

Landscape With Refuse

Kate Sullivan | Short Story

For the first twenty years of my life, The Property was an example of West Coast picturesque marred by the highly visible presence of a white trash family—my own—that didn't know how to take care of its things. The house, like all mobile homes, had no foundation. It rested on strategically stacked cement blocks. There was an exposed gap between the bottom of the house and the ground that was too dark to see through without a flashlight. During the day, all that could be seen were shapes silhouetted against the other side. It wasn't until later in my life, after living in a variety of houses with basements, that references to things (vermin, stray cats, our cats, the weed whacker) being Under The House begun to seem strange in retrospect. Along with Dad's never-finished shed and the perpetually overfull laundry room, under the house was one of the places my parents would blame when they needed something and couldn't find it.

Under the house was a graveyard for defunct household objects. Both of my parents were appliance fatalists, though the mindset manifested differently. If something malfunctioned Dad would give up on it forever and refuse to entertain fancies of its recuperation while Mom would talk at length about all the things we could do to fix it but never take any of the necessary steps. My grandfather, who lived further up the property, would volunteer his services when something—the hot-water tank, or the abiding thorn in Dad's side, the pump—went wrong with the house's plumbing, but his repairs were band-aid measures strung together with duct tape and scrap pieces of wood. Despite their lack of faith in the longevity of our household technologies, my parents were loath to replace anything until they had to, so those unlucky devices were relegated to marshy purgatory under the house until someone saw fit to make a dump run.

The other fate that awaited our household detritus was to be cast on the Burn Pile, which was a stack of all of the even mildly flammable junk we accumulated that wouldn't fit in the garbage, the compost, or the household fireplace. At one point it stood around eight feet high and ten feet across; it was a monolith assembled out of broken cabinet doors and green wood Christmas trees that loomed at anyone who came up the driveway. The prospect of the burn pile's eventual burning was the source of much excitement for my sisters and I—we had a collective vision of a bonfire to put the rest of the church families to shame—but it was, like many of our parents' property improvement schemes, not to be. Dad had piled it all in the wrong spot. The burn pile was too close to the edge of the field, and after a few years the top of it reached only a few feet from the boughs of the trees next to it. As such, it was too dangerous to burn, and so it begun to compost peacefully.

Near the end there were quite a few respectably sized bushes growing out of its depths. Not content to let nature triumph over human hubris, my parents brought the burn pile to an inglorious end via tow trailer.

The secluded location of the property was a factor in its state of perpetual deterioration. The bus stop was a little less than a kilometer away from our house, so each day after school I made my way up the gravel road by myself, often in the rain. We lived where street signage dissolved. Our road was not just ungazetted; it never existed anywhere except the whims of the Government of Canada. Neither maps nor the landscape would cough it up. According to Dad, it had been planned in my grandfather's day but never built. Presumably it would have been carved out of the forest around where our extremely long, bumpy driveway snaked up from the gravel road. Instead of a provincially issued street sign, we had a wooden one that my parents commissioned. Engraved and painted dogwood flowers blossomed around our street address and our family name.

Explaining our address issues to my friends' parents, including telling them that they couldn't use Google or a GPS for directions—an instruction they often ignored, to their peril—was only one problem the house's location presented. In middle through high school, a combination of magnanimity and pity lead to many of my friends' parents inviting me to spend multiple evenings a week at their houses, usually driving me home after dinner. At the end of the half-hour drive I'd mumble something about how they could drop me off at the end of the driveway, a request that was met with mixed reactions. Sometimes they drove away as soon as I got out of the car, but more often they waited as I followed my own shadow, illuminated from behind by the headlights, as I made my way up a driveway that was too long and thicketed to see the end of after dusk.

Worse was when they insisted, kindly, that they wouldn't make me walk all that way. This often happened in the winter, when these intrepid parents found themselves taking their Honda Accords through six-inch potholes of muddy water only to turn the last corner, past the burn pile, to reveal the stained plastic siding of an originally white single-wide trailer surrounded by gravel and brownish shrubs that were dead until the spring. I'd thank them for the ride while avoiding eye contact and trying unfold my legs from the back seat, and then I was as good as running up the stairs to get through our front door, as if disappearing into the house was preferable to being seen next to it. I would close the door behind me and face the sight my Mom was confronted with, to her vocal displeasure, every time she came home: a collection of prefab shelves missing boards and leaning to the side like the Tower of Pisa, a piano missing some of the plastic ivory key covers, and countless books lying on the floor, collecting dust.

My move to Vancouver after high school and subsequent entrance into independent living has brought

with it a love of decluttering. Despite (perhaps because) of that, my visits to the property for the past year have kindled an obsession with documenting the space and its items. My parents' separation and, more recently, my Dad's death has forced my family to take inventory. With the exception of certain childhood objects and some useful kitchenware, very little of the significant quantity of Stuff that was left behind for us to deal with was of any value, either monetary or nostalgic. All of the things that remained, under the house or inside of it, amounted to so much dross. That being said, I still have a fondness for the sight of dead vehicles enveloped by decades of plant growth: not out of environmentalist sentiment about the reclaiming of the earth, but because they signify a certain kind of dysfunctional rootedness that I suspect still informs my concept of home.