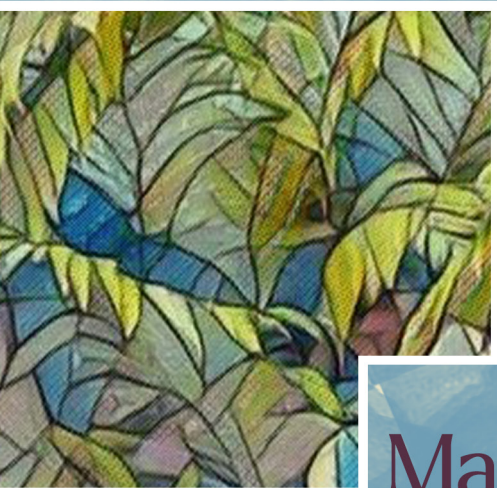


Garden Inventories

Reflections on Land, Place and Belonging



Mariam
Pirbhai



Praise for *Garden Inventories*

“What a veritable garden of delights this collection of essays is! Organic, knowledgeable and insightful. Pirbhai recounts her journey as an ‘émigré-settler’ in a fine poetic style, tripping down memory lane with ease, building a rich tapestry of deliciously vivid memories stretching across continents. Her political awareness and cultural depth are layered with humour and self-irony. I was genuinely sorry when I got to the end.” – Rukhsana Ahmad, author of *Song for a Sanctuary* and *River on Fire*

“A novice tree planter and gardener and self-described émigré-settler on Indigenous lands in Canada, Mariam Pirbhai’s cascading essays in *Garden Inventories: Reflections on Land, Place and Belonging* are an enticing *metaphoray*, as Robin Wall Kimmerer states it, a walk through one’s world with all of the senses – mind, body, emotion, spirit and imagination – in search of home. Pirbhai’s keen observations of North American obsessions in gardening, her musings aloud on land and ownership, and the often unspoken relationship with Indigenous peoples, are informative and revealing. She invites readers to take a meditative walk through time with her as she names, compares, evaluates and reconciles the life of plants and trees native and non-native to North America, to the Grand River region and to the small garden that she and her husband tend to in southern Ontario.” – Rita Bouvier, author of *A Beautiful Rebellion* and *nakamowin’ sa for the seasons*

“At a time of increasing dislocation around the globe and a massive re-evaluation of what it means to have the pleasure and privilege of roots in a place, Mariam Pirbhai’s *Garden Inventories: Reflections on Land, Place and Belonging* asks us whether there are other ways

to create and sustain relationships with the land besides birthright. Moving from the many locations she has called home over the years to the small piece of land on which she currently lives and gardens with her husband, Pirbhai notes, ‘We have brought our own stories of land and homeland to this garden, as we listen carefully to the stories that it has, in turn, shared with us.’ Whether exploring on the keen focus on gardening in North America or the fraught concept of land ‘ownership,’ she is, above all things, attending closely to place and holding her many landscapes in intimate, revealing conversation.” – Jenna Butler, author of *Revery: A Year of Bees* and *A Profession of Hope: Farming on the Edge of the Grizzly Trail*

“*Garden Inventories* explores ways to decolonize our desire to create home on native land. Mariam Pirbhai and her husband are descendants of immigrants from Pakistan and Guatemala. For the last seventeen years, they’ve been making home in Waterloo, Ontario. Their migrant histories have given them contrapuntal vision that sees between what they learned in other places and the place where they now live. It’s not lost on them that their new neighbourhood is called Colonial Acres. In essays that defamiliarize the global migration of roses, the cultural hegemony of lawns, the multigenerational rite of ‘going to the cottage’ and their effects on Indigenous lives and biomes, Pirbhai tracks between what she learned from the *lands that were* and what she’s now learning from the *land that is* about how to participate in a new balance that can foster a healthy *land that will be* for the future.” – Daniel Coleman, author of *Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place*

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Also by Mariam Pirbhai

Fiction

Isolated Incident

Outside People and Other Stories

Nonfiction

Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women's Literature (co-editor)

*Mythologies of Migration, Vocabularies of Indenture: Novels of the
South Asian Diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia-Pacific*

Garden Inventories

Reflections on Land, Place and Belonging

Mariam Pirbhai



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To Ronaldo,
and Our Neighbours

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The Land That Is

How long has it taken me to see, to really begin to see, this land? How long to stop looking over my shoulder, in the sometimes-bitter-sometimes-mournful-sometimes-yearning-sometimes-snivelling window of nostalgia? As I gaze outside my window at the little clump of lanky Jack pine trees we inherited on this property in the city of Waterloo, in southwestern Ontario, and the white pines we've planted as the Jack pines dwindle in number, I know that I have only begun to see the *land that is* on a timetable that is uniquely mine. Seventeen years.

Seventeen years and counting. Seventeen is such an unremarkable number. An odd number in a society that often celebrates evens. Numerologists might disagree: $1+7=8$. Eight signifies balance, harmony. Seventeen years ago, my husband, Ronaldo Garcia, and I moved from Montreal, Quebec, to Waterloo, Ontario. Seventeen years ago, we bought and settled in our current home, where

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we recently celebrated twenty-five years of togetherness. (And who would deny *twenty-five* its numerical clout.)

Seventeen was also the age at which both Ronaldo and I immigrated to Canada as our parents' dependents – his family arriving from Guatemala and mine, via a rather circuitous route, from Pakistan. One might even say that seventeen years, for Ronaldo and I, has twenty-five-year currency – that is, it's a veritable milestone for two people who had never before lived in any one house for more than three or four years apiece. In fact, the *first* seventeen years of my life were lived across three continents (Asia, Europe and North America), five countries (Pakistan, England, the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines and Canada), seven cities and, yes, *seventeen* different dwellings.

Is this, our house in the suburbs, complete with land ownership and title deeds, the sum total of every migrant's dream? Is this material stake in the land our passport to belonging? And yet, the



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questions persist: Are we rooted here? If all acts of naturalization are made equal, how do we know that we are rooted? How long does it take to feel rooted, anyway? That old catalpa tree across the street, its arms now reaching out to kiss a Norway maple on the other side, might say fifty years or more. The first generation might say it takes the next generation to feel truly rooted. Is rootedness, then, enjoyed exclusively by virtue of birthright – that is, being born in a place, where things like family, genealogy, heritage and home are as securely anchored as glacial sediment veining Precambrian rock? Or can we arrive at such states by other channels and means?

Over the last seventeen years, Ronaldo and I have tended this little square pocket of land that is our garden in the northernmost edge of the Carolinian life zone, a semi-temperate climatic region hugging Ontario's southwestern border. We have brought our own stories of land and homeland to this garden, as we listen carefully to the stories it has, in turn, shared with us. We live in a region known for holding the warmest average annual temperatures and highest levels of biodiversity in Canada, but where much of this natural abundance has been lost to colonization, agriculture and urbanization, in what is also the most densely populated cradle of the nation.¹ We live in one of the richest forested terrains, where black walnuts and oaks were guided to regenerate themselves by acts of Indigenous fire stewardship, such as “cultural burning” practiced by the Anishinaabeg or, in this stretch of Ontario, by the Mississauga peoples.² And yet, when I walk through conservation sites, it is the black walnut and oak that stand neglected or at risk, their fruits left unharvested and uneaten by all but the squirrels and birds who continue the work of replenishment.

Our tiny pocket of land sits in a province that could fit two

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Germanies or four United Kingdoms into its one-million-square-kilometre pocket. This is a land of staggering distances sandwiched between four great lakes – Erie, Huron, Ontario and Superior – and, somewhere far, far off, in a northerly direction, the polar Arctic currents of James Bay, but also a land where one can feel decidedly landlocked. Where SUVs and NAFTA-sanctioned trucks duke it out for supremacy on some of the world’s busiest highways, but it’s still possible to have a chance encounter with a coyote or white-tailed deer on a walk through the woods and, for some, even to the corner store. Where melting ice and rainfall trickle into storm drains that empty out into streams and creeks running alongside cookie-cutter housing developments built far too close to rivers and lakes. Where neighbourhoods like ours are nestled in a place that has come to be known as the Grand River region, whose watershed is approximately the size of Prince Edward Island, Canada’s smallest, but by no means small, Atlantic province. Where the Grand River travels some three hundred kilometres, from the Dufferin County highlands just south of Georgian Bay to Lake Erie, the eleventh largest freshwater lake in the world.

The Grand River region is a pocket of land within this great land where the number six assumed historical significance when Britain obtained permission from the Mississaugas, recognized in the eighteenth century as the “Aboriginal occupants” of this region, to grant safe haven to their Indigenous allies during the American (Revolutionary) War of Independence.³ These allies were the Haudenosaunee Peoples unified under the Six Nations Confederacy, made up of the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga and the Tuscarora peoples. The Mississaugas granted the Confederacy the use of six miles running on each side of the Grand River, from source to mouth, an agreement between First

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Peoples ratified by British imperial seals in the Haldimand Treaty of 1784.⁴ This, too, is the land we call home – a place where royal proclamations such as the Haldimand Treaty, which came to shape this land’s colonial contours, are all too often buried and obfuscated by the claiming and reclaiming, naming and renaming, mapping and remapping of the land.

This book is not a migrant’s memoir of continental crossings so much as an émigré-settler’s sketchbook of the immediate world outside her front door. It cares not for departures so much as arrivals. Like arriving at a place of acceptance that this world outside my front door will always be informed by my sensibility as an émigré – that is, as someone with other lands and places in my mind’s eye. In my case, with a plurality of lands and places, like a geographic kaleidoscope. As such, a book about this land – *the land that is* – will invariably be overlaid with traces of *the lands that were* – those other places to which I have also belonged.

Coming as I do from a once colonized land – the Indian subcontinent, the oldest and longest held territory of the British Empire – it is impossible not to see *the land that is*, ravaged and plundered as it has been, through the historical ripples and echoes of colonialism meted out to other peoples in faraway lands. I am born to parents and grandparents who crossed the historic threshold from India to Pakistan because a hastily drawn border known as the Radcliffe Line (drawn up by a British lawyer who had never before set foot on the Indian subcontinent) told them they were no longer home, no longer welcome on one or the other side of this newly partitioned land. In 1947, Partition displaced fourteen million people in a mass exodus across this blood-soaked line;

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for many South Asian Canadian families now multiply displaced from their ancestral homes in the Indian subcontinent, Partition still registers as a familial and historical legacy carried across other borders on journeys to other lands.⁵

These stories of Empire, anti-imperial revolution and decolonization have necessarily followed me into a neighbourhood unselfconsciously called Colonial Acres, and I can't help but wonder how these historical echoes inform or even shape my relationship to this land. Can émigrés afford to carry such historical baggage across the threshold of yet another land? Conversely, can émigrés ignore their own position as another kind of occupant – dare I say, a new kind of settler – on Indigenous lands? What might it take to cultivate a different relationship to this land, or even to this small part of the land known as the Grand River region? This place where winter sets in long before its official arrival on December 21, and remains stubbornly in place several months after its official conclusion on March 21. This land where the growing season is shorter than an academic term, and sinking one's hands into the soil before it freezes again is a fleeting pleasure, a perennial gift to be savoured. This land where more often than not we find ourselves battling against the loss of land – green spaces and conservation areas, creeks and river trails – all those protected areas that give us a sense of connection and belonging to something beyond the foundations and fences we erect and maintain. This land where semi-temperate forests lie on the brink of extinction or extirpation; where townships are also places at risk of losing their social and ecological identity as they fast develop into another metropolis, another outlying branch of the GTA (Greater Toronto Area); where the ever-diminishing forest is a constant reminder of cultures and heritages at risk, and where an émigré-settler might also feel like an entity at risk – at risk of losing a part of her own equatorial sensibility in this northern environment.

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Ronaldo and I met while I was a graduate student in Montreal and he, a college professor in Joliette, Quebec. Ours was a classic encounter of the Canadian kind, where two émigrés, or the children of émigrés, from parts of the world that are little known one to another, randomly meet and share stories about these distant places, and how or why they left them. They are overcome by how easy, how natural, how cathartic it is to share these stories with each other, especially because they are the kind of stories not everyone cares to hear. They are quick to see that the factors that spit them out of their respective countries of birth are similar only insofar as they were precipitated by political forces disrupting any hope of peace for their families, a saga on instant replay in the destiny of most postcolonial nations. A story so commonplace by now that it hardly bears repeating: simply substitute one colonizer for another (Britain, Spain, France, et cetera); replace one puppet regime with another (if by chance a democratically elected government comes along, anticipate a bloody coup largely operated by foreign interests championing democracy, which will rob the people who elected said government of their democracy); throw neocolonial operatives, multinational corporations, local despots, military regimes and profiteering mercenaries into the mix; and stir, stir, stir. The outcome is always the same: fight or flight for the people. Ronaldo's parents chose flight. My parents chose flight. Ronaldo's parents took a one-way ticket to Montreal, Quebec. My parents flittered and fluttered from one city to another, one continent to another, before landing in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

You might say that Ronaldo and I found "home" in each other's company, recognizing something of that migrant's plight. But, as it turned out, we have both spent much of our lives in Canada

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(be it with our families, as independents, or as a couple) in various states of transience. We packed a lot of boxes, returned the keys to numerous homes, because life just kept us moving, as it tends to do. Financial exigencies, parents' separations, academic paths, professional opportunities . . . life doesn't come to a standstill just because you've got a newly minted passport that confirms your arrival as a "naturalized" citizen, as if a piece of paper, albeit a highly valuable and coveted one, confers upon you an innate sense of rootedness, of belonging. Even roots are in constant motion, below ground.

Eventually, Ronaldo and I moved out of a condo and bought our first property with a tiny piece of land in a place called Ville Saint-Laurent, an outlying borough of Montreal. This was shortly after I completed a Ph.D. in English literature, and Ronaldo had published the first of several books on computer languages like Linux and Red Hat that I still can't speak. It was finally time to catch our breath. To feel the ground beneath our feet. But we barely had time to unpack much less tend our new little patch of lawn before one of those professional opportunities knocked on my door in the form of a tenure-track position at Wilfrid Laurier University, in Waterloo, Ontario. Seeing that tenure-track jobs in narrowly specialized fields were as hard to come by as a winning lotto ticket, especially for someone who checked several minority boxes (person of colour, very long-haired female in a short-haired male-dominated profession), and seeing as Waterloo was also known as the "Silicon Valley" of Canada, where Ronaldo could foresee a career change after twenty-five years in teaching, we honoured the tradition our parents had so ably established for us. We packed up another home with maximum efficiency and minimal fuss, and moved again.

Montreal had also become a haunted place because my mother, Qamar Pirbhai (née Iqbal), had recently passed at the age of sixty. I was shattered by the loss. Everywhere I went – east, south, north,

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west – the last anguish-filled weeks of my mother’s life choked me with grief. Montreal, the city I had fallen in love with for its artistry and conviction of identity, had stomped on my heart and I could no longer look at it through a lover’s eyes. Both my mother and Ronaldo’s father, Catalino Garcia, now lay buried, side by side, under a cherry tree in a multifaith cemetery, and it seemed as good a time as any to make a fresh start. For Ronaldo, leaving Montreal wasn’t as clear-cut as all that – he was the caregiver to his aging mother, Rebeca Gonzalez. Quebec had been home to his family since the 1970s, when they were among the first wave of Latin Americans to settle in the province. Ronaldo would also be retiring French, the second language he had lived and worked in for over thirty years and, in my case, the third language I had struggled to live and work in for a decade. Montreal wasn’t home in the white-picket-fence sort of way, but it was his home in a way that it was never mine.

Moving to anglophone Ontario, the massive province that most immigrants – at least South Asian immigrants – gravitate toward like moths to the strobe lights of the CN Tower, was not without its challenges. But interprovincial migrations seemed like a cinch after our transcontinental crossings. And since this last big move from Montreal to Waterloo, we have managed to set a new precedent for ourselves: we have lived in this one home for seventeen consecutive years. Seventeen years of relative stillness. To the multiply displaced, achieving such stillness over time is nothing short of revelation. It affords a level of constancy and consistency – as homeowners, as neighbours and, in our case, as “naturalized” citizens – that starts to become a new way of seeing, of looking, of being in the world.





Mariam Pirbhai is the author of a debut novel titled *Isolated Incident* (Mawenzi House, 2022) and a short story collection titled *Outside People and Other Stories* (Inanna Publications, 2017), winner of the IPPY Gold Medal for Multicultural Fiction and the American BookFest Award for the Short Story. Pirbhai is a professor of English

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“Mariam Pirbhai’s cascading essays in *Garden Inventories: Reflections on Land, Place and Belonging* are an enticing *metaphor*, as Robin Wall Kimmerer states it, a walk through one’s world with all of the senses – mind, body, emotion, spirit and imagination – in search of home.” – Rita Bouvier, author of *A Beautiful Rebellion* and *nakamowin’ sa for the seasons*

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After a lifetime of traversing continents and cities,
Mariam Pirbhai found herself in Waterloo, Ontario,
and there she began to garden.

As she looks to local nurseries, neighbourhood gardens and nature trails for inspiration, she discovers that plants are not so very different from people. They, too, can be uprooted, transplanted – even naturalized. They, too, can behave as a colonizing or invasive species. And they, too, must learn to adapt to a new land before calling it home. In *Garden Inventories*, Pirbhai brings her scholar’s eye, her love of story and an irrepressible sense of humour to bear on the questions of how we interact with the land around us, from what it means to create a garden through the haze of nostalgia to the way tradition and nature are bound up in cultural ideals such as “cottage country,” or even the great Canadian wilderness. Roses, mulberries, tamarinds and Jack pines wend their way through these essays as Pirbhai pays close attention to the stories of the plants, as well as the people, that have accompanied her journey to find home. Throughout, she shows us the layers of history and culture that infuse our understandings of land, place and belonging, revealing how a garden carries within it the story of a life – of family, home, culture and heritage – if not also the history of a world.



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