved" of the girls tormenting Elaine (203) and does not provide the feelings of safety and security Elaine associates with home. By allowing the girls to bully Elaine, she shows that traditional mother figures dressed like the idealized image from the school reader do not necessarily

²¹ Shannon Hengen, *Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry* (Toronto: Second Story Press), 106.

provide a safe and secure home environment.

In her later work, Elaine depicts two different views of motherhood, which contrast with her paintings of Mrs. Smeath. *Our Lady of Perpetual Help* symbolizes the role of mother in creating a sense of home. It is a painting of the Virgin Mary as a lioness holding a lion cub in her lap. “She is wearing a winter coat over her blue robe, and has a purse slung over her shoulder. She’s carrying two brown paper bags full of groceries. Several things have fallen from the bags: an egg, an onion, an apple. She looks tired” (388). In this painting Elaine illustrates the complexity of being a mother involving both the emotional aspects--the fierceness, protectiveness and wildness (in depicting the mother as a lion) and also the physical aspects--the exhaustion of being a caregiver responsible for the very mundane, yet necessary, tasks of grocery shopping and preparing meals. The portrayal of the mother as a lion protecting her cub hints at Elaine’s own childhood, when her mother calls the mothers of her friends after Elaine has fallen in the creek (217). By acknowledging the girls’ cruel behaviour towards her daughter, Elaine’s mother shows a desire to ensure her daughter is safe and secure in other people’s homes.

The double triptych titled *Pressure Cooker* depicts Elaine’s own mother. The first panel shows her mother “in coloured pencil, in her city-house kitchen and her late-forties dress. Even she had a bib apron, blue flowers with navy piping, even she wore it from time to time” (170). In the initial panel Elaine presents her

mother as conforming to the idealized image of motherhood as presented in her school reader. The second panel is a collage created from the artwork “with those rancid greens and faded blues and dirty-looking pinks” from women’s magazines of the late-forties; again Elaine portrays her mother in the same pose (171). The third panel is her mother again in the same pose, but this time the painting is white on white with the figure of her mother done in white pipe cleaners. “Reading across from left to right it looked as if [her] mother was slowly dissolving, from real life into a Babylonian bas-relief shadow” (171). The “bottom set of images went the other way” (171); however, the last panel depicts her mother “in full-coloured realistic detail. But this time [her] mother was in her slacks and boots and her man’s jacket, making chokecherry jam over the outdoor fire” (170). The shift in colour is significant because Elaine’s mother was more herself cooking out of doors than she was cooking in the house in Toronto. Elaine characterizes her mother in the painting as a woman who comes into full colour or full identity when she is in an environment in which she is most at home and which is not the traditional societal construction. The title of the painting is significant because Elaine’s mother did not feel the need to conform to societal expectations of what a mother should do. “She never says *What will people think?* The way other mothers do, or are supposed to. She says she doesn’t give a hoot” (241). Elaine remembers, “I think this is irresponsible of her...It makes my mother into a non-mother” (241). However, according to Laurie Vickroy, an Atwood critic, “Elaine’s own mother is not a typical agent of socialization, but is ultimately a good role model, an independent and

unconventional mother.”²² Mrs. Risley in her unconventionality creates a safe and secure home environment for Elaine. Elaine recognizes this when her mother phones the other girls’ mothers and tells them of Elaine falling into the creek and getting hypothermic. After this pivotal experience, Elaine gains the confidence to stand up to the girls.

Siblings and Home

Lastly, I will discuss the sibling relationship in the idealized image presented in Elaine’s school reader, where “the children play on the lawn with their dog and cat” (31), creates a sense of home. While they do not have a pet to play with, Elaine and Stephen’s childhood closely aligns with the idealized notion of home. Elaine’s parents do not conform to traditional roles but the sibling relationship presented in the novel is more traditional. Elaine has a close relationship with her brother. In early childhood they were each other’s only companions, and while they did “squabble in whispers and monosyllables” (32), it is clear that they enjoy each other’s company and are “loyal even in outrage” (27). As a young child, Elaine idolizes her older brother and considers his carsickness, “his only weakness that [she knows] of” (22). Similar to her father, Stephen creates a sense of security for Elaine by playing with her, teaching her and accepting her without judgment.

²² Laurie Vickeroy, “Seeking Symbolic Immortality: Visualizing Trauma in *Cat’s Eye*” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 38 Issue 2 (June 2005), under “*Cat’s Eye*” <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/docview/205342255/131414738254DC6FB89/1?accountid=13800>

In their early childhood, Stephen and Elaine play war. "Stephen gives [her] a gun and a knife" (26) and Elaine is "the infantry, which means [she] has to do what he says" (26). It is his favourite game and not hers, but she is content to play along. "Sometimes, instead of war, [they] hunt through the forest, turning over logs and rocks to see what is underneath" (26). At night in the motel, they "lie in the saggy pull-out bed, head to toe, which is supposed to make [them] go to sleep sooner, and kick each other silently under the covers; or else [they] try to see how far we can get out sock feet up each other's pyjama legs" (32). Since they do not stay in any place for very long, they have no friends; they are each other's only companions.

The move to Toronto changes their close friendship, just as it changed the behaviour of Elaine's parents. Once they move to Toronto there is a separation between the two children. Stephen enters into the world of boys and Elaine is thrust into the world of girls. This parallels the shift Elaine observes in her parents' clothing once they move to the city; Stephen and Elaine are expected by their peers to adopt gender roles outside of the home. Rather than doing their schoolwork side by side under their mother's guidance, they go to public school and "lining up is the only time [she] see[s] [her] brother at school" (51). At home they continue to play by setting up a tin can telephone between their bedrooms, writing cryptic messages to each other and signalling to each other with their shoe-laces tied together (51-52). However, there is a new physical separation

between the two of them, as each has her/his own bedroom. Elaine comments, “at first I found the thought of my own room exciting—an empty space to be arranged as I wanted, without regard to Stephen and his strewn clothes and wooden guns—but now I am lonely” (35). Even though Stephen spends more time with other boys once they move to Toronto, he still includes her when his friends are over to read comic books in his bedroom. After she breaks away from the girls, several years after the move to Toronto, she spends “a lot of time reading comic books in [her] brother’s room when he isn’t there” (218). Elaine recognizes that she feels comfort surrounded by her brother’s things.

Stephen teaches Elaine about the natural world in a different way than her father. Stephen focuses on sharpening her senses: “Stephen is teaching [her] to see in the dark, as commandos do” (27). Once they move to Toronto, Stephen begins teaching her about stars. On Saturdays, Elaine spends time with her brother in the Zoology building looking at specimens under the microscope.

Stephen accepts Elaine by including her in the world of boys. He does not talk down to Elaine, but includes her in the activities he enjoys. He also confides in her about his secret girlfriend. Elaine’s response is ambivalent: “knowing this secret, being the only one chosen to know, makes me feel important in a way...but also bereft” (117). Elaine realizes that knowing Stephen’s secret gives her power over him to “lay him open to derision” (117), yet she chooses to keep it “because for the first time in [her] life [she] feel[s] responsible for him” (117).

Even as teenagers they remain close. Stephen wants Elaine to “develop her mind” and “doesn’t want [her] to be a pin-headed fuzzbrain” (246). He does not want Elaine to be dating boys who “are dimwits and unworthy of [her] serious consideration” (269). When they are teenagers, Elaine observes that her brother “brings out the best in her” (374). The closeness of their relationship reflects what feminist scholar Iris Marion Young states about home. She observes, “home is a concept and desire that expresses a bounded and secure identity.”²³ Elaine could be herself with Stephen, and his complete acceptance of her creates a sense of home.

Elaine’s artwork also reveals the importance of her relationship with her brother in creating a sense of home. The painting *One Wing* is painted as a way of memorializing her brother after his death in the attempted hijacking of a plane. The two outer panels of the triptych show “a large pale-green luna moth” and the other “a World War Two airplane, in the style of a cigarette card” (460). Stephen spends one summer identifying butterflies; this summer is the beginning of the separation between the two of them. Elaine, after a school year of being tormented by the girls, is no longer “interested in games [she] can’t win” (165). Since Stephen is older and decides the rules of the games, he often wins them. Stephen spends more time observing boat funnels or butterflies by himself (164-165). Elaine likes “looking at the pictures of butterflies in his book” (165). Her favourite is the Luna moth. Stephen finds one and shows it to her. In the outer

²³ Young, “House and Home,” 146.

panel of the painting, the image of the Luna moth forms a significant part of her memorializing her brother because she recognizes that during her childhood while she was withdrawing from him, he was still reaching out, by showing her the Luna moth. The two of them managed to maintain a connection with each other. Before they moved to Toronto, Stephen “collects cigarette cards with pictures of airplanes on them” (25). The second outer panel with the World War Two airplane is represents the association with her brother always collecting things. The middle panel depicts “a man falling from the sky” without a parachute (460). Stephen was shot by hijackers and fell out the airplane door onto the tarmac. Elaine had wanted her brother to have been shot after the hijackers threw him out of the plane, “so he could have had that brief moment of escape, of sunlight, of pretended flight” (442). The painting shows “in his hand is a child’s wooden sword” (460), another image from her early childhood, as he used to make wooden swords “with blood coloured onto the blades with red pencils” (25). The title of the painting *One Wing* refers to Stephen cheerfully singing “Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer” as a young child (26); it is also a reference to her father saying “you can’t fly on one wing” (26). As a young child, Elaine is confused about the idea of one wing because she knows a bird can’t fly with only one. She also knows after Stephen’s death that she is no longer the same without him. The triptych, *One Wing*, represents home in an understated way. The three panels represent the emotional qualities Elaine associates with home, which Stephen, as her only companion in early childhood helped to foster.

Towards a Conclusion

In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood seems to suggest through Elaine's memories that there is a comfort in ideal images. The notions of home are fluid, so we hold onto idealized images to help us navigate our way through the instability in defining our sense of home. The idealized images are static and simple, which makes an ideal home appear easy to attain. The white house is pristine. The roles of the family members are clearly defined. There is no hidden uncertainty and danger in the idealized view of home. This small aspect of the idealized image actually aligning with Elaine's life in Toronto gives the impression that there is the potential for the rest of the image to materialize as well. Yet, the idealized image does not capture the essence of home, which Atwood clearly shows, rests upon the emotional attachments to people and the feelings of safety and security that are generated from them. The complexity and importance of relationship cannot be easily captured in an image.

For Elaine, place interacts with family relationships to create a sense of home. Northern Ontario, though it does not match the idealized image presented in the school reader, becomes home because the environment is comforting to her and it fosters closeness between family members rather than the physical structure of a house dominating in her understanding of home. Significantly, none of her artwork depicts urban settings or idealized houses; her hatred of Toronto is attached to her feelings of the lack of safety and security she felt entering into

friendships with Carol, Grace and Cordelia. The importance of home and Elaine's understanding of it are evident in two paintings she completed after she moved to Vancouver. Her newer paintings are "larger than [her] usual format" (457), which indicates that she has come to a clearer understanding of her life as an artist and also her understanding of self and of home.

The painting *Picoseconds*, is "a landscape, done in oils, with the blue water, the purple underpainting, the craggy rocks and windswept raggedy trees and heavy impasto of the twenties and thirties. This landscape takes up much of the painting" (458). The size of the landscape indicates the importance it had for the artist. By contrast, the human scene is "painted in another style: smooth, finely modulated, realistic as a snapshot" (458). "In the lower right-hand corner...[her] parents are making lunch" and underneath them are logos from gas stations from the forties (458). She paints her "mother in her plaid jacket" (458) dressed similar to her father. The inclusion of her parents and the reference to the gas stations is an important reference to her childhood life of transience, but her parents cooking together and the peacefulness invoked by the landscape suggest the rootedness and security of this life. Their "Studebaker is parked in the background" behind her parents (458). Prior to the move to Toronto, the family and all of their domestic objects fit into the car; the car itself was home. The title of the painting is significant because it is a reference to the lecture Stephen gave in Toronto. In his lecture Stephen argues that a picosecond, which is one trillionth of a second, is the length of time required to create the universe. In titling the

painting *Picoseconds*, I think Elaine is recognizing that her understanding of home developed in a flash but then continues to unfold during her life. However, at the foundation of her understanding of home is an affinity to a natural rather than an urban setting.

Another work of this period, the painting *Unified Field Theory*, is “a vertical oblong, larger than the other paintings” (461). This is the only painting that is not interpreted by Charna, the Sub-Versions Gallery curator. Elaine merely describes it and the reader is left to figure the significance of the images portrayed within it. It also represents a strong connection to nature and the importance of the natural world in representing a sense of home for Elaine. In the painting, “to either side of the bridge are the tops of trees, bare of leaves, with a covering of snow on them, as after a heavy moist snowfall”(461). The woman dressed in black in the painting is the Virgin of Lost Things who is holding “an oversized cat’s eye marble” (461). The marble represents the marble that Elaine used to keep in her pocket to provide a sense of comfort, when her “friends” Grace, Carol, and Cordelia tormented her. The comfort the marble provided represents the comfort that being up North for the summers provided for Elaine. The woman represents the lady that Elaine claimed helped her after she had fallen into the creek. This woman tells Elaine, “you can go home now,....It will be all right. Go home” (213). After this, Elaine’s mother finds her, brings her home and phones the mothers of her friends and tells them what has happened. This shifts the relationship between Elaine and the girls as Elaine is able to “turn and walk away” from them

(217). Home in Toronto, while it doesn't match the sense of security she felt as a young child becomes more like home after the incident at the creek. Elaine can indeed "go home" that is, turn back to the safety of the familial relationship that nurture and sustain her.

In the painting, "underneath the bridge is the night sky...but there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots" (461). These two images reflect the comfort that Elaine felt looking at the stars at night with Stephen and also the close connection she had with her brother when they would lift up pieces of wood in order to look at the bugs, snakes and roots underneath. Elaine further describes that "at the lower edge of the painting the darkness pales and merges to a lighter tone, the clear blue of water, because the creek flows there, underneath the earth, underneath the bridge, down from the cemetery" (461). The water represents the duality of something beautiful that can also be deadly in nature, a concept that is reinforced through conversations with her father. When Elaine fell into the creek, she nearly died from hypothermia, but it was also a moment of rebirth, after which she realized that she did not have to accept the bullying.

Through the descriptions of her paintings, the reader gains a further understanding of the importance of the geographical environment for Elaine Risley. The title of this painting is also taken from Stephen's lecture in Toronto. Unified field theory is a theoretical branch of physics, which attempts to explain

the connection between fundamental forces in nature. In this painting, Elaine connects the fundamental forces that create a sense of home for her.

I take comfort in reading Atwood. In intensely studying *Cat's Eye* I have come to appreciate home in a new way. My sense of home, like Elaine's, is closely tied to the natural world. My sense of home is also closely intertwined with my relationship with my brother; he lives close by and we talk frequently. However, in rereading the novel I have come to realize the power that the idealized image has over me in shaping what is "normal or expected". Home in my mind is a house with a yard. The father goes to work. The mother stays home and takes care of the children. The boy and the girl play with their dog. Instead, I am a single mother with two boys who play with the dog in our apartment. I think the value of idealized images rests in the fact that the contrast forces us to define our own sense of home. I have come to realize that my idealized notions of home are static and don't acknowledge the importance of the personal relationships that strengthen the sense of home. In his study of what creates a sense of home, Paul JJ Pennartz states, "the quality of habituation depends essentially on the quality of the interpersonal relations."²⁴ He further remarks that, "pleasantness and atmosphere do not occur, they have to be created, that is they result from action or intentional behaviour."²⁵ It is the intentional action of Elaine's father talking to her, including her in his work and encouraging her to observe the world, closely combined with her mother physically caring for her and acknowledging

²⁴ Paul J.J. Pennartz, "Atmosphere at Home: A Qualitative Approach." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 6.2 (1986), 144.

²⁵ Ibid., 144.

the torments Elaine suffered, reinforced by Stephen's companionship, that create a sense of home for Elaine.

I am left with the feeling Elaine had when she left her husband. She is unsure as to where she wants to go to begin a new life and says, "Home, I think. But it is nowhere I can go back to" (425).

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