

11-15-2023

Off By Heart Lake

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Sacuta, Gayle I.. "Off By Heart Lake." *The Goose*, vol. 20 , no. 1 , article 27, 2023,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol20/iss1/27>.

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GAYLE SACUTA

Off By Heart Lake

I gave my head a shake when I saw the newly erected sign placed in anticipation of our Golden Jubilee: “Byemoor - Heart of the Goose Country.” I didn’t know that’s what we were! It made sense, given the surest sign of spring was to hear the hello-honking of geese from my bedroom, as they glided over house and dropped in past the cut bank, landing on the slough in the home quarter where the spring water seeps. I wonder what the geese notice about the fields and fences on their way to open water? Our farm was eight miles from the sparsely populated town where I went to elementary school. As a girl, I had a lot of time to take looks around the countryside from vehicles of all types. As an adult, I prefer walking in the fields since it uncovers mysteries and magic you can’t learn about in school, nor get to by car alone.

Our area is a border zone between prairie and parkland, where a handful of high hills survey undulating plains and hummocky passages. Patches of willow and poplar pattern the fields. Brown sandy soil supports cereal crops, and stones and boulders are scattered amid the pastures. A lot of wildlife lives here. If you look at a map you’ll see the brush strokes of shallow lakes where waterfowl congregate. Underground water sources nourish the taller poplars because this place is dry.

Twenty miles north, Big Knife Creek curls along toward the Battle River, where Mom was born—twins in an April snowstorm. Their neighbour had to phone the hospital and implore, “Send the doctor or send the hearse.” Thirty miles west, the Red Deer River floats along to the badlands, but here there are no nearby rivers. Dad farmed this land for 70 years, until he passed away in 2007. He put up a good battle against multiple myeloma, likely from spraying crops with herbicide all those years, but there was no stopping that train.

Opening Round

Because I don’t want to let go, I weave a rug from Dad’s old jeans, aligning them chromatically by shade of blue. Why he kept all these pairs of old jeans is perplexing. I eviscerate the side seam and zipper and then splay the pant-leg panel smooth with my hands. When I was young Dad would say,

“No sewing on Sunday.” Well, when else would I sew?

“See this rip? Just go back and forth, back and forth, it will only take a minute,” the jacket canvas pinched in his big grease-spackled fingers.

Half inch, nine sixteenths, three-quarters of an inch—how wide to cut the strips? I slice up the left side of the denim, across and down the right side of the panel like a swath—the round and round kind, not the back and forth kind of swath. Around I go, opening up a field of wheat with an open-air swather, slowing, stopping, and swiveling for on-the-spot corners. Opening round shows all-at-once the field’s beauty or trouble, the heavy and soft spots. Opening round reveals the possibilities.

“Where’s the bread?”

“Hey, what cha doin’? Time for work.”

He didn’t use please, thank-you, or share feelings. Most often he was quiet as a puzzle. What I know about him I learned from watching his routines. His manner reliable, focused on the job at hand. Didn’t drink, built a farm from bare hands. If energy stays in everything, working these jeans is as intimate as Dad and I have ever been.

*

I know what it is to grow up in a place and move away and still be connected there for my whole life because of the land, family, and community. Land where my grandfather came in 1928 to work on the railroad, and where my grandmother, and father with his brothers, arrived in 1934, from what was then Poland. From an early age I roamed around our large farmyard and ran back and forth between our house and my grandparents’. There was so much work Dad hired Edgar to help out in busy seasons.

Dear Pen Pal,

Spring has already almost passed, and it is dry. I have a question today, how do you get to school? I take the bus. At lunchtime I wish I lived closer because if you live in town you can go home to eat. School does not always feel safe, so a break would be good. I enjoy it when I finally get back to the farm to play with our dog, Pal, and visit Grandma and Grandpa.

We farm kids spend so much time in cars and trucks and tractors and buses some of us forget what our legs are for. Our lane is so long, if I stand at the screen door and listen for the bus, hear it a mile away rounding the corner of Gooseberry Bend and take off running, I would still not make it in time. Edgar is a kind man and great bus driver. If we are rowdy he shouts, “Hey you guys, smarten up or you can walk.”

I remember grade one, I was eager to learn, and felt smart. Before long I realized that what we learned in school and my Grandma’s way at home were different and did not mesh. It came to me walking out to the end of the lane to catch the bus, with well enough time dance or skip backwards, kick rocks, dawdle, or lean into the wind. Grandma doesn’t speak English and does things in the old way, and it’s too bad I have to go to school. If I do not spend the time with her now, how will I ever learn what her words mean, and she is so alone. I miss Grandma and her

interesting life of making butter, mashing potatoes, and stitching in the afternoons, but there is no choice. All the things I wanted to have learned at school: how to speak Polish, the names of trees and grasses, is quicksand real? There is none of that in school.

On the bus we sit in a pack and belt out tunes. When we're tired of singing we play cards, games like Crazy Eights, or Hearts. Then I settle, curl my knees and rest them on the seat ahead, lean against the window, and zone out. I imagine adventures walking in the fields. Every day it's always work work work or drive drive drive. When my Uncles are home they go for long walks and I join them, even though they are quiet. Talk to you next time! Your friend, Gayle.

Sunshine and Shadow

Making good mileage on the summer-fallow

a double four-wheeled tractor

cultivating stubble

full throttle

Imagining plans for Saturday night,

One for the money, so much to get ready

shower, hair,

clothes, makeup

Radio Q-14 Country blares through the speakers

Storms never last, do they baby

exhaust fumes shimmer

crows accost hawks hunting voles in the wake of the plow

sky gestures rain but it's only teasing

storm clouds mix sunshine and shadow

moving quickly, they break off

shift under, layering, circle one another, swing dancing

Whirlwind shoots oat straws

across the field

two rounds till she's done

weeds are falling

Stop. Cool the motor

cut the gas, pause a moment

sigh in the silence

of phantom vibrations

Grasses sway, wildflowers wave

backs against the wall

head home covered in a skin of dust

~*~

At age six I was allowed to sit on Mom's lap after we were through the gate, to steer the car taking supper out to the field. Farm kids helped with the daily work of chores and crops, and moved on the land freely. First in child's play, sometimes on horses, and always in vehicles, including cars, trucks, tractors, snowmobiles, and various self-propelled farm implements such as swathers or combines, and the buses. School kept us busy, but didn't teach us about people who were here before us, things I began to learn about and understand after I had my own children and started searching. When driving, Dad taught us to keep to the same track, not to crush the grass, drive a straight line, do not cultivate the trees, or hit the fence.

The Oldest Road in Alberta

Raking hay on the edge of the lake and a bearing goes. We make a trip to Stettler for parts, and stop to pick up groceries. On the way home, quiet for most of the 45 minute trip: 15 miles east of Stettler on Highway 12 to the Gadsby corner, 10 miles south on the gravel past Shooting Lake and the Hutterite Colony, one mile east, another 6 miles south, and 1½ east. Dad says out loud, yet as though he didn't mean to speak it.

"The oldest road in Alberta." We are ¾ of the way home, he has spoken this before, one of the sayings from his sack of mantras.

“What do you mean, Dad?” I ask. He repeats it, as though I didn’t hear him the first time. We share some BC cherries.

I look out, and think about the places we pass. I know each farmyard, house, and barn along the Oldest Road in Alberta. From the frame of the car window, from playing kick the can at birthdays, from branding, from visits. In the side mirror the cloud of dust behind our car hangs on the road and a similar one approaches on the horizon, finger waves. It’s the guy who checks the oil leases. It was December when the first rig that I saw went up in our community; I could see the lights from the bus on the way home. After three weeks the tall white rig and camp trailers were gone, everything except big piles of dirt in the field, liquor bottles, garbage, and holes in the road. That was the start, then more and more rigs popped up everywhere.

Fences superimposed over history, gridding quarter-sections of land like a plaid fabric. The fence-line with wide or narrow borders on a field of hay, grain crop, or pasture. A loosely ruled margin with room for bird nests and burrows, a place where snow holds up in winter, wildflowers in spring, summer and fall. Fences hold old stories, the language of landscape. Some fields are full of wildflowers, growing right in with the hay. The wild may live at the sides of the roads and in the fence line too: crocus, buffalo bean, brown-eyed Susan, sage, paintbrush, lilies, shooting star. It may be narrow, but much can live in the fence line, a litany of landscape where I am from.

Past the fences, these cages of post and wire, there are gaps in my knowledge. Beyond the roads, stories made before settlement, before my eyes if I look. I see a coyote jump and pounce in upland grass. Finally, home.

“Get me that wrench,” says Dad. We change the bearing and I’m back, bouncing over the gopher hole-ridden pasture along the lake. Pronghorn lope up as though to sail well over the top wire, then at the last minute quickly duck under. Clowns, think they’re fooling you.

Dear Pen Pal,

Do lots of kids go to your grade? We have a small population density and the County was going to ship us kids the 35 miles to Stettler for school. So our two little towns combined, and now there are 3 girls and 5 boys in my grade and what a blast!

In fall I will ride the bus 15 miles to Endiang, which has grades 7-11. It’s not too early to think about deciding when, or for some kids if, to leave to finish grade 12. Dad went to Castor school and quit in grade 9 so he could farm, but that was years ago in the 1940s. Now in our family we are expected to graduate. Every other County community sends the kids for grade 10. If you go then, you might feel more a part of the pack than if you left for grade 12 only, and a bigger school would have more opportunity to join clubs. My girlfriends will go to Castor or Hanna when it’s time because they live closer to those towns. What do you want to be when you grow up? Mom says, “The world is your oyster.” We don’t talk about the leaving very much, but I feel

it would be like a turning away. Our family does not enjoy long conversations or questions. Mom speaks in riddles like, "A penny for your thoughts?" or "If you can't say anything nice..." well you know how that saying ends. Dad works all the time and I do not understand most of Grandma's language.

Sometimes I think there is no good way to be a girl here. If you're good at school you get teased for being a brain. If you act like a boy they call you butch. If you like boys a lot maybe you're called slut. And if you don't want to 'do it' with boys they call you a tease, and those are just the start of the words. I like going to dances and parties and I'm not old enough to drink alcohol but I have. Most families want boys so they will be farmers, as though girls are not. I think girls are just as much farmers as boys.

Farming chores get boring when I'd rather be watching TV. At the same time being outside whets my whistle about the fields around me. I want to learn all the things I don't know about the environment. I like it when Uncle Bill visits. When he's tired he just lays down on the ground for a rest and takes a big deep breath. I'm done my afterschool Shreddies snack, so I'll pack up this note for later. I'm heading out to the pasture to fetch our milk cows, Dribbles and Spikes, unless they are already waiting by the corral gate. Your friend, Gayle.

*

When you ask where I'm from, and you always do, we say Byemoor—but actually, we are from the Byemoor area, south of Stettler, or east of Big Valley. We are out of the way. Marginal compared to land by rivers, in terms of soil productivity and rainfall, but there are acres and acres. The farm borders what used to be the third townsite of Leo, Alberta. I guess you could call it a ghost town, which sounds cool. Leo disappeared when they sold all the buildings and moved them away, including Alberta Wheat Pool's first elevator. Mom says, "Just go read about it in the Byemoor Book."

The farm sits along an elbow of Gough Lake which is a long way around by road and a funny shape. Well, it's not what you might think of as a lake with sandy beaches and kids splashing around in bikinis and muu-muus. The south part has some water but the north is covered in fences and is either soggy or dirt-dry and pocky. The name Gough Lake is not right either, for a different reason. I wish I knew the name from before. We have dry spells, but not always. I read that at one time it rained so much you could take a boat from Stettler to Leo, and once there was enough water to float a funeral pyre for a South Asian neighbour. As farms get bigger the population dwindles. I don't live there now; I live in a city.

Years ago the First Peoples left stories in the landscape for us to care for, some of them in stone. These petroglyphs are rocks with carved messages but I don't know what the marks mean. Maybe they're in a museum somewhere, but I heard that one went missing after a pipeline went through, and we don't know where it could be.

~*~

Our family name is carved in thick black painted printing onto a piece of wood, varnished and nailed to the corner gatepost at the end of the lane where the bus stops. Having visitors is an important custom and Mom encourages, "Drop by *anytime* for a visit." She keeps a paper by the phone detailing how to get to our place from at least five waypoints in any direction, gives careful instructions, mentions the sign with our name, but people still get lost regularly. Finally, when they arrive, "Come on in!" We start our visit by putting Corel coffee cups and a plate of squares on the table, discussions of the weather, and joking conversation.

When the geese arrive in spring, their voices sound tired.

"Hi, we're home!

Well, it's about time we finally arrived."

When they continue their fall migration, great waves of birds fill the sky. Wherever they're going, I hope they have been able to feed well during their stay, and their trip is swift. The ocean is hard to get to from here.

*

In winter, Peg and I skidoo two miles across the lake, which would be 20 miles by road, to visit the Ferriers. We navigate by watching the fence line. "Jesus, look what the wind blew in," laughs John. Nancy serves coffee with canned Carnation milk and Tom gets out the cribbage.

Fences form a material barrier and a mental separation between distinct spaces, and reinforce the laws of private property. The fence line itself can be a liminal area where the wild can live around a cultivated crop. It is a border on the land where the farming cannot reach easily.

You can't fudge a good fence. Keep fencing tools handy in the back of the Old Mercury farm truck: post maul, steel bar, digger, spade. Keep the claw hammer, fence pulley, staples, and fencing pliers in a metal bucket with a heavy iron lid. Hammer the staple, not the post.

I've never known these fields without their fences, which order my thinking. Broken wires from lumbering moose, railroad fence, willow gate post. Three, four, five barb wire, corner brace, hay wire, rough windbreak lumber, chute, corral, plank. Don't forget to close the gate.

Stay at it year-round 'cause one guy can't do everything at the same time. Fence in any weather. A good fence will keep bulls in if they want to be in, and convince cows they are in the right spot. As you drive along, train one eye on the wire.

*

We focused on the land as an agricultural and economic resource, not as a source of social, spiritual or cultural information. Our busy farm life, settler culture and customs, and personal fears and inhibitions were barriers to forming as close a relationship with the land as I longed for. When I learned about the rich history of the land in the very community where we lived, I

asked myself, what else do I not know? So many questions could be examined in future writing and research. In what ways can we protect the cultural/graphic record and share knowledge about the land? What is being done to support relationship building with Indigenous people whose presence remains so strong on this land? How does settler culture and custom, including mythology of stewardship over the land, serve to help or hinder today's challenges such as the climate crisis? How can rural Alberta be more open and welcoming of diversity of people and ways of thinking, knowing, and being, and improve social conditions in areas including mental health and addictions? How do people who move away think of the land that they may hold in their heart?

Shrinking Public Space

I look through the diamond shapes on this chain link
down at the twelve inches of ground
between the old and new fences
in the yard beyond, a house stands
stately and knowing
as though
land could be held alone
through private owning

Land that once held school ground
will disappear, in field and soon the state of mind
this public ground will blend in with blown soil
I long to walk the other side
of this fence, by thickets and
rocks bulged up on overgrazed pasture
Where fox runs under the bridge to his home
along the creek's serpentine border

The new one -- chain link
the old one cedar -- rotted off at ground level
single barb
strung up by staples
slash-mark hanging from #9 gauge wire

I feel shut out
cut off, no need for signs to post the land
colonial sentiment internalized
how many hurdles
to get into the field?

Wondering, have I a right?
I mean a legal right. Hard to know?
A wonder anyone finds out anything
holed up in this barred life
watching TV's blue-light

"The legal right to walk the creek at the high-water mark
is part of Bed and Shore Legislation." Just don't get shot.

Just a fence does it hurt?
good fences good neighbors

keep the cattle safe pride of ownership

orders the imagination

represents the title

~*~

It's fall, and we drive out to the lake's edge to check the cattle. We crouch behind an embankment trying to encourage our bull to stay in the right field without spooking him, while Dad follows behind in the Ford. It's hard not to imagine the dust and roar of hooves when everywhere around you is so vast.

"Did you ever find an arrowhead?"

"No, did you?"

"Oh ya. There used to be a camp here. Lots of arrowheads and hammers."

"At the Halkirk Homecoming parade, Jean Ross said she found these stone, perfectly round shaped balls the other morning in her flower bed."

"How do you know?"

"She told me they blew in with the storm and they might have been used as a game."

"Look at that! Great work. The bull is in the right field!" We watch as he walks about 50 feet toward the lake and promptly jumps back over the fence into the pasture where he was before.

"We didn't always have fences you know, the cattle used to run together around the lake."

"Good idea."

*

Settler spirituality in the landscape is a boundary which was rarely crossed in conversation. We did not acknowledge the land as having spirit.

Have you ever used the saying, "like finding a needle in a haystack?" I found a shockingly small rock chip, the size of my little fingernail, on the ground in the hayfield. This tiny notch from an arrowhead added a spiritual dimension to my relationship with the land. Developing this relationship brought more knowledge and information. Knowing where to turn with that understanding is still a challenge.

*

I like to work with women in the kitchen serving luncheons, all the gabardine and cake, all the conversation. After, when we've finished up the dishes, "What are you doing now?"

"I'm going on a fishing trip," I say. It's a façade. I just want to be alone on a cloudy day in rainbow season.

"By yourself!" they're shocked. "What about your children? Are you married? What is your last name?" I'm a curiosity.

I have nothing planned but to not worry about anything. By myself in the minivan, I meet all matter of sage stems and stones. Walking on the hills I find so many plants and surprise, the wet spring has sent a scarlet mallow in her orange summer dress. Never seen before, never looked. Full polychrome arc in the gray sky from where the juniper grows up north in the Paintearth Hills, to south cactus country and the Hand Hills.

Delia Highway hugs Wolf Hill. Heart Lake, Sullivan Lake, Cut Bank, Gough Lake. Grandfather stones, yards full of stone, yet still the missing stone that got away on an Endiang hill, pilfered when the pipeline went through? I stumble in a dark dream, wake up cranky with images of injustices, fragments of dialogue, names. Scream the old names to me.

If all the stories could be valued. Oh, imagine if we knew the fields by foot and the land by eye, if we went off the road and weren't afraid. If we knew the sacredness on which we walk, the land in her wholeness instead of all broken up and separate. Scan the horizon, notice what history your eyes can hold and your body can sense. It's there. Remember what became too heavy and was dropped along your path; go back and name it.

Close the Gate Behind You

Such a long lane

What could be the point?

Winding around two curves

bordered by wild, prairie pasture

hay laying in swaths in the road allowance

What path to take

to enter the landscape?

If this road wasn't here, and this gate, in a different corner

opened easier

Held closed by a loop of smooth, round wire – push
hard with your shoulder—make it tight
or cows will nuzzle it, over and open
kick their heels, surging into the bales
Sun sneaks behind the trees
To never look on the other side it's impossible to know
the sun sets at all west of the granaries
The cattle are complaining, or anyway, letting their voices be heard
They know when rain will come
stride into the home quarter, ripping grass
two-step tails swish mosquitoes

Rocks at the house mark a shadow
high walls and blind boundaries
The space between thunder and lightning
Grass buzzes, wind hums, dust wisps up, barges in, rattles
a crescendo, diminishes, then away

GAYLE SACUTA grew up on a farm in Alberta's heartland, at the edge of a large, shallow, ancient glacial slough. She lives on Treaty Six territory in Edmonton, Alberta. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Cultural Anthropology and a Master of Library and Information Studies degree. Gayle works as a public librarian and enjoys the creativity of music, fibre-arts, and life-writing.