

## Shadowboxing: Myths and Miniatures of Home

Elyse Lamm Pineau

### ACT I

*At Rise:* Lights come up on individual rooms in Dollhouse DL while projections of rooms appear on screen CS. Spot DR on footstool. I sit, watching.



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## A. Threshold

### Small Things: An Allegory

I've always had a fondness for small things.

The still life.

I feel at home in worlds drawn-to-scale so they fit in the palm of your hand yet lose neither weight nor precision in their rendering.

Small things can be dense with significance. They can render the mythic in miniature, augment the moment and make it momentous, make it a monument,



make *invitation*  
should you choose to attend,  
to play in the House of Memory and Imagination,  
the House of Wood and Wonder, where,  
twixt the fixed and the unfolding of each shadowed room,  
comes the Story.

Lies the Homestead.

*Elyse Pineau*

When I was a small thing, just a little bit of a thing, really; when I was a small, still-life in the world, the thing I loved most in *my* world . . . was playing inside *that* dollhouse.

The first time I set eyes on it, that very dollhouse you see here, it was a double-decker, double-sided, drawn-and-dressed-to-scale extravaganza, that my mother and her Bridge Club—the Ladies of Cards and Cocktails--had commissioned one year, forty years ago, as a Christmas surprise for the five daughters, the five little Lamms—Rochelle, Cherie, Maria, Laurie, and Lisa Lamm; the name I was called, forty years ago when I was small. It is a big rambling old house with 2 corridors of open rooms running parallel down a spine, and it's mounted up high on a pedestal for ease and for access. At *that* time, *this* house you see here, was painted white with gray trim, to mimic the house I grew up in:



*that* double-decker, double-sided, drawn-up-scale, 4-square white Colonial, set back and apart from its neighbors on the block by a high stone embankment and an iron rail. And so you can see, how the homes where I spent my childhood were doubled one morning, that Christmas, when Mother had built, for her five wee young Lamms, a house we could play in, inside the house where we lived.

And true to convention, this model of home had no walls, at least not to the outside. And having no walls there was no place for doors. But that didn't matter; because a house built for dolls has no need for doors, *because everybody knows that the dolls aren't going anywhere*. Because it is the nature of those who live in a dollhouse to hold still and host your attention, your desire to yield to the power you can wield over things that are small. Small enough to fit in the palm of your hand.

*But coming back to the story* of this particular dollhouse, it came into being one Christmas Eve when my mother convened her Bridge Club—Mrs. Percey, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Weib, Mrs. Forstram—the women who gathered for years to attend each other's homesteads, through crises both minute and monumental. And *as I came to learn it*, the story of this dollhouse began that Christmas Eve 40 years ago, in the hours between eggnog and Midnight Mass, when The Bridge Club set up housekeeping and the women commenced to homestead. All through the evening, *as the story goes*, they painted and wallpapered, and furnished and curtained and carpeted and knick-knacked and stocked the pantry shelves, and laid the dining room table. They made up the beds and populated the nursery, hung the pictures on the walls and lit a plastic fire in the fireplace. And when at last it was done and house looked like home, they posed a family of dolls in life-like positions. Poised for Christmas morning.

Now, being the youngest of mother's daughters, the littlest of Lamms and just a bit of a thing at the time when I first laid eyes on it, this house without walls for the smallest of dolls stood much, much taller than I did. *As my body remembers* that first Christmas morning, if I stretched myself up as long and as tall as I could, my chin could just rest on the edge of the carpet that ran the length of the double-deep living room so that if I turned my head, to one side, then another, I had a perfect doll's eye view of the entire ground floor.

But in order to see into the second story, the hidden story of the house that was bigger than I was—I needed to be taller. I needed to grow older. I needed to grow wise enough to know how to put a little distance between us, because things look less looming when viewed in perspective than they do from the ground. But more than anything, I needed more language to leverage, in order to see into the other stories of the house I called home. And so that's how it started,

this Homesteading project. In order to see into stories hidden inside my house . . . I learned to play upon a chair.

I learned how to take up my chair and place it carefully, strategically, dead-center, just out of reach of the house, just about five feet from the house. And I learned to perch there on my chair, quiet and focused in a still-life position and give my *whole small self* over to the moment. momentarily. The moment I first laid eyes on the House of Wood and Wonder that would teach me to play. That would call me down corridors of memory and imagination where small things beckoned, and I could yield to the power I could wield in a world drawn to scale. A world where Stories made it possible to pass through the walls of a house as if through a door.

## **B. Ground Floor**

### **The Homesteaders' Act**

My parents, Barney and Marion Lamm, were children in the Depression, sweethearts through WWII and dewy-eyed newlyweds on this day, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1946. But the trajectory of their story does not begin here, iconic though it is, this moment in American history when a war had ended and the young men returned—the ones who returned—and the sweethearts were waiting and the economy shifted and the country promised a generation of working class American dreamers that the future was theirs to homestead. No, *that* story begins, for my parents at least, in the wake of an earlier war to end all wars, when the young men returned—the ones who returned—and some of them were pilots. Some of them were fighter pilots from WWI. Do you remember? Those daring aces and their flying machines: like Eddie Rickenbacker chasing the Red Baron all across the fields of Germany? Well my father remembered, because some of those boys flew home after the war and for a decade after, some of those flyboys came barnstorming out over field and farm, out over some farmer's back 40, my grandpa's back forty, staging dogfights for a show and taking the townsfolk up for a ride. And I think maybe they took Barney up for a ride, because the trajectory of my family story begins, *I know*, with the first moment dad laid eyes on an

airplane and felt the tug of turning its nose into the wind and taking off from the earth. Because from that moment on, the thing he loved most in the world, was flying in his airplane.



And so when he was 5 he subcontracted my grandmother to bake pies he could sell on the grade school playground to earn enough money to buy himself an airplane. And at 10 he caddied golf for rich businessmen and at 12 he started washing airplanes and hanging out with pilots, and when he was 14, the year after Prohibition ended, he opened a Speakeasy called Barney's Green Gables in the basement of my grandparents' farmhouse, in my grandmother's name of course, just to be legal. And at 17 he graduated high school, having never been tardy or absent a day—and he bought himself that airplane. And by 19 he was the sole proprietor of Dakota Skyways, with 30 pilots working for him and a government contract to train pilots as the country geared up to enter the war, and when it did, he joined the Air Force and trained pilots for Uncle Sam.

Released from the Air Force in '46, he climbed back in his plane, turned the nose north toward Dakota where Marion was waiting and the whole wide world beckoned. And he was carrying a pair of silk

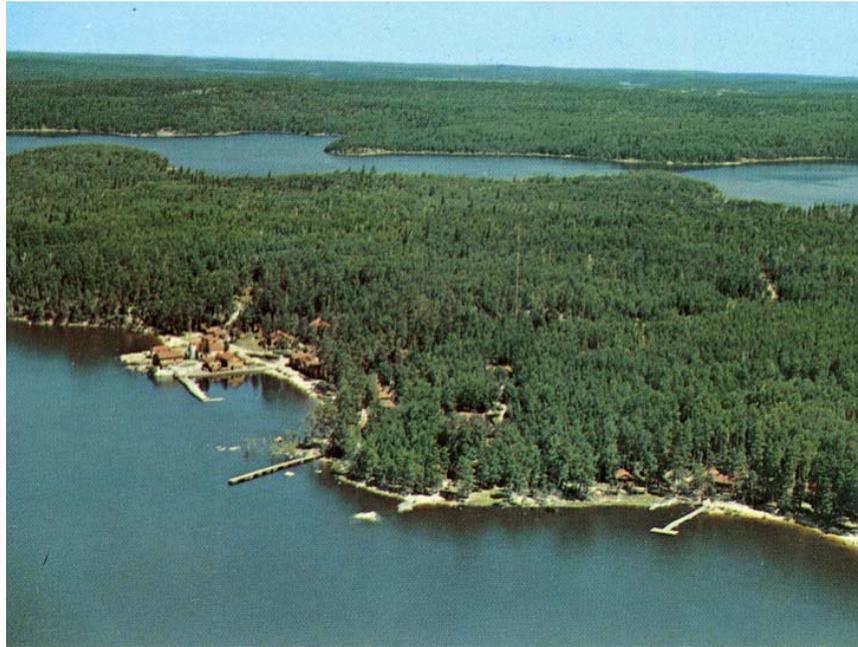
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stockings in one hand and a proposal of marriage in the other. Mother accepted both.

Which may have been the last time she had occasion to wear a pair of silk stockings, because, three days after their wedding, according to legend, the two of them packed up everything they owned into a two-seater Cessna float plane, turned the nose north toward Canada and together the newlyweds took off in search of a Homestead.

And that is the start of the real story.

### **Barney's Ball Lake Lodge**



Before the war, my father had cast his eye on a peninsula of land deep in the Canadian bush of Northern Ontario where the fishing and hunting were legendary and the only means of transportation through a thousand miles of 'uncharted' wilderness was foot, boat or float plane. Unpacking all their worldly belongings from that two-seater Cessna into one rented room with a closet and a 2-burner

hotplate at a boarding house in town—a house, by the way, that just happened to be a double-decker, 4 square white Colonial, set back and apart from the street by an iron rail—my parents flew north into the bush. Cashing in on the equivalent of a post-war Homesteaders Act, they leased-for-life a parcel of forested shoreline in the heart of native Ojibway country. *As family legend tells it*, the newlyweds set up housekeeping in an abandoned mink trapper's shack on the shores of Ball Lake, sixty miles north of the nearest settlement and adjacent to two Ojibwe reservations, Whitedog and Grassy Narrows. Gambling a bank debt on the hired labor of six log cabin craftsmen and the surrounding native population my parents began supervising construction of a wilderness resort: Barney's Ball Lake Lodge. With each tree they cut the shoreline receded and cabins grew up on the edge of the forest until there were twenty or more, with a Lodge and a store, and a fishhouse, and a dancehall with movies and dorms and even a chapel in the trees for Mass on Sunday mornings.



From its conception, Ball Lake re-imagined the “rustic hunting lodge with-a-couple-a-cabins-and-a-cook,” that had been the model and mainstay of Ontario tourism before the war. Instead, my father’s

passion for the outdoors was anchored by mother's gift for homesteading, so that together they created a lush and luxurious wilderness retreat with unparalleled personalized service—a kind of Waldorf in the wilderness, if you will—whose note of rugged elegance offered the best of both worlds to American businessmen and celebrities turned summer sportsmen.

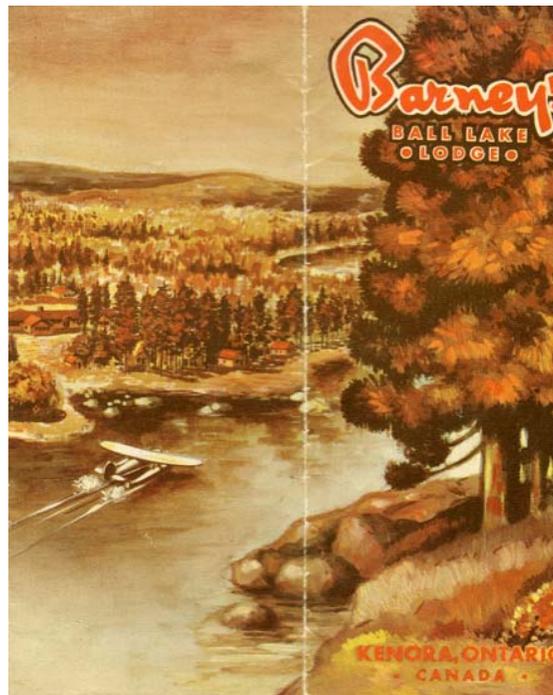
And mother recorded it all. From guest logs to scrapbooks, mother collected and archived the stories of Ball Lake from the first season to the last. Here's a prophetic note from the 1<sup>st</sup> guest log, the year they opened for business in 1947: "As far as I'm concerned, this is a creation little short of a miracle. It offers the greatest fishing in Canada and all thanks to two of the finest young kids I've had the pleasure of meeting. Congratulations on building the greatest sportsman's lodge I've ever seen. . . . And Barney, if I had had a longer paddle, I would have killed that bear!" wrote Jimmy Robinson, veteran head writer for *Sports Afield* magazine, May 1947.



Over the next 25 years, from the start of fishing season in May 'til the last of the big game had been taken in November and the family moved back to the house in town for the winter, Barney's Ball Lake Lodge grew to be the premier wilderness resort in northeastern Canada. By the time I arrived on the family scene in 1959 it was a

long-standing, self-sufficient, precision-operated, live-in community of 200 staff and guests with a folkloric history and a mythic pioneer spirit whose legacy I can neither discount nor disclaim. And so perhaps, I must tell the story differently.

An enticement from the first brochure produced in the early 50's: "Beyond the rim of civilization, Barney's Ball Lake Lodge is located in the heart of a virgin wilderness where abundant wildlife have lived unmolested for years and now are yours for the taking!" Can you believe they wrote that?! But it's all right here; you can read it for yourself.



Imagine: "the imperishable memory of a charging bull moose that dropped at your feet . . . the long range shot that stopped a fine buck dead in his tracks. You've never tasted the thrill of the hunt till you've hunted big game in the far north! Here is a country dotted with lakes seldom fished by white men. Here are the waters where fish bite hard

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and often and where 40-pound lake trout lurk in every pool. And at Barney's there is a staff of veteran white and native guides to pass on to you their intimate knowledge of the wilderness and share age-old tales of the far north while frying up the walleye you've just caught and serving you the traditional Canadian 'shore lunch.'"



"Once back at the Lodge there are even three walk-in refrigerators to keep your game and fish fresh until you pack your trophies and head for home."

### **Taxidermy: Light and Dark**

They say that children who grow up on a farm become unsentimental about death, understanding that the slaughter of animals is all part of the "natural" cycle ordained by man's dominion over the earth and its creatures. So I have to wonder what lessons I learned, surrounded by slaughter? What sentiment survived the remains of the day's hunt, when all manner of creatures lay dead or decapitated all along the

shoreline, or better yet . . . stuffed and preserved in life-like positions, gathered benignly 'round the hearth at the Lodge like a silent menagerie. Did I think they were real—these immobile and glassy-eyed beasts with which I played as a child? I know I had names for them all: this is Pepper on whose back I rode like the wind on forested paths—and over here on the wall hung Teddy-the-bear with his thick polar hair and sharp yellow teeth. Did I wonder who killed them and why they came to be hanging on walls, or draped over mantles or made into rugs? Did it strike me as odd, do you think, that the family feline was a bobcat named Spits [hissss!]. Or did even my innocent eyes understand that these animals mounted in poses, both fierce and façade, were merely a shadow of life that lurked beyond the edge of the forest. When did I begin to question the stories I'd heard of actual family pets, like Crazy Legs the moose. He was just a baby when he arrived on the scene—by some mysterious accident that I was never told—shortly after my oldest sister Rochelle took her first baby steps across the hearth. And baby daughter and baby moose learned to toddle together until . . . Well, mooses, it seems, grow faster than daughters, and one fateful day Crazy Legs sat on the baby . . . and thus he earned admittance to the family's permanent archive.



So given this propensity for posing, perhaps it made sense, when at last it was done and hearth looked like home, that my parents then posed a family of daughters, like a familial still-life—Rochelle, Cherie, Maria, Laurie and Lisa—poised to meet the tourist season.

### **Sandbox & Silver Spoon**

Now as you might imagine, when each of the daughters was small, we were not permitted to roam free around the camp, for fear that we would toddle off the end of the dock, or get chewed up in an airplane propeller or wander into the woods and be eaten by wolves. And so when I was small in the wild Canadian bush, I spent my earliest days inside an enclosure in front of a playhouse that mirrored the real house at the top of a hill overlooking the camp, where the guests played and the staff worked and my parents oversaw operations.

It was a good vantage point, this picketed playpen, for over seeing how things operate and perhaps that is why I recall it now, in this moment. I recall a moment when I was 4 or 5 and I was playing in my sandbox inside of the fence at the top of the hill. I was playing with a bucket of plastic figures, you know, overseeing operations for my very own bucketful of tiny men—cowboys and Indians, likely—and I was trying to pile up enough sand in my 3-by-3-foot world, to build a respectable fort so I could make them stage a battle to see who would be King of the Hill: the cowboys or the Indians.

And in the midst of my play my father walked out of the big house on a double-time beeline to the lake where an airplane was docking because that was his way, everyday, but today, out of the clear blue Canadian sky, he paused for moment in his leaving and he saw me. And he stopped. “What are you doin’ there,” I imagine he said, gruffly and tipping that half smoked, soggy-ended, unlit cigar like he did. “Anything you need?” And then I imagine, because I cannot remember, that I just held up my hands full of sand, in that universal gesture for “more.”

And because I can just picture it, I imagine he huffed that one-note chuckle, “huh!”—then popped the cigar back in his mouth and without a word headed off down the hill in time to catch the plane

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taxiing into the dock. Because the next thing I do remember, a line of men began forming down the hill on the beach. At the edge of the shore they made a line in the sand, so small from my vantage point they looked like a row of plastic figures. And each one of them carried a bucket and each filled his bucket brimming with sand and together they turned and looked up toward the house on the hill where a child was waiting, ensconced in her picketed playpen. And one by one that line of men filed up the hill with their sand and emptied their buckets at my feet. And I sat on the side of the box with my cowboys and Indians, mesmerized by a world where the whim of a child moved the earth.



I don't know why this memory comes to me now, here in the middle of this story, but the fact that it does, in the *way* that it does, is worth heeding. Because memories, like dreams, return for a reason, and it's wise to attend when they do.

So I'm sitting in a sandbox with two fists full of plastic men and the men of my father's—the men in *his* hands—are filling and carrying and emptying their buckets in front of me and with each turn, the pile of sand grows taller and taller and taller until I can no

longer see over it, until it seems a mountain of sand has been moved, as if all the sand in Canada has poured into a box at my feet. And I'm ecstatic, cause the thing you most need in the world when you're 4 is enough sand in your sandbox, arranged by decree of the King of the Hill—who's your Dad!! And I know, in this moment, before I can name it, that privilege is power by association. That the power he wields, as King of the Hill, over buckets of men and the earth they can move has been placed at my disposal, to use as I will, without lifting a finger. Just because I'm the daughter—and the baby at that—of a man who can order a mountain to move, I've been granted the privilege to oversee operations in a world built to scale by the labor of others.

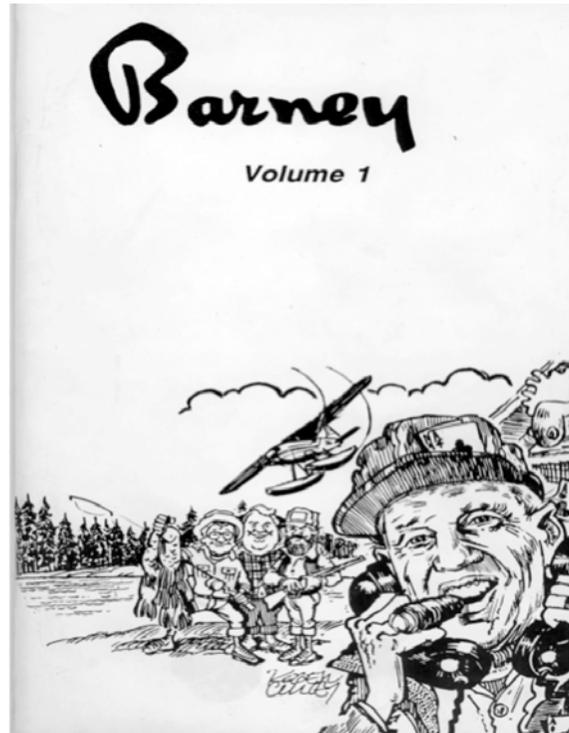
And what do I say to these men as they file past my sandbox offering the earth? What is the protocol for children made powerful by birth, by no act of their own, just the fact that they'll inherit a house on the hill? Do I thank them? "Kind sir, I'm so pleased you could stop in your tracks and deliver the world to my door." Do I notice? It's their job to haul dirt and I can't be expected to break the King's rules and leave my enclosure and risk being eaten by wolves. Some are cowboys, some Indians, these men at my feet, these men in my hands, and who shall decide the outcome of battle for sand forts I've ordered them build?

While I cannot recall my response in that moment, the fact that I can't doesn't matter. See, the gift I've been given is *this* moment, *now*, to offer a gesture in kind: to build in that sandbox a moment that matters, using all that I've learned about cowboys and Indians and Kings of the Hill. So when opportunity comes, as it has in this moment: I'll know what to look for; I'll know what to say. About men who've been ordered by decree of a King, to form lines in the sand where battles are fought. And the child who inherits those buckets of men can wage war, while safely ensconced in a picketed playpen, in a big white house on a hill.

What lessons, then, lie buried in sand, as I sift through these stories of power and privilege. What does it mean to wield dominion? Who is the man in the myth and how does one live accountably, ethically, once you can see, once you name where you are seated and how things operate. "Anything you need?" he said to me then. Yes, I

need *more*. I need models; I need insight, into how I'm to learn how to be. And then I remember . . . I *know* how to learn about models for living and developing character. I know it by being, *becoming another*. Through the eyes of an "other" perspective is different, less looming, more grounded. This method of learning beckons me now: to take up my chair, to leverage the language, to colonize history... to grow wise in my body by taking up residence inside of the stories, inside of the people who inhabit my home. From here, then, let me see how what's fixed might unfold; how man becomes myth, and the moment that matters is when power and privilege are put on the line and the lives that you hold in the palm of your hand must rely . . . on decisions you make. Accountably. Ethically. Momentously. Now. So . . . *The Barney Book*.

Let the tales begin . . .



*Elyse Pineau*

### **The Barney Book**

*(excerpts from a printed collection of “oral history” narratives about my father prepared for a Ball Lake reunion. Explanatory asides are shown in italics).*

Kenora was socked in tight with fog. Even Rex Kitley was walking. *[You’ve got to love a story that starts like that, you know, troping its own folkloric conventions! You see Rex Kitley was the original “old time Canadian bushpilot,” the standard by which all others were judged and the audience for these tales would have known that immediately. But since you don’t have that local knowledge, I’ll try to fill in the gaps as we go. ]*

Barney had over-nighted up North and first thing in the morning he fired up that old Norseman and headed south to Kenora, only to be met by a huge fog bank barring his way. The fog was sitting so low on to the ground, a guy could barely see to walk in it, much less take off in a plane. Well, Barney landed and found a local native that knew a way into Kenora via waterways.



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*[I hate it when they do that, because you know it was Joe Loon. I know it was Joe Loon, who was there at Ball when the first tree was cut and became head guide and family friend for 25 years and eventually lost his life there in the waterways around the Lodge.]* So, Barney and Joe climb up into the airplane and away they go. Barney put the Norseman up on the step and step-taxed that plane 50 miles, all the way into the Kenora base. *[When you put a float plane “on the step” you’re givin’ her just enough power to pull the nose up out of the water without getting airborne. So they were just skimmin’ along the surface, you know, under the fog bank.]* Everyone, including Rex Kitely, was aghast as Barney slowly appeared out of the fog, taxied to the dock and very casually got out of the aircraft and without a word, sauntered on up the hill, leaving everyone standing on the dock with their mouths hanging open wondering how he'd done it . . .

Like most of the old time bush pilots, Barney believed that an airplane on floats will not be overloaded in the air if it can be persuaded to get off the water. A hunting party had taken a moose down about 35 miles north of Ball and Barney went to pick it up with a 65hp Piper Cub. He crammed as much moose meat in the back seat as he could, then tied the head to the float struts. Aerodynamics, drag, MOT regs, weight and balance, didn't matter. After all, 200,000 hours in the front seat, what could possibly go wrong? Well, Barney got the Cub on the step *[remember what that is?]* and then up out of the water all right, but he couldn't get out of ground effect, you know, to clear the trees surrounding the lake. So he starts flying go-rounds, starting just a few feet off the water. He flew round and round and round that lake, gaining a few feet of precious altitude on each circuit until he finally had gained enough altitude to set out for Ball. 'Tenacious?' That's a bush pilot for you.

I don't care what he tells you. When Barney is hunting he couldn't hit the broad side of barn at three feet! And you can tell him I said so.

*[Oh, here's a good one; I like this story; its about mother].* Back about 1960, Marion got a hankering for a mink coat. The Lodge was very successful by this time and so Barney seemed receptive to the idea.

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Sure enough, come Christmas there was a box just the right size under the tree. But upon opening it, Marion found 6 mink traps, all individually wrapped, a map of the trap line and license made out in her name! There were no limits to what this man would do for a practical joke.

Barney is generous by nature and so he thought it only fair to share the many pleasures of a good cigar with his big Newfoundland dog, Blackie. To his delight, Barney found that not only did Blackie like to share a cigar, but he could carry them around clucked gently in his teeth—and keep them lit! Thus Barney and Blackie were often seen padding about the hangar, passing the cigar between them. Now, how Barney told me this story . . . one day he and Blackie are taking a tour of the hangar, enjoying a cigar, and Marion comes around the corner just as Barney reaches down for a puff. “Barney!” and I can just hear her. “Barney! What are you doing? You don’t know where that dog’s mouth has been.” “That’s ok Marion. He doesn’t know where mine’s been either!”

[*Oh, I remember hearing about this.*] I heard that during the Christmas period around 1953 Barney and Doc Eisentrout were out partying pretty good. One bet the other that he wouldn't have the guts to shoot all the lights off the Town Hall Christmas tree. Sure enough, the two of them tried to do just that. They even went to jail for the night, paying a \$200 fine the next morning. They also bought a pair of shoes for every kid in town who had parents on welfare . . .

I had never flown for someone like Barney, and haven't since. An example that stands out in my mind occurred one cold October night about 10:30 when my phone rang. It was 'the old man'. He explained that a group of native friends had gotten themselves stranded up north and needed to get back to the reservation. It'd take all night. The weather was atrocious. It was very late. I'd worked all day. Barney didn't seem to hear. “Here's what I want you to do. You just get into that great big silver airplane of yours and you go get those guys and take them where they want to go. . . .” Well, I roused the crew and off we went. What a night ! Pissing with rain, cold,

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miserable, we made it mostly by cursing Barney and everything connected with him during the next five hours. I got back home about 4:30 am. And just as I crawled, literally, back into bed the phone rang. It was Barney. “Just wanted to thank you for helping out my friends tonight. Take a couple of days off and give me a call next week.” I was dumbstruck. He hung up before I could ask if he wanted me to do it all again. I would have without question.

If Canada had one Barney Lamm for every thousand people, this country would have the entrepreneurial spirit of a giant. He is a gentleman to a fault with people he liked. He is deadly to do business with.

I'll tell you what kind of businessman Barney was. One day he concluded a deal which netted him a handsome \$10,000 profit. He sold a Beaver to an operator who had been looking for just such an airplane. Five minutes prior to the sale he'd had a call from another operator who was eager to sell just such a Beaver. Two phone calls and \$10,000. To top it off, Barney called the seller and asked if he'd mind delivering the Beaver to the buyer's location. Barney never saw the airplane.



Barney and Jimmy Robinson [*you remember Jimmy?*]. Barney and Jimmy were up fishing one season. Jimmy had been at Barney all day long, the way only Jimmy could kid someone non-stop all day. Well, Jimmy hadn't caught a single fish—not even shore lunch—and Barney hadn't done much better. All of a sudden Barney ties into a real good fish and starts to get pretty excited. It's been a while since he's landed a trophy size laker. So Barney plays this big fish for a while and gets it coming in toward the boat, but just before he can get a net on it Jimmy leans over the side of the boat and burns through Barney's line with his cigar—a cigar he's of course bummed off Barney in the first place! Barney swore at Jimmy for hours afterwards, threatening to throw Jimmy overboard and carrying on suchlike, while Jimmy of course, driveling out the corner of his mouth, spent the remainder of the day cackling away happily, smoking a few more of Barney's cigars. It was truly something to watch those two guys—what great friends they were

It had rained all day at Ball Lake. After supper Barney was walking up to his cabin past the camp store where the guides were lounging outside. Among them was John Beaver. “Evenin’ John,” said Barney, “How ya doin’ tonight?” “Good, Barney, except my feet hurt like Hell,” John says. Barney looked down at the remains of what was once—a very long time ago—a pretty decent pair of boots. “No wonder your feet are sore!” With that he reached down and unlaced his own boots, took them off and dropped them at John’s feet. He grinned and without a word walked off through the mud in his sock feet to his cabin.

Barney was made a Chief of the Ojibway tribe in a lengthy and private ritual. The literal translation of his given name is Thunderbird Continuous Day. This has a profound meaning in the Ojibway tradition and language. The only other men I know of who were honored in this way with a totemic name and full regalia were Will Rogers and Calvin Coolidge.

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The legends about Barney Lamm could be related endlessly, but he was fond of other acts about which little is known because he wanted it that way. The many mercy flights flown with no compensation expected, the free flight to school, to town, to the reservation when there was no money. The sickbeds attended by Marion and the monetary help dispensed so quietly by them both: whole families fed, clothed and sheltered. In the winter off season when Barney was in town and he was accosted for a touch, his only question was; “What do you need?”

### Pass the Salt

I think that if there is one way I remember my father, it's in that phrase: what do you need?" My father's kind of compassion was immediate and nonjudgmental. If you're Isaac and you're broke and there's nothing on the trapline and no presents for your kids under the tree at Christmas—what do you need? If you're Phil and you can't make your payroll cause you're just starting out in the resort business and it takes time to build up your clientele—what do you need? If you're Mama Tanguay and your husband went down in a plane back in the early days when the lodge was being built—what do you need? If you're Harold Loon, Joe's son, and you're eight and you and your dad were swimming up at Ball and your dad got a cramp and went under—and you watched as his body sank, becoming one with the waterways all the way to the north bay. If you're Harold—what do you need? What if you're Helgi and you're just old but you miss the homecooked meals your wife used to make—what do you need? Or if you're the woman at the home down the hall from Helgi and you just caught sight of Barney delivering that meal and you yelled out, "Hey Sonny! How can I get me one of those meals on wheels?"—what do you need?



I commemorate and idealize my father in the big stories, the legendary bush pilot entrepreneur . . . but I *remember* my father in the small things, the quiet acts of kindness with which he met the needs of all of us who called on him, relied on him to use his resources to provide what was necessary. And he would. And the remarkable thing was, he did it as simply and automatically as he might pass you the salt, if that's what you needed, sitting at the dining room table in his house on the hill, where the dishes were gold and the silver was shining and it was his job to provide what was needed. The lesson he taught was *precisely because* you're the Head of the Household, King of the Hill, *the right thing to do* when your table is gold and the dishes are silver, is ensure that whoever is hungry, for whatever reason, is invited to eat at your table.

And that is why, I believe, he did what he did, in March 1970 when the Canadian government announced that the food to be served at his table was toxic. That one day out of the clear blue Canadian sky, when the Ministry of Tourism announced that the fish in the lakes all the way from the border to the artic bays were contaminated with something called methyl mercury and they didn't really know what it was and they wouldn't really say what it did, but they were confident, really confident that the degree of poison possible in shore lunch wouldn't kill you, so no one should worry: keep quiet, stay open, it's business. That day in 1970, on the eve of their 26<sup>th</sup> season, my parents faced a decision. The fate of the Lodge hung in balance, and with it the fate of the family, all of the families, who'd come to depend on being fed at their table.

And that is the start of the real story.

**END ACT I**

*Elyse Pineau*

## **ACT II**

*At Rise:* I enter UR against a projected backdrop of Canadian forest and Northern Lights. The “persona” is Ojibwe.



### **C. Second Story**

#### **Bush Town**

Small town. Bush town. Town where no one dreams of going elsewhere. Mill town where five generations of sons cut timber, float lumber down lakes and rivers few others have charted save the native people, save the People of First Nations who scrap together their existence on the shores of the waterways, where white sons float their chemically saturated remains of a forest right past the Hudson's Bay post at the Rez on its way downstream to the big American lumber plant, white on the hill at the border, where the dollar is worth six bits, but its the only deal in town and so you take it and you make it a show of Canadian entrepreneurship at its best.

Summer town. Boom town. One of any number of Canadian bush towns on the shores of 10,000,000 lakes where the walleye weigh 15 pounds, and the moose and the bear nearly pose for your rifle, and the guides, who are native, know the all tricks for tracking

your prey and preparing your catch and sending the trophies back home to the boys at the lodge, at the big white corporation just south of the border where your dollar buys more than your guide, who is native to his Nation, will earn in 10,000,000 seasons of trophies tracked and stuffed for the wall of your big white house on the hill across the border.

Winter town. Forty below freezing town. Town where the temperature is given in the number of seconds to frostbite and the lakes are solid and the trapline's bare, and neither logs nor fishermen come floating past the Rez with their dollars, but the whiskey is cheap if you buy it from the boys in the white storefronts and a bed in the jail is warmer than a night in the alley at forty below freezing and the call of the train . . . ooooohhh, the howl of the train seems so far away as you follow its tracks, this creature of iron not native to your Nation, the very one whose bones you dug from the earth in the time of your fathers and tracked across land that was stolen away from your children. For six bits and a dollar.

Scandal town. Toxic town. Town where one spring the fish all floated belly up on brochures sent out by the government boys who live in the big white capital on the hill. Red fish in frying pans with Xs on them and bleary eyes soaked in methyl mercury from generations of floating toxic timber through every waterway north of the border. But these fish that are eaten alive with poison are eaten again by bird and predator. And then, of course, by predator's predator: the first people of this nation who have lived off this land for 10,000,000 years and whose genes, now, are mutating to accommodate this latest act of cultural warfare. "But no cause for alarm!" the big boys in the white house declaim in their tourist campaign: "No cause to halt business!"

*You can only get sick  
if you swallow the fish  
that swallowed the fly  
that swallowed the gnat  
that soaked in the poison  
that came from the mill that Jack built.*

And they all agreed, those white boys in the big house, that if you just could afford to "Fish for Fun" instead of for food, you could

easily afford the risk of exposure and after all, you just can't afford to disappoint all those boys who come north of the border with their dollars looking to buy Canadian entrepreneurship at its best.



### **Mercury: An Untimely Story**

My parents first heard of mercury poisoning in March 1970 when they were notified that the fish in Ball Lake were contaminated with methyl mercury from a chemical plant and paper mill located upstream of the Lodge. By early May, nearly all commercial fishing had been banned along the river system. Refusing to release any information about industrial mercury, including the results of scientific testing they had conducted, the Ontario government, instead, advocated a “Fish for Fun” program that would effectively allow the sportsman’s lodges to remain open for business while guarding against any lawsuits that might result from poisoned tourists. No acknowledgment was given, of course, to the health and economic impact on the Ojibwe population for whom fish was the

primary food source, and guiding the main source of employment. Within 24 hours of the announcement, my parents sat down together, in the intimate privacy that characterized their relationship, and made the decision that they could not ethically open the Lodge that season, given the potential harm both to their guests and to the Ojibwe employees in whose communities and culture their lives had become entwined. They were the only camp operators to close during that or subsequent seasons. Barney's Ball Lake Lodge never opened again. I was ten years old at the time.

Angered by the government's refusal to release even the most basic information about mercury my parents hired Norvald Fimreite, a graduate student in environmental science at the University of Michigan, to conduct private research on industrial mercury and to survey fish from the area. Fimreite discovered the highest mercury counts in fish ever recorded in the Western Hemisphere, up to 50 times the accepted international level. When my parents financed the publication of Fimreite's research the government was forced to admit that methyl mercury was a lethal industrial poison that destroyed the central nervous system and altered DNA structures, resulting in severe birth defects for generations, and further, that the contaminated waterways would be ruined for at least a century.

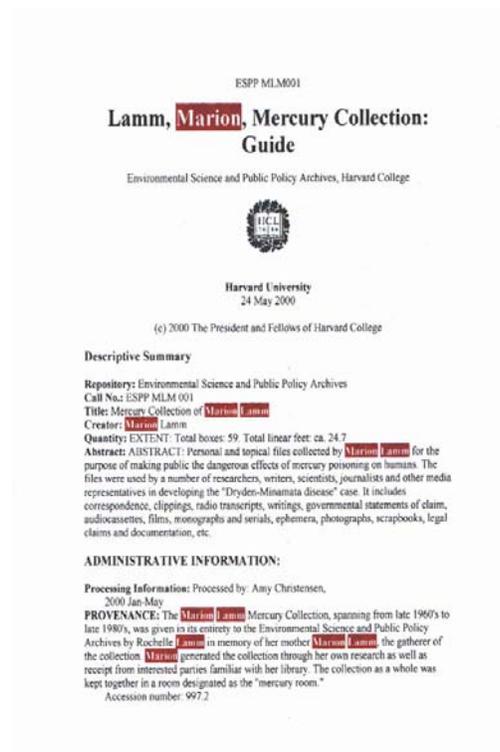
In 1971, my father filed a 3 million dollar lawsuit against the Chemical and Paper Company and facilitated an additional civil action suit against the corporation on behalf of the Grassy & Whitedog reservations. My parents began researching everything they could discover about industrial mercury, attending scientific conventions, grilling politicians at every public press conference, rallying the American media and serving as public advocates for the Indian bands' negotiations with the government. Over the course of that year, they spent more on fish testing in the area than had the provincial government, in addition to providing pilots and aircraft for any scientists or journalists wishing to visit the area, and "out" transportation for Indian spokesmen who wanted to meet with government officials.

By 1973, my parents had learned enough of the global history and consequence of mercury poisoning that they contacted scientists in Minimata Japan, the site of the first and most severe mercury

contamination in 1956. Japanese doctors arranged to have several Indians from Grassy Narrows, along with my father, travel to Japan to see, first hand, the devastating effects of mercury poisoning. They were appalled by what they saw. At the request of the Ojibwe council, my parents financed a Japanese research team from Kumamoto University, to set up base in Ontario and begin intensive examinations of the Indians. Blood and brain tissue samples taken from the Indians at Grassy revealed accumulated mercury levels 500 times greater than the international medical standard.

Needless to say, the government and the timber corporation were furious at my parents' actions and they launched a local smear campaign which culminated in my father being 'hung in effigy' in the town square. After 15 years of litigation, the lawsuit brought against the Chemical corporation still was not resolved, nor would the company agree to compensate the Grassy and Whitedog bands as long as any legal claims were in effect. In consultation with the Indian bands, my parents agreed to drop their lawsuit—under the condition that the paper company buy Ball Lake and then that the lands and properties of Ball Lake Lodge be *returned in perpetuity* to the Whitedog and Grassy Narrows Ojibway bands as a condition of the government's legal settlement with the tribes.

And of course, my mother recorded it all, because that was her way of homesteading. Over fifteen years, she collected every news clipping, magazine article, scientific report, and medical document, including surreptitiously recorded phone conversations with politicians. Eventually, this homemade archive grew to be the most comprehensive record on the effect of mercury poisoning on indigenous peoples in North America. Today the [\*Marion Lamm Mercury Archive\*](#) is housed at Harvard University, where it is the centerpiece for mercury related scholarship by international scholars and social justice activists. Not bad, for a high school educated, small town girl from North Dakota.



So how did my mother grow to be a leading activist and primary archivist of this environmental social drama? Did she foresee that the decision to close the Lodge and take up this cause would lead to dissolution of the homesteads she had built with such care, even as it re-imagined the government's genocidal relationship to the Ojibwe lands and peoples? Mother was a quieter presence than my father in the Ball Lake legend and its aftermath. To the casual observer, she was the proverbial supporting player, working behind the scenes, adding the "woman's touch" that "steadied" the home and made it hospitable. Hers is not second story, so much as *backstory*, and so its telling requires a shift in perspective, an angle of vision that attends to the shadowed, the hidden, the unseen corridor of rooms on the backside of the spine. Not surprisingly, it was here, in her kitchen, that my mother held dominion. [*Oh, but you cannot see into the kitchen, can you, given the way I've positioned this dollhouse*]. But no cause for alarm;

*Elyse Pineau*

position is never a problem in the house of Wood and Wonder where walls can dissolve and stories can rise with the simple and strategic placement of a chair.

### **In Marion's Kitchen**

*(played against a lifesize projected image of the Ball Lake kitchen while sitting 'inside' the picture on a replica of Mom's stool)*



In Marion's kitchen the world was methodical, methodological, with everything lined up in its place and all utensils precisely placed and ready to hand. Precision and efficiency were a way of being her body learned early, back in the first days of the Lodge when she needed to be cook, cleaner, bookkeeper, decorator, hostess and table server—simultaneously.

[*Ab, here is a story that's one of my favorites from that time*]. The first year they opened for business in 1947, Jimmy Robinson was seated at their table. [*you remember Jimmy? Head writer for Sports Afield magazine, a curmudgeonly critic whose review could single-handedly make or break a fledgling resort.*] Well, mother was taking drink orders when Jimmy cackled—in that way he had—"I want sauerkraut juice with my meal!" Without missing a beat, mother smiled sweetly and asked: "And do you take

that straight-up or on the rocks?” Then she slipped back into her kitchen, dug in her cupboards for an old can of sauerkraut, hand squeezed the juice over ice and served it up on a silver tray!

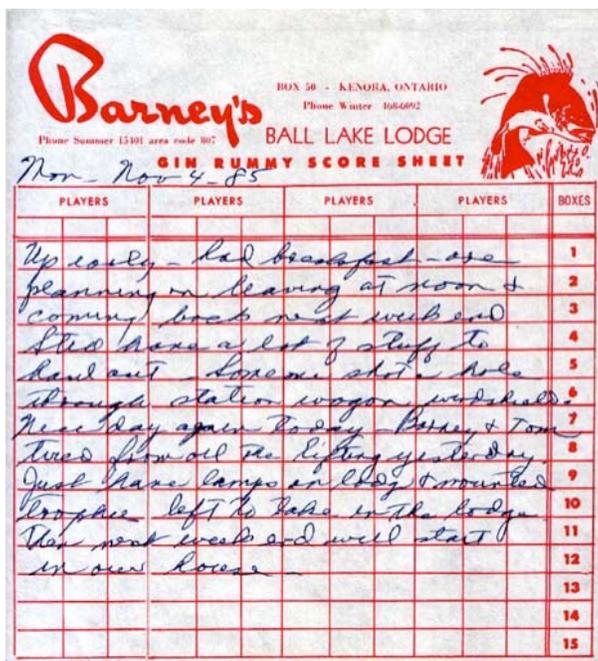
As far as my mother was concerned, the fact that her kitchen was 60 miles from the nearest grocer and all supplies needed to be ordered in advance of the season and flown in weekly, there was no excuse for running out of anything and the customer was always King. Mother ran her kitchen like a well-oiled, precision-operated production line. All canned goods were to be neatly stacked on her pantry shelves, with the English, rather than the French language label turned front, thank you—she always said that when she opened a cupboard she wanted to see rows of “little peas” and not “*petit pois*.” Every evening for 25 years she sat on this stool, right here, with her pencil and sharpener ready to hand, and each plate lined up on the counter so she could check them before serving. From the start she scorned storebought bread and salad dressings in favor of homemade, and each meal was a multi-course gourmet feast, prepared for 200. Her menu cards: Thurs: consommé soup and shrimp cocktail, roast turkey and dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, baked squash with turnips, cranberries, pineapple-carrot salad, trays of olive and pickles, homemade brown bread, and pumpkin pie for desert. With hand-whipped cream, if desired. And true to her Depression-era roots, nothing ever went to waste; so you know that the night following this feast, all the staff was eating turkey stew with dumplings.

I share these culinary criteria, not for their humor—although that too is delicious—but because my mother was my first methodological mentor. In her body I discover my own—the way that a body grows wise in its movement: well-disciplined, precise, efficient, efficacious, epistemic. Having opened the door of embodiment, then, what lessons remain to be learned? What can she teach me about making a homestead, about making decisions on what should be served and what be resisted, in a moment that mattered for all who had sat at her table?

It was several years after her death when we discovered that recipes and public documents were not the only records that mother kept. Not the only stories she held sacred and worthy of preservation.

Elyse Pineau

Sorting through her personal effects during the dissolution of the estate—in that time when hearth was no longer our home—I came upon a treasure. A diary. Written at Ball Lake during the height of the mercury crisis, on gin rummy scorecards, that artifactual icon of my parent’s relationship.



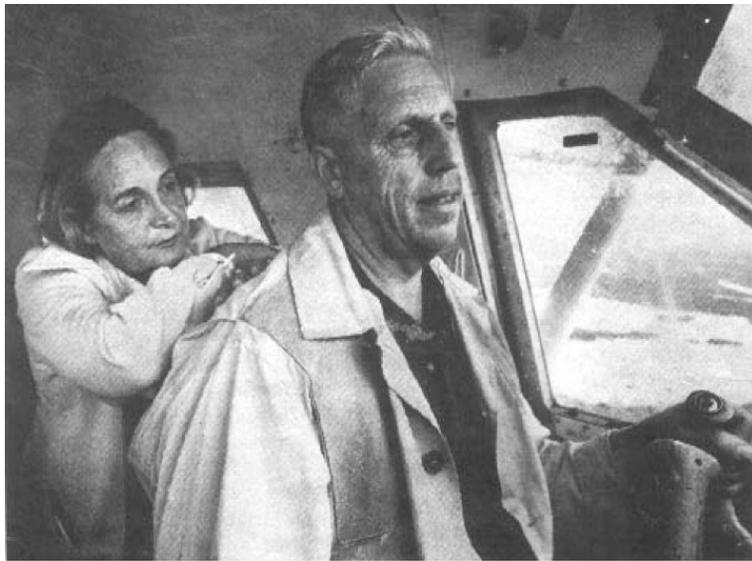
[You know for 50 years they got up every morning at five a.m. when dad brought her coffee in bed and they played a few hands of gin rummy waiting for the sun to rise, talking over their day and making the decisions that mattered]. In these Gin Rummy Diaries, I find the backstory, the *real* story. A story of intimacy and a story of ethics.

**The Gin Rummy Diaries**

*(taken from the actual diary pages—gin rummy score cards—while a sample is projected behind. Performed in character as my mother. Photos of my parents at various stages in their life are put on the screen as the diary excerpts unfold)*

Oct 8, 1983

Today is my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and Barney and I are alone at Ball Lake for a week. Great! Great! Great! It's cold and rainy; there's no running water or heat or electricity, but Barney brought me breakfast in bed at 4:30 this morning and then built up a fire and we cuddled under a blanket. We are on our second pot of coffee now, playing gin rummy in front of the fireplace and waiting for daybreak. Boy, how we love this place!



April 14, 1984

First trip of the season and there's still ice on the lake. Camp looks so beautiful with the morning frost on the trees. Had coffee and donuts served to me in bed. Barney's room service at Ball is great! There are so many memories here and we are sad this morning. The government people are coming out today to talk about buying the

*Elyse Pineau*

camp and making compensation to the Indian bands. I know we have to face reality, but . . . Morbid thought: Barney wants us to be buried here, in front of the church. We love Ball Lake so much.

Sept 4, 1984

Flew into Ball today and just unpacked the groceries: macaroni & cheese with smokies for lunch—Barney's favorite. Camp looks great. Tomorrow is Barney's birthday! Hard to believe that we will both be senior citizens. What a remarkable life we've had. Barney is such a great guy and we love being together after 38 years. Maybe tomorrow Barney will get some partridge for our supper. Piddly things to cook, all those little bones, but Barney loves the way I make them. A lazy day at Ball, just the two of us. Great!

October 3, 1984.

No progress with the government purchase of Ball Lake or compensation for the band at Grassy, but we're all trying to keep our spirits up. It's been such a long fight; fourteen years already. All of a sudden I feel so lonesome for you kids. I'm sitting here by the fire looking at the sticks Laurie made for roasting marshmallows; there's the hook in the ceiling where we hung Cherie's baby swing—oh she loved that Jonny Jumper; the marks on the mantle where we measured each of you girls' height over the years. How long ago but so fresh in my mind. No matter what happens with Ball, I think we will always be here in spirit. There's just so much love in these walls. Well, no more tears.

November 1984.

What a trip! Spent the past two days up at Minaki Lodge in Kenora for a District Camp Owners meeting. Leo Bernier, Minister of Tourism was the speaker. I detest that man! And the Lodge: poor food, terrible service and everything cold and impersonal. I told Barney that place would make a perfect funeral parlor. But now that we're at Ball, everything feels better. I have never seen the trees look so beautiful, just like a fairyland, every branch loaded with snow and ice crystals. Tomorrow we'll check the cabins and close up the Lodge

for the winter. But tonight, Barney is right here beside me with the fire roaring. All is well.

July 1, 1985.

Yesterday the chiefs from Grassy and Whitedog came out to look at Ball and 125 band members are here now. We met in the Lodge and Barney spoke about the history of Ball Lake up to mercury and what has taken place since then. Now the Indians are having their own meeting. I have such mixed feelings about what should happen and I can't imagine someone else living in my house. My heart just aches and Barney feels the same way. But it will be a relief not to have all the pain and worry and expense of fighting this battle alone. Perhaps things will look brighter in the morning.

September 1985.

Cold rainy day. Guess it suits my mood. We are up at Ball to begin packing and moving. Damn Leo Bernier. Damn mercury. Damn the government. This should never have happened. I hope Barney and I come back to haunt whoever takes over Ball Lake. Our whole lives are here in these cabins. Began taking things down from the chapel and the Lodge. It broke my heart; it just seems too final. But I will not pack up our house until the very end. I will not!

October 29, 1985

A good day! After 40 years, I never cease to be amazed when I see Barney in action. He got everything and more that we wanted in the negotiations. The Indians will take over Ball Lake but we will keep the furniture in the house, all the Tiffanies in the Lodge, the Stations of the Cross and the church bell from the chapel and the honeymoon cabin across the lake. I can't even feel sad and Barney says things are finally falling into place. I hope you kids think we did the right thing through all of this. It was the only thing we could do. And despite the heartache, I think we will both sleep well tonight.

November 4, 1985.

Well, we did it. Took all the Tiffany lamp shades down from the Lodge. I had been dreading it; they looked so beautiful hanging there.

*Elyse Pineau*

I do hope we made the right decision for us and the kids. Barney keeps trying to cheer me up, but it still just hurts. Bad moment last night. All of a sudden Barney said: “let’s take the baby crib with us back to town this trip” And I couldn’t hold back the tears anymore. Just one more heartbreak over the whole mercury problem. Damn! No one should have to put up with politicians whose only concern is getting votes. To hell with what is right or wrong! I hope my kids never have to fight a cause like this, even though it is the right thing—not when the government and the big corporations and the politicians are all against you. Damn. Damn. Damn.

November 25, 1985

This will be our last trip to Ball. All this week we have been packing up the house. I can’t believe that we will never come back here. In the morning we will take the hook out of the ceiling where the kids’ baby swing used to hang. We agreed that that would be the last thing we did before leaving forever. . It feels like a funeral for a loved one. I wonder if the hurt will ever go away.



## Homesteading

The act of Homesteading . . . *narratively speaking*  
Is the commitment to breathe life over the coals of memories.  
Words exhaled over memory ignite  
and illuminate the 'still life' with purity and precision.

With the craftily measured breath of the fire-kindler,  
hearth-tender, homesteader, sent out over coals in search of a  
spark . . .

Story is the breath that kindles the past.  
Story breath ruffles down through a life, through layers of ash and  
chill  
to the remnants of old fires, ancient fires, maybe the self-same fire  
you have been tending, carefully with measured breath,  
there in the palm of your hand,  
as you traveled from hearth to homestead and back, seeking out the  
remains  
of the day, *whatever remains of the day* when something-or-other  
happened,  
    *[whatever it was]*  
and finding a spot in the coals with a whisper of warmth remaining,  
you lean down  
and gently, carefully,  
with the full measure of your craft,  
you offer your breath in service of a flame.  
And if the coal of a memory is sound,  
If the whisper of heat you suspected you felt can be trusted,  
Then the breath of your story will come as a gift,  
a blessing on breathed and breather, both,  
and the heart of the coal of the day that remains when, *whatever-it-was*,  
fell away,  
will commence to glow,  
and the glowing will grow with each measured breath,  
until coal becomes flame  
That casts enough light to see by.