

Permission to Land

A Memoir of Loss, Discovery and Identity

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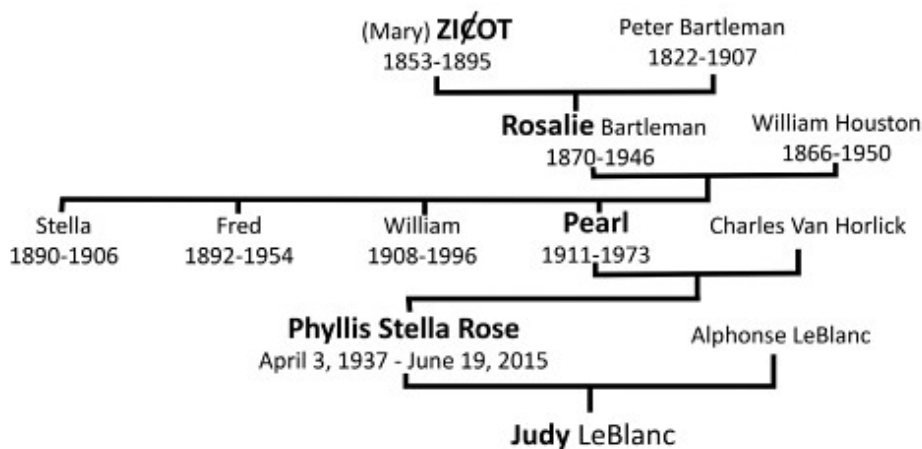
*Sometimes the end is told before the beginning.
One must walk backwards on footprints
that walked forward
for the story to be told.*

I will try this backward walk.

—Louise B. Halfe, Sky Dancer, from
“*āniskōstēw* – connecting”
in *Burning in This Midnight Dream*

FROM WHO I AM BORN

I can trace my Coast Salish ancestors on my mother's side back to 1853 when a woman named ZIÇOT of the WSÁNEĆ Nation married a Scot named Peter Bartleman. Their daughter Rosalie married William Houston, whose mother came from either the Suquamish tribe in Washington or the Tseil-Waututh Nation from Burrard Inlet in British Columbia. Rosalie and William were my great-grandparents. Their oldest of eight children was my great-aunt Stella, and their youngest was my grandmother, who had six children including my mother.



FAMILY TREE

My mother was named *Phyllis Stella Rose*. She went by Rose, recalling the wildflower, its petals that tear, its thorns. She had a quick smile for the camera, a coquettish tilt of the chin. I've been going through boxes of family photos. Most are arranged neatly in albums while others are in Ziploc bags awaiting my mother's prowess for organization, a chore she will never complete.

After my mother died, I saw that she wasn't fixed in my history but lived on in my body's tics and follicles, my DNA, the image of myself in the mirror. She inhabited my dreams and lingered in photographs where she's at the mercy of the camera's shutter and the gaze of the living. I want to go back in time, to ask the questions I never asked: about this history she's left me, of which I know so little, to probe the silences, and to understand what it means to acknowledge an ancestry without claiming an identity. Who were her Coast Salish grandmothers, and therefore mine? What did they mean to her and what do they mean to me? Which is the longest reach, from present to past or from past to present? Finally, the only possible route is from known to unknown.

i) Rose, June 12, 2011

In the photo a woman in her early seventies wears a straw hat, and through the tiny holes in its weave the sunlight makes a pattern of circles forming a corona around her head. Her eyes are concealed behind thin-rimmed glasses, and a hesitant smile plays around her mouth. Behind her, the lake bleaches blue to white, and the mountains in the far distance are a greenish blur. In the brightness of the summer day and the wash of light, there's a porousness to the image that is unsettling. The woman is my mother, and she will die in four years and eight days.

I was with her both days, the day she died and the day this photo was taken by my husband. Also present outside the frame of the photo were my father, my daughter and her husband, my mother's sister and brother. We were on our way from the West Coast to my niece's wedding in Canmore, Alberta, and had stopped in Kelowna to pick up my uncle from the care home and take him out for lunch. None of us are in the photo, all us family members. It's my mother only, she who so often was surrounded by others, as if she's on a solitary journey and merely smiling into the day.

Even if I know she's not alone, looking at the photo, I'm able to imagine that my mother could be another woman, one she must have dreamed of in her most private moments. This woman of my imagination sits enjoying

a glass of wine on a lakeshore in a wide-brimmed hat in a tourist town in the interior. She's free of the encumbrances of family or history. Did my mother ever wonder what it might have been like to live a life other than the one she lived? Now that I'm older, and now that she's gone, I sometimes wonder this myself. Not that there's anything extraordinary in my fantasy, only that it might have been different in small ways, and maybe some large. Now that she's dead, and I'm nearing the age she is in the photo, I'm able to imagine her wondering, for example, what it might have been like had she not had me. I'm now able to hold that thought and know that it wouldn't have meant she didn't love me in the best way she could, which is what we do.

The photo sits on my desk, and some days I want to shake my mother from her inertia, pull her into the present and protect her from all that I know is coming, or is it to protect me from losing her for good? How many ways you lose your mother throughout a life, starting from when you're taken from her body as an infant. For good, we say, to describe what we think of as that final losing.

ii) Rose, Mid-1960s

In the photo the house is cut off at the attic. This is how my mother lived her life, or tried to, as if there was no attic. The house pushes its bay window outward like a chest wanting a medal. My mother stands beneath the window in front of a flower garden bordered with rock. She saw beauty in flowers and in the geometry of houses: cathedral entrances and dormer windows, slant of light. This isn't to say she didn't have practical considerations: size, modernity, the neighbourhood. My father was the same, only for him the attraction wasn't aesthetic so much as a dream of prestige at a time when home ownership was the only definition of success for the postwar working class.

The door up the front steps is in shadow on the covered porch.

Once there was a knock at that front door and my older brother answered.

"Is your father here?" the man asked.

My brother, who might have been twelve at the time, replied, "He doesn't live here anymore."

The man went away. I, who would have been eleven at the time, said to my brother, "You're not supposed to tell anyone that." My brother and I stood for a moment at the closed door in silence, he wide-eyed while I stood frozen with shame seeding somewhere inside of me because my mother was alone with four children.

After a year, my father came back. One time—I don't remember if it was before he moved out or after he moved back in—he drove

his Volkswagen bug in mad circles on the front lawn while my mother screamed at him from the porch to stop. I coaxed her into the house and made her a cup of tea.

There is a madness in attics, but the attic doesn't exist in this photo.

She's in her twenties or early thirties—how do I know? A flirty fist on hip, knees slightly bent, and her slender body draws the eye to her physicality. White slacks end above her delicate brown ankles. The summer sun illuminates the living room window behind her. White sheers are visible. There's no seeing in. Her hair is a shock of raven black against this radiance.

My mother squints into the camera and is not exactly smiling. She could be described as petite, but there's a force within her. If you turn the photo, the tilt is of no consequence. Always, she will hold fast.

In his effort to capture both the house and the entirety of my mother's body, my father has stood too far back. Between him and my mother is a ribbon of grey hardpan, a small section of the circular drive on which she stands. I wonder which of his possessions he's most keen to forefront. Neither the house nor my mother submit easily to ownership.

iii) Women, December 1968

The four of us representing three generations are wedged together on the couch: my mother with my six-year-old sister on her lap, then Grandma Pearl, and me beside her. My twelve-year-old body is cut off from the shoulders down, my eyes are lowered and I lean forward as if about to bolt. My little sister slants toward the photo's frame. None of us want to be there.

A string of pearls accents the red dress that flatters my mother's tiny figure and contrasts elegantly with her coifed black hair. She's dressed up for this occasion, my grandmother's visit. It's Christmas, and she's cleaned and baked for two weeks after her shifts at the grocery store. Her mouth is more brightly lipsticked than her mother's, though both women have similar expressions on their face: tight jaw muscles and a slight effort at a smile. Grandma Pearl, wearing a white cardigan and a skirt not quite long enough to hide her stubby knees, has squared her shoulders to the camera. The direction of her gaze is toward my father, who's taking the picture, though the rhinestones on her glasses deflect the light and conceal her eyes. She fully occupies the centre of the photo, her posture broadcasting a mix of wariness and defiance. My mother will one day adopt this stance, and so will I.

My mother tilts her head toward my grandmother with her shoulder torqued in the opposite direction. It's the tension in this opposition that touches me the most: the daughter, despite herself, poised as if wanting to rest her head on her mother's shoulder.

iv) Grandma Pearl, Late 1950s

Her name, Pearl, suggests something white and hard, born of agitation. She started life out as a Houston, her father's name, which absorbed the one attached to her mother: Bartleman. Her first married name was Van Horlick, and all her children, including my mother, are Van Horlicks. After the divorce there was a man who beat her and the children then left, but she didn't take his name. Finally, Van Horlick was absorbed by a new husband and she became a McKee.

The photo is black and white, overexposed, so that its shadows are dense and its bright spots luminescent. In the foreground Grandma Pearl and her husband Howard McKee are dwarfed by darkness behind and above them except where traces of dappled sunlight reveal the trees of a forest. They sit at a table covered with a white cloth and various dishes, coffee cups, a jug of milk or maybe orange juice. Howard is in shade though a patch of sunshine highlights the jaunty white cap on his head, the hat I imagine my grandmother asked him to wear. "Wear this, Hon, it suits you." It was said he was *a good man*, that finally Pearl had a good man. My grandmother, whose hair was naturally as straight as my mother's, would have curled her hair for this lunch out at the edge of the forest.

She and Howard face forward, his mouth in a perfect O as if caught in mid-sentence. Both surprised by the shutter of the camera. Grandma is much shorter than her husband, and her shoulders are slightly hunched, her eyes squinting, while her face and body are bleached white from the full sun that washes over her. In this abundance of light against the dark background she can't see what I see, her elfin face and black curls, her own shininess.

v) Pearl, About 1940

In this, one of only three photos I have of Grandmother Pearl, I'm surprised at her youthfulness, her small stature. In her twenties, she's already a mother of four, with four more to come. If I stare long enough, it's as if I hear her thoughts, her voice, and I know her in a way I never knew her in life.

Though Pearl's brother-in-law is a tall glass of water like her husband, it's not him but her mother she longs to stand next to. As always, her mother, Rosalie, is propped up by Pearl's brother Fred way down on the other end of the line in this family photo. Always, since Stella, her sister, died, or so Pearl is told. Pearl is the youngest in the family and wasn't even around in 1906 when this sister she never met, the oldest in the family, died. Never mind, it was five years before Pearl was born. It was as if when Pearl opened her infant mouth for the first time to cry out in hunger, in the shadowy corner of the room hovered Stella.

Mother and daughter about either end of the photo, a round-faced smiling Rosalie angled toward her tall son who rests his arm on her shoulder, and Pearl only half there, not smiling. A quarter of Pearl's body is shaved off where she stands behind her brother-in-law's elbow. Her mouth is curved into a frown and her arms are crossed. She's a skinny petite thing with straight black hair, Charlie Van Horlick's scrawny dark-eyed wife.

In the middle of the photo, all three of the towering men and the broad-shouldered blonde woman are smiling.

Look at Charlie now, lips puckered around a dangling cigarette, his arm snuggling the big blonde what's-her-name close, and Pearl and Charlie's boy and girl at their feet like they belong to Blondie. Pearl can smell Charlie's whiskey breath from where she stands. Didn't her mom warn her about him, though her dad said Charlie would take care of their little Pearl, that he was a *worker*, that he came from a big respectable family who owned a ranch.

Oh, her Charlie, for better or worse, is a smooth-talking hunk of man, and even her mom says they make beautiful children together. Just look at her little boy; was there ever a more handsome child, that sweet shy pout on his face? And Rosie, her China doll, sticking her chest out proud as can be and staring straight at the camera with that scowl and those piercing eyes. Didn't Pearl holler at her to stop scowling and Charlie bark back without taking his eyes off Blondie, "Leave her alone, Pearl."

Had Stella lived she would have loved Pearl; Pearl just knows it. Her big sister, Stella, would have been twenty-one when Pearl was born, and she would have sung her the songs their mother Rosalie sang to Stella when she was a baby, songs Rosalie stopped singing before Pearl was born, the old songs her Bartleman grandmother sang in their language, a language Pearl will never know. Stella would have braided her little sister's hair and taken her to pick buckets of berries in the summer.

Almost eighty years later, Pearl's granddaughter will wonder if her own mother, who is little Rosie of the scowl, ever saw this photo. She'll ask her uncle, who's still handsome at eighty-five, about the blonde. Her uncle, who since his sister's death misses her phone calls, will shrug his shoulders. Though the uncle and the granddaughter know, Pearl in the photo doesn't yet know that she'll one day leave Charlie.

Little Rosie doesn't know and will never know that in her middle name she carries the ghost of the oldest sister who died: *Stella*. Or perhaps she knew all along, the way we sometimes know things without being told, or being told but not telling.