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Stories by Water

excerpted from Blue Valleys, a book of the Kootenays.

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This piece of land holds my life the way a mirror holds light or a glass bowl holds water.

The beach where I go almost every day is a semi-circle of brown sand, framed by round granite loaves of rock. Bone Bay, we called it, when I was a kid, because a dead cow had washed up there, once, years before. We said they were human bones, ghost bones. It was the ghost beach.

Today, as on most days, in the late afternoon, the dog and I go to the beach, he carrying his newly found soccer ball, long buried under the snow which is finally disappearing. The Delicious tree by the garden is full of robins, the garden is a river of mud littered with islands of snow. Occasionally, one of the robins flies down to pick through the mud.

The yard is a patchwork of dead leaves, snow, ashes, and sawdust. Come spring and warmth, it will all be eaten by the grass. The honeysuckle and the clematis have been crushed by the snow melting off the roof in huge crashing

chunks. The potentilla and other shrubs are also flattened. Spring is black and grey, sharp edges, black branches like dead hair on the fruit trees.

We go down the hill, across the orchard, over the rocks and onto the granite sand. Mist hangs over the lake. The dog worries the soccer ball until I kick it into the icy water, and he crashes in after it. The lake is low. The water is still. A sucker hangs motionless, just under the surface. Fungus whitens his tail.

We moved to the farm the year I turned six. This new land was a place of cows, thistle jungles, and bantie chickens who followed me hoping for food. Louis Shelackie's old shack, where we first stayed, stunk of creosote and damp plywood because he had built it from timbers he stole off a highway bridge.

When we moved to my grandfather's big farmhouse, it reeked of smoke and dust and ghosts. Pierre Longueval, the man who had created the farm and then drowned in the lake, snuck through the house at night, slamming doors or opening them again.

It was my job to throw grain to the chickens. When I went out in the late afternoon with a bucket, they came running from all over the farm. As I stood staring out over fields, emerald in the evening light, I fell, tumbling into this land, heart, soul and body. I gave it my dreams, gave it all my longing and belonging. The farm became a place of stones that turned to elephants, hills up which galloped ranks of imaginary wild horses, a beach where the rocks sang in the afternoon, and golden eyed fish who lived in their own kingdom sailed with majestic slowness through green-shadowed water.

As evening fell. I would sit on the Fishing Rock, watching the sun leaving over the top of McGregor peak, gold light catching the forestry watchtower on its bald peak. A downdraft would start, I could hear it coming, sighing down the mountainside through the fir and pine branches.

Above me in the fields, the dark was growing and the curlews were crying and crying through the shadows.

They're gone now. They've disappeared and I don't know why. My father says the ravens drove them away. But when I was a child, lying awake on hot nights, they cried and ran over the fields and I loved their cries more than any other sound.

I stayed at the beach until there was only a lingering rim of light behind the opaque blue mountains. The fish made circles on the water; the water slurped and lipped at the sand's edge like feet splashing, like something coming out of the black depths to visit.



There is a monster in the lake. Many people have seen it. On very hot summer evenings, our father sometimes used to take us out in the boat in the middle of the lake to swim.

He would swim under the boat and grab our legs. He and our mother would talk about all the bodies that had been lost in the lake, the bodies that never came to the surface, the black endless depths of the lake.

But still I wouldn't want to go home. The fields were full of dark. The hay stubble would bite my bare feet. My mother might be calling. Mosquitoes began to haunt the air; light still glimmered in dim layers on the mountains. But I didn't want to go, not yet, not quite yet. The wind would come stronger now, enough to rock the trees, wake ripples on the water which splashed with greater urgency, – ghosts in the water.

The mountains were black now. Under the trees, up the path from the beach, I had to feel my way. The voice behind me from the water was menacing. I had escaped but it wanted me back. All day I had hovered by the water, staring into the green depths, looking for fish, caught in a dream of water and air, the sun tasting my skin, turning me to brown salt and leather. My skin would glow all night.

Floating back through the hay fields, half fish, half bird, blind across the bird-crying fields, with the wind and the black sighing trees and my mother waiting, calling me, singing, to come in, come in, come back inside.

My mother had trained as a singer before she married. She sang at her work, sang to call us inside, pure operatic notes floating over the orchard and down the hill to the water, where we were hiding, escaping the endless work. When we moved there, I thought the farm was freedom, I soon found its other name was work. My mother sang in her toil, from morning to night, the endless effort of running a farm and feeding everyone on it and producing everything from scratch, all our food came from the farm, meat, fruit, vegetables, milk and butter. Every fall, 300 jars of fruit and vegetables lined the shelves in the cellar.

Outside, the farm was my father's kingdom. He extended his fury at his disobedient and wayward land to us, his lazy children. The rain rotted the cherries, lodged the hay so it couldn't be cut; weeds overran the pasture grass and the garden. One year, the chickens got coccidiosis and died, all six hundred of them, and every day for a solid year we ate chicken, which my mother did her best to disguise as something else but never could.

The thing I once loved most about my father was his hands. They were huge, the skin thick as leather mitts, littered with nicks and cuts, the lines embedded with grease and dirt. No matter how much he washed, they always had those black lines, that male reek of motors.



When I was a child, I followed him everywhere. I had to stretch my legs to awkward lengths to match his strides.

"You're just like your father," my mother would snap when she was really angry with me.

I was my father's henchman, and for a long time, his enemies were my enemies. I believed in his raging endless despair about work and money, I followed behind him, snarling at my brothers and sister who couldn't, wouldn't, could never work as hard, as fast, as well, as I could.

Once we were walking out to the hayfield in the spring. Wind came beating in off the lake. We were supposed to spend the morning picking up rocks, shards of granite from the outcrop that my father had blown up with dynamite. He liked to blow things up. I did too. I loved to help him. It's a miracle he never blew any of us up. He used to hand us sticks of dynamite, the paper damp from age and leaking nitroglycerine.

"Don't shake your fingers," he said. We put the dynamite down the holes he'd drilled with his ancient compressor, covered them with dirt and rocks and tamped the whole thing down with crowbars. He fixed the blasting caps, ran out the fuse, said, "Get down. Open your mouths."

That was to protect our ears. We all got headaches from the blast fumes and our crazy dog Willy ran in and began pawing at the blast holes even before all the rocks had stopped raining down from the sky. Maybe he figured the world's biggest gopher was down there somewhere.

On the way out to the hayfield, my father began cursing my little brother who was lagging behind. I was eight, so my brother would have been five. My father was ranting, about how we all had to work, when there was work to be done, you goddamn well did it, that it was work or starve and by God, we were going to work.

I saw it. I got it clear. It was one of those moments when life suddenly made sense. We were all in this together. We had this thing to do, called survival. I felt a clear and religious hatred. I hated my brother, who didn't get it and was whining behind, scuffling his feet in the dirt and doing everything to get out of working.

Occasionally, our father stopped cursing the weather, the fruit trees, the contrary cows breaking through fences and getting out on the road. Sometimes he played, went fishing, took us all hiking up a remote creek across the lake to look for the rare and tender brook trout in the high rushing pools of Next Creek. In the summers, we'd go on picnics and winters we went skating on the

marshy spaces of Rat Slough where he chased us with bulrushes breaking open in a foam of seeds.

One day frozen sleet coated the hayfield and he took us out there in the old Dodge pickup and spun it in circles until we were dizzy with screaming.

I always felt safe with him, even reaching under the shrieking buzzsaw to pull away lengths of wood or the time he knocked a tree over the power line. When the wires lay snaked and sparking in the grass he said, "Don't touch those," so my brother and I jumped over them instead.

And although I never told anyone, I knew it was my fault the tree had taken out the power lines. He'd told us to push on it as he cut through with the power saw because it was leaning and the wind was blowing, but when I felt the tree lean its awful weight towards me I weakened and let go. It bent over to squash me but I was too fast and ran out and away.

My father's first paid job was at twelve, running a combine, harvesting peas in the rain. The heavy pea vines kept tangling up the combine blades. When my oldest brother developed asthma, our father told us all how he had been allergic to pollen and dust but had cured himself by working on a haying crew where most of the hay consisted of ragweed. A day spent coughing and sneezing in a haze of yellow ragweed pollen had cured him. The same treatment never worked for my brother.

I came home once from rounding up cows on horseback with the neighbour kids with my scalp torn open from a low-hanging branch. My mother demanded we drive the twenty miles to the hospital. My father was furious at the idea of wasting gas and time over something so trivial. But my mother won, for once, and a doctor used nine stitches to close the cut.

It took me a long time to become my mother's ally against my father.

At first, quite reasonably, I tried to agree with both of them and I tried to get them to agree with each other. I went back and forth during their fights. Tell your father, tell that rotten bastard. And I did.

To which my father often responded bitterly in a phrase he still uses, "You women," he said, "you goddamned women. You all think alike."

Now, as I spent more time with her, I took my mother's side more and more often. My mother and I, over the baking, washing, peeling fruit, mixing dough, agreed genially and often that my father is a bastard and that her marriage to him had been a mistake.

The farm ate my mother alive – as it ate everything and then reproduced itself endlessly, each winter, the earth enthusiastically devouring all the blood and shit and leaves and sawdust and bones and feathers and sad yellow corn shooks we dumped on it.

My mother was always there, at the centre, and if the life of the farm had a soul, she was that soul, endlessly generating food, meals, comfort, cups of tea, bowls of popcorn.

Even when she couldn't afford shoes for us, she somehow afforded records, a subscription to the Metropolitan Opera Society. She sang at her work – and then she stopped singing. She was too sad, she said, or her voice was going, or she was too old.



When I was very young, I promised my mother when I grew up and became a rich and famous writer, that I would take her to the Metropolitan Opera in New York. I never made enough money to do that. I regret that failure – not the money, but the trip, the fact that she never got on an airplane, never went anywhere but dutiful occasional trips to see relatives.

There was so much I wanted to give her and never did. Though she sang at her work, she never stopped – cooking, cleaning, baking, milk things, laundry, her kids, and then her grandkids, all endlessly coming home to the farm, coming in the door, going automatically to the fridge because she baked every day and there was always something to eat.

When my mother first started losing her memory, she didn't talk about it. She wrote notes to herself, she wrote down all her grandchildren's birthdays. She wrote her sister's and brother's birthdays in a notebook. She wrote about music she liked and the names of programs on the radio but mostly she wrote down lists and lists of work.

I knew my mother had started leaving us the day she phoned over to my house, almost hysterical with fear because she couldn't remember how to make biscuits. She'd been making biscuits for almost seventy years – odd that her brain would lose such a simple thing. These days, she sits and stares out the window. I hope she's resting.

A family can run away like water between your fingers. My sister came with me to see our mother, who cried when we left but was soon distracted by the nurse offering food. My sister and I went back to the empty farm in silence. Over tea, we agreed, genially, that after our mother died, we probably wouldn't see each other again.

"I hate this goddamned place," she said. "I hate this valley, I keep trying

to get away from it."

She left and I went to the beach for a last swim, but the beach was lonely. Tomorrow I would return to the city. The rocks hummed quietly to themselves – a new family had moved in next door and kept driving in and out of their bay with their enormous powerboat. There was no peace at the beach.

On the inland lake where we lived, a boat has very little function – other than pleasure and play, but what pleasure and play it is, terrifying intoxicating, even sexy. The boat lifts you over a medium through which, if you were encased in it, you would have to drag yourself. A power boat is a flying dream in which you are flung harmlessly, in sheer joy over the glistening flat surface, surrounded by water but not in it or bound to it.

And all this for pleasure, a pleasure which results in enormous amounts of gasoline spent, fumes on the water, but a pleasure which allows you to drift seamlessly and effortlessly through the vast beauty of lake and mountains and or even better, to go round and round and round in dizzy circles and all of this at the cost of some \$30,000 and rainbow sheen of oil pollution, quickly dissipated.

The first time I went swimming this summer, I hesitated at the water's edge. Rain slanted down on the other side of the lake, but the sun shone on me. The mountains were black-green and blue in the shafted light.

I shed my clothes, waded into the water. It was warm at the edge and ice cold further out. I gasped and let it take my breath and kept swimming. I swam to the rocks circling the bay, hauled myself out and lay there for a while.

There were no boats on the lake because of the storm. I sat there in the warm wind then slid back in the water until I was full of the lake, full of summer and strawberries and the heat coming and the storm waiting on the other side of the lake and mosquitoes hovering at the shore. I swam and gasped and remembered all over again the sensual intimacy of swimming, like making love, slow rolling and rolling in the water. Seal woman. I couldn't bear to leave.

I could live anywhere. I could love anyplace. That's what I tell myself. It's the utter familiarity of this place that translates into profundity. It's the same lake and the same beach and the same summer repeating itself like an ancient liturgical chant. I used to swim out for half a mile into the lake, over the depths of black green water, and lie and bask and roll, spouting and playing like a demented goofy whale. The water always feels safe. It holds me up, licks me clean. I am its plaything as it is mine. But this lake eats things, people, boats, bodies.

I came out of the water and leaned against the sun-heated rock. The kids used to warm themselves on these rocks. They claimed, when they listened closely, they could hear voices. I listened but I didn't hear anything from inside the rock.

But when I was young, they sang to me. They danced in late afternoon the reflections from the water. I finally told my mother that the rocks sang and she said, " It must be insects, or the wind."

I rubbed my back against the rock. My scalp tingled from the cold and my skin was as soft and clean as a washed leaf. After I left, I stopped at the garden for strawberries, a new cauliflower, onions and garlic, the first perfect raspberry and even a few half ripe Saskatoons – the grazing time of year, when the earth drips with food.

I never understood before that memories are also a place to live. Whenever I come home to the farm these days, I do the same thing. I prowl around. I look at every change. I see the work I can no longer do, the trees which need pruning, the weeds in the raspberries, the unmowed lawns, the work I did for years, the work I don't do any longer. But I see it.

The dog and I always go for a last walk before bed. Usually, we go to the beach but on my last visit home, in August, I found myself wandering through the old Hog Pasture, which hasn't been a hog pasture for sixty years. It's now owned by other people, has huge new houses on it that nobody lives in, both for sale. I'm trespassing but there's no one to see or care.



Plus I have some rights here. Or my memories do. And some needs as well.

The dog takes off, disappears into the darkness, running fast, nose to the ground. I depend on him to warn me about bears or cougars, but I'm not really nervous. Any self-respecting bear or cougar would hear me fumbling along and get himself as far out of the way as possible.

I'm never sure what I'm doing out here, tracing paths that only existed when I was a kid, paths that are now lawns and driveways. Still, I know the way, even in the dark. Over this particular path, I went every day after school to fetch Tiny, the Jersey milk cow with the huge doleful eyes. She used to hear me coming and hide in the brush. I had to stand very still and listen until the occasional faint clank from her cowbell would give her away. Once I found her, she'd begrudgingly head for the barn, her calf, her evening feed of grain and hay. I'd wander behind, a stick in my hand which I didn't need, switching the clusters of snowberries off the bushes, or the last dried elderberries from out of the thicket.

I'm glad to see that same elderberry bush I used to walk by is still there. Elderberries are hard to kill. Maybe the new owner got tired of chopping it down, finally let it be and curved his driveway to go around it. An old European legend says that witches live in elderberry bushes. If you chop one down, the witch will curse you.

White people haven't lived long enough in this country to have similar legends. We don't know or believe anything about the spirits of the land. We don't think there are any. Maybe we believe that to our peril.

All my life I have watched people move in around me, chop down the trees, build driveways and houses and septic tank fields and lawns and gardens. Gradually, they have built places which hold other memories, not mine. But these houses are for sale because the people who built them are both dead and their children live far away and don't want to come here.

My memories are of these places before they were owned, civilized, tamed. Mine are of the old paths, the deer trails, the moss-beds under the spruce, the snowberry jungle with the secret swamp at its centre. Mine are a child's memories – it is my childhood I am prowling through out here in the dark, feeling my way over paths that my feet remember, that would be hidden to me by daylight.

I have an odd fantasy that I can see the paths – that the layers of feet, mine, the dogs, the cows, the O'Neil's crazy wild horses, deer and bears and skunks and other animals prowling the dark, have left thin molecular traces of themselves, traces that shine dimly in the night.

What is probably true is that the paths are a hidden unevenness in the ground, so they refract the little available light, from the stars or a distant yard light differently and so maybe it is true that I can see them.

But I like my fantasy better, that the path is visible to me at night in the same way as the smells of wild animals are visible to the dog's questing nose – that it shines in some way I don't understand, that it is available to my seeking feet, wide open eyes and my endlessly nostalgic heart.

The paths remain, – and the names. The names remain within our family – I don't know if the neighbours with their new houses have any idea that they now live in Sawdust Bay, Haley's Pasture, the Hog Pasture, or Bone Bay.

These were the farm names, acquired easily, lost just as easily. Sawdust Bay still has thick piles of sawdust layered over with pine needles where Pierre Longueval, the man who created the farm where I grew up, milled out the lumber for his house and barns and chicken sheds – Haley's Pasture is where one of the first white men into the country trailed a herd of goats over the mountains, built four log cabins whose ancient bones still crouch under the fir trees. Someone has put a trailer on Pierre's sawdust piles, someone has built a driveway over the rock walls and rusty barbed wire Haley used for his goat pasture.

When I am home, I prowl the old paths remembering stories stored in

the ground and waiting for me, shining up at me in the starlight. I prowl these paths looking for comfort, for roots, for balance, for reconnection. I know what I am really doing is wandering through my own history, looking for the next book, the new path, the next step on the road. It's what I do as a writer, wander around in the dark, eyes to the ground, looking for the crystals left behind by feet that have traveled this same ground.

When I lie in bed at night the path still shine in my head. All night I walk their secret ways, at home and content.

Driving alone across the country is the perfect suicide dream. It's like being dead for just a little while.

After I finished working in Edmonton, I drove down through Calgary, stopped in Fort Macleod, on to the foothills, through the Rockies to the Kootenays.

I had been living in other people's houses for months, living other people's lives. I was tired of smiling, getting up at odd hours, eating breakfast when I didn't feel like it, hanging up my wet towels, stopping at two glasses of wine.

Now, every place I saw, I imagined stopping, finding a place, a house, and simply staying there, having a life of my own. And each life would be in its own kind of place; in Northern Alberta, it would be among the poplar and aspen and cottonwood, the gruff farmers, oil wells and hydrogen sulphide flares, flat stretches of brush and sly greedy trees busily reclaiming any unplowed land.

I wanted to stop in Peigan country, near Brocket, where someone had spray painted a sign saying, Free Nation, No Treaty Indians. Two men were standing beside a fence post and tractor, stretching wire. The wind was blowing hard, hard, out of the Crowsnest. The horses stood with their heads down and rumps pointing to the mountains.

Or down through the other side of the Crowsnest, maybe I could live in Fernie and never go skiing. I could have a little house on the dark mountains among the elk and moose and hunters in the fall. I could live alone, in all that snow. I kept thinking of my favourite Adrienne Rich poem about driving across the country, through towns she might have lived and died in, lonely.

And then I thought of the place I do live, and have lived for so long, all my life, and how peculiarly lonely it is there, among the people I have known all my life. It's writing that makes me lonely, I thought resentfully. It's all writing's fault. I finally understood that writing made me an exile the first time I picked up a pen when I was six. I have been watching from the sidelines ever since, trying to understand

Maybe I could buy an RV I thought, and understood that fantasy for the

first time too. Oh I know so much about everything when I'm driving. I imagined myself freewheeling it alone down the Dempster Highway to the Arctic and standing there, looking at the blue-black ice on the wild ocean.

I could get a dog for company. I'd never have to get out of the damned RV except to go for long windswept walks beside the Arctic. These days, they even have drive in bank machines. I could have a computer and a satellite dish and a wide screen TV.

Of course, I'd have to have some money but that wasn't today's problem. Just tomorrow's, when I got home and stopped being tragic on a windswept highway heading out of Alberta and had to get ready to move again out of the place I've lived my whole life. I've left so many times and then returned.

I have always wanted to write when I was driving. When I was a little kid, I liked to ride around in the back seat of cars because I could dream there. I didn't get to do it much because we had a pickup. Four kids and two adults in the front seat of a '57 Dodge didn't leave much room for dreaming.

For four years, every week I drove a two hundred mile round trip to teach writing. The long fall faded into winter afternoons, gold tinged hills blending with the blue smoke from slashfires, an abandoned trailer beside the river bleeding pink fading to yellow insulation out of its guts.

At night I drove through a black tunnel, with trucks crashing through the slush, deer and elk peering from the frozen sidelines.

When I got home, I'd build up the fire, crawl into bed, watch David Letterman, lay there listening to the snow hissing against the windows, and fall instantly, gratefully, asleep, glad to be home, glad to be not going anywhere for a while.

The day before I moved away again, my son and I were driving the lake road with his son asleep in the back seat.

"Do you think your grandmother has Alzheimer's?" I asked. I was driving so I didn't have to look at him.

"She's fine," he said. "You worry too much."

The steering wheel shook because the tires were going bald. I never know what to do about tires. They're never just right for the time of year. Someone always tells me, "Oh, you shouldn't have your winters on now," or then they say, "Better get some new winter tires." It wears me out, thinking about tires.

"Should I get some new tires?" I asked.

"The tires are fine," he said.

"She phoned over to my house last week. She said she couldn't remember how to make biscuits."

Oh, c'mon, I had said. Of course you know how to make biscuits.

I wanted to say, "Do you think she'll die while I'm gone, do you think she'll fade away and forget everything?" but it was such a beautiful day, the

road like a carved edge between the cliff and the bright blue lake.

"She's fine," he said again.

We drove on and on, balancing on the yellow line, the delicate and multicoloured wake of my life trailing behind me.



One night when I was home, I walked back from the lake in the dark. The moon was coming up behind the Purcells, behind the black and white slanted slab of hill. I saw the moon. I stood and opened my mouth. It was too much to take in – , all I could do was breathe and breathe with the cold air and the snow falling in my open upturned mouth. All I needed, all I ever wanted, was to be walking in the cold night and watch the moon rise over the mountains, the light falling over the farm where the coyotes taunted the dogs as they all ran back and forth exchanging insults, the coyotes in their snowy woods beyond the fence and the dogs running between the house and the pasture, the sleepy grumpy cows shaking their heads at them as the dogs ran under their bellies and me, hesitating for a long while in the cold before finally going inside.

About the Author

Luanne Armstrong is a novelist, freelance writer and editor, and publisher from the Kootenay region of British Columbia. She completed a BFA in Creative Writing at the University of Victoria. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from UBC in Vancouver and is presently working on a PhD, also at UBC. She has worked at a variety of jobs, including coordinating women's groups, teaching at a First Nations College, and in Indonesia with an environmental organization. She has taught Creative Writing at the University of Alberta, the College of the Rockies, the Kootenay School of Arts in Nelson, and the Okanagan School of the Arts in Penticton. She was the Berton House writer in residence in Dawson City, Yukon, from September to December 2000. She is the managing editor of Hodgepog Books, which publishes literary and children's books.

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