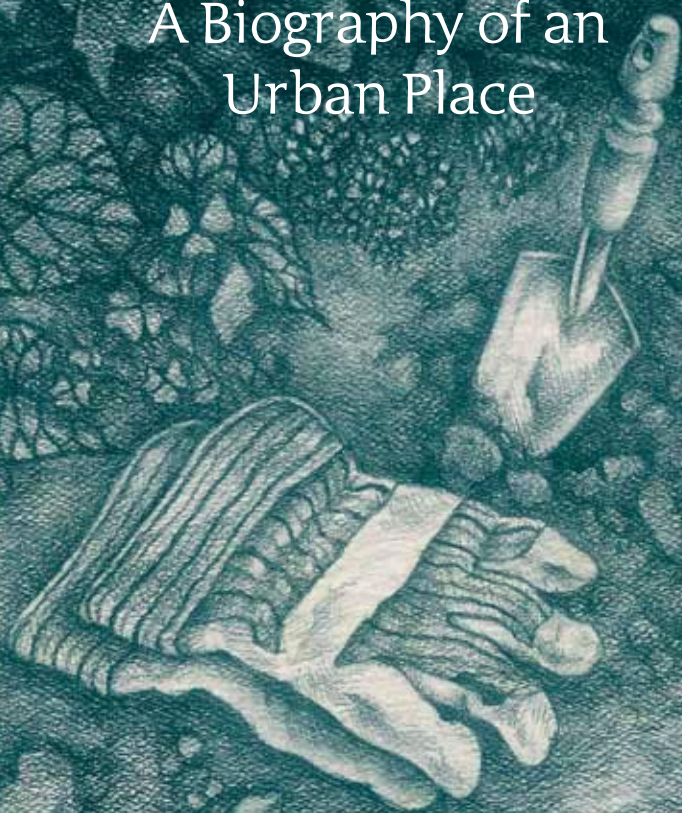


Yardwork

A Biography of an
Urban Place



DANIEL COLEMAN

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Daniel Coleman



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Prologue

I LOVE IT WHEN, after the dark of summer sleep, I step out on the back stairs from the sunroom with a cup of coffee in hand and take my first breath of morning air. The early light threads the green leaves of the maple in our neighbour's yard to the east. It filters downward, lighting dewdrops that hang from blades of grass. My eyes narrow when I stretch and yawn, making the prism of dew on a single blade flash emerald, then lime, before winking magenta, sapphire.

The magic of morning in the backyard.

The fire in the dewdrop echoes the flame that leaps when a breeze shivers the scarlet and wine-red leaves of the Bloodgood Japanese maple in the northwest corner of our yard. It is Moses's bush that burns and is never consumed.

I no sooner think, "Take off your shoes – this is holy ground," than a truck, backing into the university maintenance building

below our place, flings its backup alarm into the morning air: Beep. Beep. Beep. Okay, maybe not so holy.

The strident noise is cut by a bright, piercing whistle, so sharp and clear it rinses the air of all other sound. It's hard not to smile at the song of a Carolina wren. Its tiny body seems an utterly impossible source for such a huge voice, like a rusted clothesline pulley turned in four or five brisk triplets. Its blazing cycles stop abruptly, leaving the world echoing and ready.

"Good morning!" I answer, trying not to shout, not to draw attention from the maintenance guys below. "Good morning."

How many hours have I spent out here, just like this, tasting the busy silence of an early morning? How many evenings have Wendy and I spent drinking in the sparks of fireflies that hover over the lawn in July? How many afternoons bending our backs to wheelbarrows and rakes, laying flagstone or digging compost? Like every yard in the world, ours is a small plot of earth whose unique personality emerges from both the combination of what's given – the lay of the land, the quality of the soil, the length of the growing year – and yardwork – the amount of care and attention devoted to it.

I'm down to the last sip in my cup. But my heart runneth over.

I am not accustomed to belonging. I am foreign to the idea of staying put. I was born and raised in a spiritual diaspora, and the place in which my family lived was never home. In *The Scent of Eucalyptus: A Missionary Childhood in Ethiopia*, I've described how my parents were Canadian Protestant missionaries who met and married and raised four children in that East African country. The missionary society of which they were part had members around the globe, working originally in West Africa, then

spreading across the continent into Europe, South America and eventually Asia. Like the other members of this far-flung community, my parents lived peripatetic lives, assigned by mission administration at different times to different ministries in different places around the country. My mom was born on a farm, so she knew all about yardwork – planting gardens of beans, radishes and beats, as well as zinnias for beauty. But none of the houses we lived in were our own, nor did we expect to stay in them long. The places we lived in, with their unique qualities – from cedarwood floors to painted clay-and-wattle walls – were steps on an eternal pathway, since the kingdom of God was not of this earth and our sights were set on eventually reaching the heavenly Promised Land.

When I completed high school, I followed my older siblings to Canada, the land of our citizenship, which our parents called home, and which we had visited but where we had never lived permanently. I entered university, met and married my wife, Wendy, and eventually graduated from the University of Alberta with a doctoral degree in Canadian Literature. Jobs for literature professors are few and far between, however, so when I was offered a position in my field at McMaster University in Hamilton, we both felt I must accept it. Neither of us wanted to move here. For one thing, our families (the parts that lived on this continent) lived in Saskatchewan and Alberta, and we wished to remain near them. And like most Canadians, we had only seen the glowering smokestacks of Hamilton's steel mills from the QEW's six-lane Skyway Bridge on our way from Toronto to Niagara Falls, and we thought the city looked like an environmental disaster. But there were no other jobs in sight, so we reluctantly moved to this

soot-stained, gritty city that grips the southwestern shoreline of Lake Ontario.

Who knows where fondness for a place grows from? Perhaps it is a reaction to placelessness, the un-belonging of my childhood. Perhaps it is part of my increasing perception that in an age of climate change places *have to* matter. Perhaps my growing attachment comes from identifying with this damaged place as an environmental underdog. Certainly, a major turning point in my thinking about this place came from my encounter here in Hamilton with Indigenous thinkers and their understanding that all creation around us is alive and actively trying to teach us. Vanessa Watts, a friend and colleague who is Hodinöhsö:ni' and Anishinaabe, calls this understanding place-thought: the awareness that places are alive, have spirit and are providing us with everything we need to live. I began to wonder if I myself could begin to learn some place-thinking; if I could transfer the skills I had developed in my bookish education toward reading the relationships that constitute a place, a landscape.

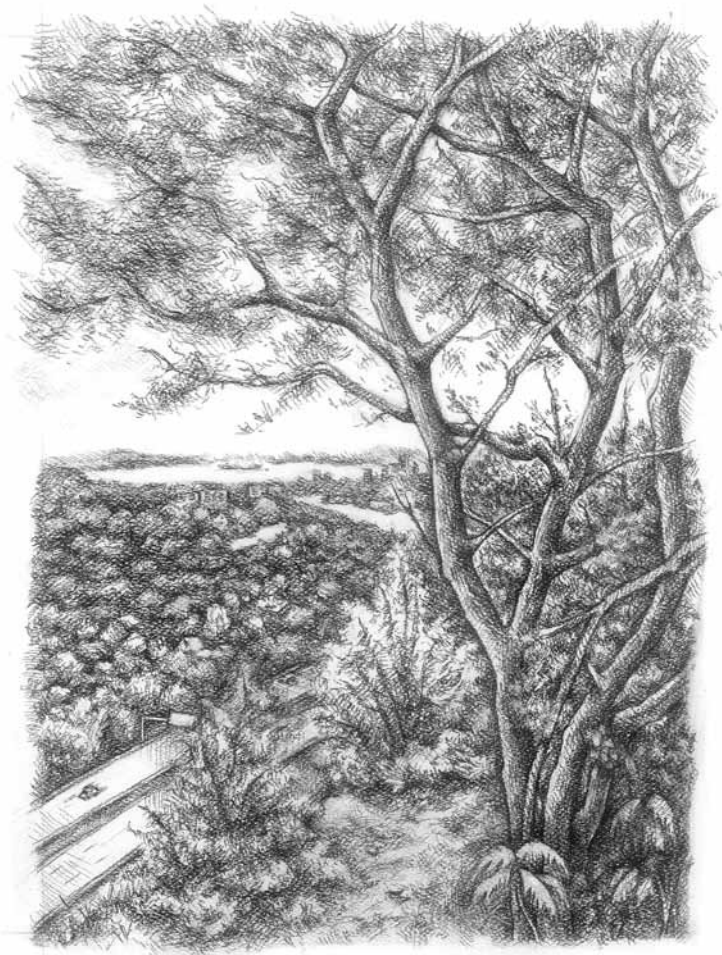
But even as I thought about how to get started, I knew immediately that landscape is too big, dense and complex. Anyone who begins to pay attention, real attention, to even one square metre of any place on earth, from the microscopic beings that turn leaf matter into soil to where water goes after soaking into that ground, will soon be overwhelmed. In order for a beginner like me to notice anything at all, I needed to limit my scope. So I decided to focus on my own backyard. I knew that even this small place would be too complex, but at least it would be convenient – right outside my door. I could watch it every day, through each season.

I have become gradually aware, however, that whatever I'd intended, whatever the elements of my upbringing, training and experience that fed my interest in connecting to this place, the place itself rose to meet my interest. Whatever work I have done in this yard – laying stone patios, planting coralbells, digging compost – its own energies, its own particular dynamic of soil and weather and living beings, have responded to and reshaped my efforts. This exact patch of earth in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, has called me out, responded, seduced, even stalked me. Not to make me into prey – though a growing awareness of its agency, its volition, prickles the hairs on the back of my neck – but to teach me that a feeling of belonging does not reduce the elements of place into belongings, into acquisitions. Paying attention to this place has taught me that belonging is interactive and responsive, not simply assertive.

By relating what I can about the life that hums in this one place, I don't just pin words on it – it expresses itself, grabs my attention, like the impossible song of the Carolina wren, making me scramble to learn how to hear it. The more I lean in to these everyday voices of this exact place, the more familiar they become, and the more my being and longing come together. I find my longing to know and be known settling into everyday being, everyday life. It's not just that I know more about this place, but that this place increasingly knows me. Belonging comes from having been accepted, not from being in charge. The work of place, the recording of its biography, its life story, then, requires as much listening as it does speaking. Indeed, because of the imbalance of our acquisitive, aggressive times, the work

of belonging may require *more* listening than speaking, more contemplation than action, more intuitive immersion than bold assertions.

Ultimately, like all relationships, belonging to a place depends upon good manners: courtesy, respect and gratitude. Good manners are ways of attending not just to the dignity of the lives around us, but also to our need for those lives to remain distinctly separate and not be absorbed into our own, like fuel burned for our benefit. Courteous attention sees the lives that surround us living for themselves, like the maple trees around me that eat carbon and make oxygen. We need them to be themselves, because how will we breathe if they are all transformed into lumber? In this way, yardwork, the labour of attending, has the potential to alert us to what might be sacred in any everyday, familiar spot on this abused, workaday earth.



Holy Land

The earth is sacred. Everything on the earth is sacred. Every spot on earth is sacred, not just certain places that are regarded as sacred sites because something happened there. Something happened all over this earth.

– Audrey Shenandoah (Onondaga, Eel Clan)

THE CAROLINA WREN IS rinsing the air with her song, a truck's alarm is beep-beep-beeping as it backs up in the maintenance yard below our place, and, despite the disturbance, my cup is running over. I am a morning person. I tend to wake up cheerful, so it's not difficult for me to feel joy standing on the back step at this early hour. But I want to do something more in this yard than simply admire its beauty. I want to pay a more focused attention to this exact, little place: to listen, to learn its manners, to register its hidden wonders.

I can't claim any particular expertise. I'm not especially well informed about the environment, though, like many, I'm slowly waking up to the ways in which all things – from the needles on the pine trees to the earthworms under the lawn to the very breath in my lungs – are interdependent and connected. But I know that I need them to stay alive, and they need me. I'm not a scientist or a botanist; I like birds, flowers and bees, but I'm not an expert on any of them. I'm not a historian or a landscape architect. Nonetheless, I want to learn about the layers of story and soil, to be more than just a cheerful visitor who compliments the

pleasant views. I want to dig in, to hunker down and figure out where I am. I want to connect with where I've ended up.

Take for instance the cricket that's taken over from the Carolina wren, throwing its vibrating song into the tangy air from somewhere down in the wild ginger we planted beside the stairs. Aren't crickets supposed to make their sounds at night? Maybe this one is late to bed. And why doesn't his song ever pause? I watched a YouTube video showing how crickets make their sound by rasping one wing over the barbs on the other, like running a thumb across the teeth of a comb. Their upraised wings form membranes that amplify the chirp. The YouTube crickets had wings only half an inch long that created a rhythmic pause while they flipped the wing back down to the bottom to start the upward rasp. *Chirr. Chirr. Chirr.* But this cricket in the ginger never pauses. Why? How does he make this continuous, unbroken sound? Maybe he's faster than most. Maybe he whips that wing from the end to the beginning so fast I don't hear a pause.

I have no idea.

It's just male crickets who sing, by the way. They have a whole songbook from which to sing: a loud song to catch a female's attention, a quiet one for courting them when they come close, a sharp one to warn off other males and another to celebrate the joy of union. Entomologists call crickets' rasping action *stridulation*, and they say there's a relationship between the rate of stridulation and temperature. Crickets are cold-blooded, like all insects, so they stridulate faster when it's warm and slower when the antifreeze gets thick in their veins. An American scientist named Amos Dolbear in 1897 came up with a way to tell the temperature from cricket chirps. He counted the number of

chirps a snowy tree cricket made in fourteen seconds and added forty to that number to come up with the temperature in Fahrenheit. This formula is known as Dolbear's Law.

My cricket doesn't seem to have heard of Dolbear's Law. The morning is plenty warm, twenty-five degrees, and it's only seven a.m. The cricket's song is non-stop. I can't count Dolbear units, because all I hear is one unending chirp. Maybe crickets here in the city of Hamilton don't stridulate like snowy tree crickets did for Dolbear.

That's the thing about the livingness of things: by paying attention, by learning the manners of a place, you can learn a whole lot. Enough even to make a law. But then shift locations, listen to a different story, pay attention to a different cricket in a different backyard in a different place, and nature changes the rules.

But you have to notice in the first place to even begin to wonder. Here in this city, the traffic's either too loud or I'm too busy to stop and notice minor details. The world goes on right beside me every day. Mornings like this one, however, make me want to stop and take note. They make me want to fend off my ever-present busyness, dampen the outside noise and focus in. They call me to do some yardwork.

SO WHY NOT START at the beginning? With this morning's first light sparking the fire in the maple, it's easy to think of first things. Beginnings, however, are difficult. Where exactly should a person start? "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," from the book of Genesis? The universe started with a big bang? And what existed before the beginning? Most stories

posit a murky and shapeless dark before the quickening of light and life. “And the earth was without form, and void,” says the Bible, “darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” Without form and void – that’s a way of saying that whatever existed at the start, we just don’t know. It’s we who are in the dark.

Here in this morning light, dewdrops tremble on blades of grass, within earshot of transport trucks groaning up the highway to the top of the escarpment that curves around the city. In the rumble of nearby traffic, anyone might find it hard to imagine that dark and formless time, to picture how things were then. The even grade of the neighbourhood’s sidewalks, the level lawns around each house on this street, the web of utility, TV and fibre-optic lines – none of these conjure up formlessness and void. None of these link us to a time when only dark water rippled below, only black sky spread above and in between, just wind – the living, breathing air. No ground, no trees, no sun or moon. Genesis insists that the Spirit of God – some kind of sentience, some kind of presence – hovered over the waters. So the void wasn’t exactly void, but our language for what animated the scene is vague and abstract.

The story of beginnings told closer to here is more concrete, has more detail. This is the story told by the Six Nations, the People Who Build the Longhouse – which is what their name, Hodinöhsö:ni’, means. Their story of beginnings says the Guardian of the Tree with Lights in It, Hodä:he’, had woken from a dark dream saying the people should uproot the tree under his care. After carrying out these strange instructions, Hodä:he’ and his

wife, Atsi'tsiaká:ion, sat eating a ceremonial meal at the rim of the hole in the Sky Dome, where the roots had been unearthed.

I'm afraid of heights and don't like to think about their legs dangling out over the null and void below, ocean or lake smell wafting up from the absolute black beneath their heels.

Another version has Atsi'tsiaká:ion sending her husband to scrape bark shavings from the briny roots of the sacred tree. She was pregnant, and the tree had power in it – so much power that it glowed. Everyone knew the tree was sacred, something not to be touched. Hodä:he' was nervous and slow. But Atsi'tsiaká:ion was heavy with child; she wanted medicine and didn't have patience for a hesitant husband, so she brushed him aside, stepped to the edge and . . . slipped. Some of the longhouse people say she fell through the hole in the sky by accident; others say that Hodä:he' pushed her. Maybe he was angry with her for telling him to disregard taboo and touch the sacred tree. Maybe her supercharged hormones blinded her to how close she was to the edge of the hole.

It's not for us to comment on the behaviour of sky people.

So the woman fell, and as she did, she grabbed desperately for a handhold. All she could grasp was a fistful of little plants and roots, not enough to hold her. Some waterfowl, floating on the black water below, saw the falling woman and decided to fly up and ease her landing.

So, according to this story, the world was not really null and void at the beginning. There's a backstory before the Beginning, a kind of prequel that has bird and animal nations living on earth's water before the sky people arrived. This beginning before the beginning only mentions water creatures – no crickets. Perhaps

that's because there wasn't any land yet, no place where the non-stop crickets of Hamilton could stridulate.

The waterfowl conferred, as they carried the falling woman on their wings, about where they could put her down. Some flew down and held council with the animals living in the water below. What to do? Finally, A'no:wara the turtle, the most solid and dependable of all, volunteered to let the woman land on the hard shell of her back. Atsi'tsiaká:ion was thankful for the firm place to settle, but she looked around and saw it was hard and bare. She showed her new neighbours the plants and roots she had grabbed as she fell and explained that she needed to plant them in soil. She needed a yard to live in, a place to tend her few roots and seeds, strawberries and medicines, if she was going to survive.

The humblest of all the creatures, Hano'gyeh Muskrat, volunteered to dive to the bottom of the deep and bring up some earth for Atsi'tsiaká:ion to plant her fistful of baby plants. Different layers of the story tell this part differently: some say that other beings, such as Beaver and Otter, dove down first, and that the water was so deep they came up empty handed. Empty pawed. Some versions even say they died in the attempt. Another version has Hano'gyeh diving alone and being down there for a long time, while everybody waited anxiously. It is said that his body finally floated, lifeless, to the surface. Beaver looked closer, though, and was surprised to find mud clutched in his paws. This mud from the sea floor dried on Turtle's back, the brine of lake weed evaporated and Muskrat's mud smelled more and more like earth. Atsi'tsiaká:ion danced in circles of gratitude, and as she did, the soil spread out like pie dough until it covered all of Turtle Island.

She danced out the place where I now live, including this yard, where I stand today.

MUCH OF WHAT I just said is full of loaded words and mixed up names. I've hardly begun to tell the earliest story from this area, and already I've stumbled into controversial territory.

The longhouse of the Hodinöhsö:ni' people is made up of a series of rafters or nations. Officially, there are six of them, each with its own language: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora – although others, such as small groups of Delawares, Tutelos and Nanticokes, also adhere to the longhouse. The names I'm using are a mix of longhouse languages. The name Atsi'tsiaká:ion comes from Mohawk, while Hodä:he' comes from Onondaga. Hanógyeh is an Onondaga spelling for muskrat, while it's spelled Anò:kien in Mohawk. Say them both out loud and you'll hear the echo. Different names and spellings indicate where different versions of the story originate. I've used the version of Atsi'tsiaká:ion's name from the Mohawk storyteller Sakokweniönkwas, also known as Tom Porter, who learned it from his grandmother, among others. And I've used the version of the husband's name from a long line of tellers and retellers. Sotsisowah, also known as John Mohawk, a Seneca professor at the University of Buffalo, updated a transcript of the story originally written down by the Tuscarora scholar J.N.B. Hewitt, who worked at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. Around 1889, Hewitt came to the Six Nations of the Grand River – today just a half hour's drive south of here – and heard the story from elder and Onondaga chief John Arthur Gibson.

Given these inter-linguistic, inter-national sources, it's understandable that the names I'm using might get confusing.

Professor Mohawk, now deceased, was not Mohawk but Seneca. He re-edited the story from a transcript made by a Tuscarora ethnographer, who heard it from an Onondaga chief. The point is that it's an old story that's been passed from tongue to tongue, language to language, generation to generation, reserve to museum to university and back. It's as layered as the limestone cliffs of the Niagara Escarpment that outline this end of the lake. At least all these tellers have something in common: all are members of the longhouse builders of the Iroquoian Confederacy.

But there's a history of bad blood in the name Iroquois. The Mohawk writer and language teacher Brian Maracle says the French may have heard the name Iroquois four hundred years ago from the Algonquians, who were rivals of the Hodinöhsö:ni' and called them "Irinakhoiw," meaning "real snakes" or "rattle-snakes." The Algonquian Confederacy rivalled the Iroquoian one for trade, and their epithet would have pleased the French, who disliked those "snakes" for preferring to deal with the Dutch and the British. So they spread the word.

But I just called Maracle a Mohawk, another Algonquian insult meaning "cannibal." The Mohawks' name for themselves is actually Kanien'kehá:ka, which means "people of the flinty ground," after the rocky terrain in eastern New York, along the waterway known today as the Mohawk River. But they've had so many years swimming in English, whether they wanted to or not, that the old language has mostly been washed out. I've heard Hodinöhsö:ni' people use the old curses to name themselves today, often with a chuckle and a shrug.

These names grow out of ground that is contested and shifting. I have cobbled them together from books by Hodinöhsö:ni' people who speak different languages, from outsiders, from the internet and from the beginner's class in Mohawk language I took a few years ago. I offer you fair warning: take my words with a grain of salt, because they are as mixed up as the sand and cobble of the ridge upon which this yard is built.

Even putting the story of Atsi'tsiaká:ion and Hodä:he' at the front of this book raises problems, because creation stories are sacred to the people who hold them. Over the years, these sacred Hodinöhsö:ni' stories have been raided by anthropologists and museum collectors who don't practice the everyday duties and ceremonies of the people to whom they belong. They don't wake in the morning to utter the Words That Come Before All Else, known as the Thanksgiving Address, which recognizes the order of Creation that welcomed Sky Woman into a world that provided everything we humans need. They don't perform the Four Sacred Ceremonies that re-enact the agreements between people and the more-than-human world that keep nature's cycles turning. Those of us foreign to these practices don't know what it means to bring these stories to life in our everyday world. Treating them as legends, myths or academic curiosities kills their vitality, like taking a butterfly fluttering in the corallbells here in the yard and pinning it to a board in a glass box. Not something you want to do with Sky Woman.

I'm caught, therefore, because a settler society like ours is built on both erasing and glass-boxing the stories of the people who were here before us. Without an active awareness of First Peoples and their stories, it's easier to think of our ocean-crossing

founders as peaceful settlers and to ignore the culture killing that was part and parcel of land theft. If we act like there aren't any stories of those who lived here before our ancestors arrived, we take over without memory or conscience.

The longhouse stories grew out of this land, out of this part of northeastern America. Out of this territory of Great Lakes, limestone cliffs and Carolinian forests. They were passed on by generations of people who had watched and listened to this particular habitat for thousands of years. Well, not *exactly* this habitat, at least not any more, since ninety percent of what's growing here in my yard – the Japanese maples, the Russian sage, the hybrid tea roses – are imports and hybrids from Europe, Africa and Asia. Our ideas of flower gardens, lawns and city streets have changed this place dramatically. But all around and underneath these newcomers, the foundation of the ancient habitat remains. And longhouse stories help us attend to that ongoing, living foundation on which everything else – all the new imports – depends. These stories reconnect us to the laws and agreements by which the natural system works. “The primary law of Indian government is the spiritual law,” writes Syracuse University professor and Onondaga Faithkeeper Oren Lyons:

It has been the mandate of our people to look after the welfare of the land and its life. Central to this responsibility is the recognition and respect for the equality of all of the elements of life on this land. . . . If all life is considered equal, then we are no more or no less than anything else. Therefore, all life must be respected. Whether it is a tree, a deer, a fish, or a bird, it must be respected because it is equal. We believe it is equal because we are spiritual people. (5–6)

From what I've learned so far from Hodinöhsö:ni' people, stories such as Atsi'tsiaká:ion's fall from the sky function as ceremonial narratives that dramatize nature's laws of equality and interdependence. They teach us about the agreements upon which all life depends. These stories are what Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste and Choctaw legal philosopher Sákéj Henderson call the "cumulative result of a large number of historical contracts, which create reciprocal obligations of kinship and solidarity among all the species and forces which co-exist in that place" (45).

This is a very different idea of story from those I'm familiar with – from Goldilocks and the Three Bears to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. More than this, I'm new to these parts. My ancestors and I haven't lived here long enough to accumulate thousands of years' worth of historical contracts, or to understand the reciprocal obligations that make our ecosystem work. In attempting to keep track of these stories, I'll for sure miss things that are important, and I'm bound to twist their meanings with my newcomer's accent and way of thinking. But by passing on the fragments I've learned, even if my understanding is partial at best, at least I won't be spreading the lie that this storied place was null and void before Europeans arrived.

LIKE THE HODINÖHSÖ:NI' PEOPLE, geologists say that in the beginning there was water, and that the land rose up from it. They also say that animals walked the earth long before people. Scientists mark the passage of time through the stories they find in rocks. In the layers of limestone, dolomite and grey shale in

the escarpment walls, they see that this place, including my backyard, was once a warm, tropical sea.

When the hostas in my garden are buried in three feet of snow in January, it's hard to think tropical, to smell the jacarandas or the coconut oil. But even I can read the evidence told by the escarpment that surrounds us. Seashells, water creatures and coral petrified in layers of stone travel downwards through time, all the way from the Longwood Formation near the top crust through at least six layers to the Grimsby Formation below.

There is a scaffold of galvanized steel stairs and platforms, protected by railings, on the north side of the Dundas Valley, near Rock Chapel Road. There, geologists from the Royal Botanical Gardens have bolted signs onto the cliff face that introduce walkers to the stories the layers tell. Walking down those stairs is like stepping down the bleachers of nature's great amphitheatre. The top tier is the most recent. It consists of glacial till: clay, sand, gravel and pieces of fist-sized cobble held in a tangle of tree roots. The grip of these roots, however, is unpredictable, and the rubble of shale and stones at the bottom of the cliff indicates how readily they can let go. The signs call the second tier under the till the Lockport Formation. It drops five or six metres, and is subdivided into two beds: the Ancaster Member and the Gasport Member. The difference between the two is clear, even to a novice like me, because the Ancaster layer consists of brick-shaped chunks of sand-grey stone, while the Gasport layer is a single smooth wall. The signs indicate that the Ancaster is thinly bedded dolostone made from sediment laid down when the warm and shallow tropical seas were calm, while the Gasport is thick-bedded and coarser grained, laid when Hanógyeh and the others were enduring choppy waters.

Although the signs don't mention muskrats or turtles, the Gasport layer provides the first traces of the water plants and animals that existed here before sky people or humans. The smoother surface of this section of rock, not as creased and cracked as the Ancaster Member, reveals the contours of sea lily crinoids and cavities called vugs that were once the tunnels of sea worms.

It is just as the Six Nations story says. In the dark beginning, before this place was formed, already things lived. The evidence of their living here remains in the rocks. Theirs is an even older beginning than stone itself.

Geologists say the rocks indicate that a warm, river-fed sea covered what are now Lakes Huron and Michigan. The rivers flowing into this sea laid down silt, layer on layer – some clay, some sand, some the crushed shells of sea creatures and coral. They say that about four hundred million years ago, the basin of that sea began to rise up, not unlike Anó:wara rising from the deep. The edge of the draining sea lifted into what's now the cliff face of the Niagara Escarpment. In the drying that followed, not to mention the glaciers of four distinct ice ages, they believe erosion carved from the dry sea floor the cliffs and slopes that now define this region.

My footsteps ring out from the metal stairs, echoing off the cliff face as I descend from the Lockport Formation to the Rochester Formation, made from the chalk of mollusc shells. Then comes the dolostone of the Irondequoit and the brick-sized chunks of the Reynales Formation, which remind me of the Gasport and Ancaster Members above, before I encounter more sandstone and shale the next tier down, in the Thorold Formation. In the delicate wafers of this shale, I feel like I'm closer to the moment

when the sediment was laid down in the first place. The piece I lift flakes in my fingers. It smells cool, like basement dust. The story of time unfolds from tier to tier, sometimes repeating itself, but never in the same order. Finally, at the bottom of the cliff, I reach the crumbled talus slopes that mostly cover the Grimsby Formation. The signs say there are more formations below the Grimsby, but I have to take this on faith as they are completely covered by fallen rubble that leans against the bottom of the cliff.

The story registered in the stone tiers of this great amphitheatre suggests another reason for the dark beginning. After the warm seas, it got so cold that this whole region was capped in ice – a thick, hard, frozen shell between the light of the sky world and the formless void of water and muck below. The deep freeze lasted for ages, and left some remarkable traces. Bones of mammoths were unearthed in the 1830s, when the Desjardins Canal was dug through the Iroquois Bar, the massive ridge of gravel that divides Cootes Paradise from Hamilton Harbour. Today it's known to most people as Burlington Heights. When the leaves have fallen in winter, you can see, from the top of these galvanized stairs, how the High Level Bridge spans the old cut of the canal.

The geologists say the ice cap in this area began to melt twelve to fourteen thousand years ago. As the ice thawed, a lake, larger than present-day Lake Ontario, formed in the bowl bounded by the Niagara Escarpment. Eventually, the ice dam that had contained this huge lake collapsed, and meltwater rushed out the eastern end. Scientists call the body of water that rushed from this area “Lake Iroquois” – not to be confused with the warm tropical sea from back at the beginning. They named it after the

crude French epithet for the Hodinöhsö:ni', despite the fact that the Hodinöhsö:ni' stories I've heard don't talk about a drained lake. That's what I mean about finding stories that don't line up exactly, even though they have echoes.

Lake Ontario is what we have come to call the smaller body of water we live beside, the lake these cliffs shore up, the child of massive Lake Iroquois. In the Mohawk language, "Kaniatarí:io" means "nice or beautiful lake." Some sources indicate there were similar words in Huron-Wendat, so perhaps we got "Ontario," too, from the mixing of languages. However we got the name, and despite its smaller size, the longhouse people must have thought the lake enchanting to give it such a name.

So, this land rose up on Turtle's back. Or the tropical sea sank away. However it happened, what had been dark and formless surfaced and revealed the escarpment that embraces this end of the lake. Forces and powers – call them trilobites or Tree of Lights, ice dams or muskrats – lived and breathed in the darkness that existed before anything we know. Something hovered over the deep and built this amphitheatre before any humans filed in to occupy its bleachers.

THESE STORIES ARE NEW to me, since I arrived here only twenty years ago. Like many people, I moved here for a job. So I didn't learn the stories about this place at my mother's knee. And she didn't hear them from her grandparents, or they from theirs – which means that I've had to seek out these local stories. I've read them in books, talked to people who have lived here longer, gone hiking in the valley and on the escarpment, walked the trails,

tracked the creeks, headed on down to the museum, checked the library and browsed Wikipedia.

I'm like many who have moved to the sprawling cities that hunker down more or less like permanent work camps around this end of the beautiful lake. Johnny-come-latelies, we wonder where we are and what we have to do to survive in this place.

Or we don't wonder at all. We remember all too clearly why we came here. Terrified by armed men knocking on the door back home, shrunken by nothing to eat, or assaulted by cholera or a terrifying tsunami, Hamilton's immigrant generations boarded a diseased and dirty ship or breathed the greasy air of a red-eyed overseas flight. For many compelling reasons, those of us whose story is about moving want to leave our hardship in the past and strike out into a fresh, untroubled world.

We are the people-who-move, migrants and the children of migrants. We move heaven and earth, not to mention ourselves. With hard work and know-how, we move everything: falling water into electric light, dark forests into waving wheat, previous residents onto reserves, swampy shorelines into terra firma for factories, docks and piers.

Move and improve.

And, if the place doesn't improve fast enough, or won't keep pace with our drive, we move again. If the apple farm gets blight or the sky turns yellow from our smelter's dust, then we light out for new territory. We get used to moving, which makes us fidgety, to say the least, about staying here, staying anywhere. We arrive and absolutely love a place. But it's not long before we run our shit into the creek, and the creek flows into the bay, and the

bay is where we get our drinking water. All it takes is one generation before there's an outbreak of cholera, and the city fathers have to fill in a mass grave. A hundred and fifty years later, we can't believe it when a veteran tugboat captain runs aground on a pile of toxic waste by one of the factories' piers in Hamilton Harbour. The pattern doesn't seem to change over the generations. Once the shit surfaces, we sell our erstwhile dream home to someone else. Maybe some Irish family fleeing famine, or African Americans fleeing slavery, who then sell it to Italians or Portuguese after the war, who then sell it to Vietnamese or Serbians or Somalis after other wars. There is always someone fleeing violence or poverty that got here even later than we did. We hope they haven't heard about the cholera or cancer in the bay.

What are the chances of those-who-move becoming people-who-stay, becoming folks who give up the fidgety dream of the Promised Land somewhere over the rainbow and begin to think of here as precious, even sacred – as holy land?

I was raised on Bible stories. My childhood was soaked in tales from what we called the Holy Land, the place where all the episodes in the Bible took place. From the Jewish beginnings, with the null and void, the garden and the apple, the exile and forty years of desert trekking and onwards to the extermination of the locals, the settling into the Promised Land and another exile in Babylon. Then comes the Christian part, with its storytelling throughout the towns of Galilee. All of this, including Jesus' death and resurrection, the stories of the twelve apostles and the early spread of the Church, fed my childhood, shaping my spirit and imagination.

We called the land in the Bible holy because its layers of stories, stacked one on top of the next, added up to the Book of God. The Holy Land is where *it* happened. Where everything happened. Where God touched down and lived among people. Literally, we understood it to be the land God had given people after their many tribulations.

This biblical story of exile, of seeking the Promised Land, permeates popular culture, even when its source has been long forgotten. “Next year in Jerusalem,” Jewish families repeat every Passover, the ritual phrase heavy with the grief of exile and the longing for an elusive home. Christians have reworked this idea into allegory. Rather than a literal story about wandering in a desert, they understand that it’s about finding a way through this vale of tears, not to Jerusalem but to a heavenly city, where they can finally put down their troubles and rest. The idea of progress – that through science, democracy or technology, we are gradually bettering our conditions and creating a better future – is beholden to this moving and improving, as is Manifest Destiny – the idea that the pilgrims who arrived in America were, like the Chosen People, leaving oppression behind and building a new city on a hill, where justice, liberty and Walmart would prevail. This story becomes a historical cycle. “Exodus, movement of Jah people,” sang Bob Marley, syncopating the story of white colonial migration with a call for black people to rise up and throw off the Babylon that Manifest Destiny had grown into. The biblical stories have created a kind of unconscious language, a spirit map, of where we came from and, ultimately, where we’re headed as nations, societies, revolutionaries and aggrieved people seeking justice.

I confess: I love the Bible. I'm not outside its mental geography. This book has shaped my mind as much as anybody's. I know it's been used for some vicious purposes, but so have other good books, from the *Mahabharata* or *The Communist Manifesto* to *The Catcher in the Rye*. The same book can be used to justify slavery and abolition, justice and apartheid.

But what does representing a territory in the Middle East as the Holy Land make *this* land, right here under my yard, beside this lake, beneath these limestone cliffs? Does it have to remain Babylon?

For those still building the longhouse with its six rafters, some of whom have a huge affection for the Bible, *this* is the Holy Land. This is where *it* happened. This is where the beginning began, where the stories start. This Holy Land is where ancestors descended from the torn sky above, where they avoided drowning in the dark waters and landed safely on Turtle's back, where everything we need to live a good life was first provided. This Holy Land is inscribed with the features and creatures of this exact place, this northeastern piece of Turtle Island, the shores of this beautiful lake, these cliffs and pine-guarded woods. This is *it*.

SOME TAKES ON THE Bible story need rethinking. When I was a child, we used to sing the Jim Reeves song in my boarding school's chapel:

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

What I did not know, as a boy in chapel, is that, like a lot of American pop music, Reeves's song had its antecedents in the experiences of people who had been kidnapped into slavery. Only when I got older did I learn that they'd been stuffed in the holds of ships like so many sacks of sugar or barrels of salted cod. That they had been stolen across the ocean. Many did not complete the journey. Some jumped overboard. Those who survived were driven by axe handles, musket butts and whips, like so many animals. How could such a brutal world feel like home?

It's no wonder slaves sang of passing through and seeking treasures beyond the blue. Some of them arrived here in Hamilton, after months on the Underground Railroad. Stewart Memorial Church on John Street is famous for being one of the stops. So is Griffin House, west of here, in the Dundas Valley.

This is a part of the story we didn't know when we belted out the tune in chapel. But even then, some of us knew that there were families that beat their own children, countries that ate their own citizens; that sometimes you have to flee a bad scene if you want to survive, let alone grow. We liked the song for saying that we could let go, that we could be free. We liked knowing that we were made for life beyond the blue; that we didn't have to grab on tight to bitterness, as if it were our only option. We could seek other worlds, other places, beyond this one, where we might be better off.

But here's the part that troubles me: What happens to the place itself, if every generation is just a-passin' through? If every generation chops down the trees, exterminates the Canaanites, clears a farm, then a strip mall, dumps chemicals in the water and moves on? As the number of people on this earth passes seven billion, what are the chances of finding a Promised Land

to move to that hasn't already been promised and settled, abused and compromised, where living residents, human and non-human, aren't already being beat up or disappeared?

THERE IS ANOTHER STORY from the Bible that I think holds more promise. It, too, is about how things started. But instead of starting with the formlessness and void, it starts with words: In the beginning was the Word. It's a kind of puzzle that has kept generations of readers guessing. I can't be sure, but maybe it means something like, everything started with Talk. According to this version of the creation story, the world starts out with or in word. It's as if the word was Creator and the Creator was word.

Rather than starting with darkness and void, with zero and *terra nullius*, this story starts with expression, with talk. It begins with intention and expression, living and humming with Hanógyeh and the others before the Beginning. I'm inclined to think this version suggests that a place becomes maples and wrens and crickets and rocks and trees and escarpments through story. Or, to put it the other way around, that maples and wrens and crickets and rocks and trees and escarpments *are* the words with which the place and its stories begin. I'm inclined to think that without telling, without these living beings speaking their existence, Creation would have remained null and void, dark and out of focus. Once words start, then everything – every single thing – emerges. Creation is expressive. Expressiveness is creation.

Seen this way, expressiveness is the basic power, the ultimate energy. It's what makes things happen.

Scholars of semiotics, the science of signs, have a term for this beginning. They call it *logocentric* – *logos* in Greek means word, so word-centred or word-obsessed. They hear the statement “In the beginning was the Word,” and they say, “But have you noticed that the word is unsteady?” Words are slippery. They are not as solid as the things they refer to. They lean on each other like dominoes, and if you trip one, then the whole string collapses.

What else would you expect of bookish types? They are smart, but nerdy, too. *Of course* words are unstable. Every time I try to string a sentence together, I know it. I feel it every time I know the thing I was trying to say has eluded me and the words that came to mind missed the mark. Every time I feel trapped by something I said yesterday. It sounded all right then, but it’s come back to bite me, because I didn’t know how my words would land in someone else’s ear. Of course words are unsteady.

But that’s just one side of it. The other side is this: there’s no way to get around words. Pretty much all the things we know – and a whole lot of things we don’t – start with words. They begin with talk and story, and are made into solid objects or marks on a page. They are stored away in clay jars or libraries or memory sticks so that we can go back and check on them, or carry them with us wherever we go. *Here’s the earliest record*, we say. *See how our story began?*

But even those words, the ones in the jar or in the library, seem to shape-shift each time we dig them out again. If they always meant the same thing, we would not need the shelves upon shelves of books, written over the centuries, that suggest new ways of understanding the same, original words. Have you ever

seen one of those huge volumes of the Torah in a synagogue? All those footnotes about what Rabbi X in 1738 said the original text meant, and how Rabbi Y in 1834 disputed X's view until Rabbi Z changed it all around again? Sometimes there are more footnotes and addenda than original words! Of course words are unsteady, or you could say mobile, even when they look as frozen as the Gasport Member.

But it's not just the Bible that suggests we start with talk and story and word. Not just people who take their constant marching and moving orders from the book. Because, for one thing, other beings talk, too. Don't forget Hano'gyeh and the other water people, let alone those vociferous rocks.

I'm sitting and writing in one of the outdoor chairs on the patio under the white pines, my feet up on a cushioned footstool. As I scratch out these lines on the page, a glossy black squirrel ghosts slowly under my chair, a walnut, husked of its green casing, clenched in his mouth. Maybe that's why he was so unusually unhurried and self-effacing. He didn't want anyone else to see his prize.

Except me. I'm an exception. Not competition, in the world of squirrels, for the pearl of great price, which he carries silently and boldly under my chair. He noses this way and that. Reading the signs of other beings' passing, of the places where this particular walnut might find safe storage. He slips soundlessly under the leaves of the Francee hosta, searching for a place to bury his treasure.

The leaves where he vanished haven't stopped shivering when the sky overhead fills with the shriek of blue jays calling their own names: Jay! Jay! Jay! Jay! Four siblings who have been rolling

around our neighbourhood all summer like kids on skateboards swoop into the white pines on the west side of our neighbour's yard. Their adolescent guffaws overwhelm a sound I had not been aware of until it stopped. The intimate chitter of a mother Carolina wren, hopping to its fluttering baby in the lower rungs of the cedar hedge. I saw them earlier, silhouetted in the thin branches at the north end of the hedge, black against the green wall of leaves in the neighbour's yard. The young one crouched excitedly, fluttering its stubby wings, while the mother inserted her beak into the baby's greedy mouth. Chit, said the mother, hopping back one twig. Chit. Then she was off for another seed or bug.

I am aware that each of these beings expresses itself all day long in my backyard. Just because I don't know their language doesn't mean they are not speaking, not making words. It's like being in a circle of people speaking a language I don't know. I get used to not trying to understand. I can recognize the rise and fall of intensity, of what I imagine might be sounds of distress, laughter or straightforward information, but it washes over me like water washes over fish. It doesn't enter my consciousness.

This is how our culture has become deaf to Creation's words, to the self-expressiveness of many forms of life. We have decided that humans are the only ones who speak. So we don't hear what any stridulating insect, any reeling Carolina wren, any slab of dolostone, is saying. It's a kind of focus that becomes a bias, a refusal of a holistic understanding of words and communication. The root of "whole" is the same as the root for "hale," meaning healthy, which is the same as the root for "holy." You could say our deafness to more-than-human words is how the land became unholy, unhale, unwhole.

But whether we listen or not, it'll go on talking. Nature doesn't mind repeating itself.

Since I'm not from here, but want to *belong* here – to be here a long time, in a healthy place – I will do some yardwork. I'm keen to try and track as many stories as I can: the ones that started here, like the maples down the slope, and the ones that landed here more recently, like the Japanese painted ferns beside these stairs. All of them keep speaking their existence, right here. And because words are slippery, because each one leans on its neighbours, tracking the stories of this place means I can't grip one so tightly that it squeezes out the next. Maybe this is what ecology means; maybe it means attending to a whole and holy ecosystem of stories. Instead of listening to just one word or just one story, maybe tuning in to all the stories that jostle together in any given place, maybe this messy process will help me, help us, understand the piled up layers – the cracks and seams that run through them, their interdependencies – that distinguish the “thisness” of this place. Maybe gathering up these broken stories will help those of us who moved here begin to feel something. For the place. Itself.