

**UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2016, First-Place Non-Fiction Winner**  
**By Tara Fietz**

Past Tense

11 CRYSTAL RIDGE WAY— PROPERTY DETAILS: *Built in 1995, this 4 bedroom, 3 bathroom house is in a family-orientated neighbourhood, close to both schools and stores. Soundproofing throughout the home makes it a stronghold where you and your family can escape from the bustling world outside, and get back to what's really important.*

A beige paneled, three-level house, squatting in the small town of Okotoks, Alberta, now almost a Calgary suburb. Square footage: too large for my three person family, too small to escape in when my father drank bottles of cheap pinot noir in the kitchen, lips wrapped around the glassy neck like a breathing tube. It was an ideal home from the outside, perennials overflowing in carefully colour-coordinated beds, three little flowering bushes along the walkway, a driveway strictly devoid of chalk smudges. Brand new when my parents moved in, with me as a drooling nine-month-old. I remember the air smelling like lemon cleaning products, proof of my mother's obsessive cleaning habits, until my father complained that chemicals were too expensive and she switched to a compound of vinegar and baking soda, which left her hands swollen and red whenever she scrubbed a rag around the kitchen sink. I remember eyeing the plaster cracks on the ceilings, certain that they creaked open further with every slammed door, each pounding footstep, or when he stood screaming at me on the basement stairs and planted his fist into the wall— *you were my biggest mistake.*

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LIVING ROOM: *Be sure to check out the gas fireplace in the corner of this bright and sunny living space, with plenty of room for both relaxation and board game nights. The walls are freshly repainted and boast an attached 32" flatscreen TV and ports for speaker wiring, this room is the perfect space for any family activities.*

I'd crept down the stairs one night, my six-year-old footsteps muffled by the plushy pink carpeting, and pressed my face to the square balusters, ignoring the bite of a vertical crease down my forehead. I could just see into the living room, where my father was standing and yelling. A pair of his pants had come out of the wash with bleach speckles scattered across them. He took four long strides across the hardwood— Mom's source of

pride, after she sanded it down and re-stained it herself, all while keeping my curious hands out of cans of cheap mahogany stain— and with his hand against her throat, propelled Mom’s small frame across the living room. The crater in the wall from her skull stayed on there for two days, before she kneeled down and scraped white putty across it. I lingered behind her, watching her slow strokes, breathing in its wet, acidic smell. But even after it was painted, its sheen was just a little too matte to match the surrounding walls’ eggshell. It remained a jagged edged bullseye, poking out from behind the repositioned couch.

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*KITCHEN: Very functional kitchen with brand new gas top stove, attached dining nook and walk-in pantry with plenty of room for all your groceries. Newly renovated with buffet bar on the kitchen island, this is the perfect place to serve breakfast for the family on busy mornings, and a custom wine rack built into the countertop provides enough space for all your adult indulgences.*

The name *Okotoks* means “big rock” in Blackfoot. It refers to the large chunk of rock, a glacial erratic, deposited just outside town, a couple minutes from the Tim Hortons. Kids used it as a climbing wall, oblivious to (or at least unconcerned with) the petroglyphs tucked into the folds of rock.

The town’s meaning was the first thing I learned about where we lived. My home and upbringing was greatly centred on Blackfoot culture, so living in a place of native history was never glossed over. Mom’s grandmother was a Blackfoot warrior’s daughter, who married into the white Watt family and brought nothing with her, neither language nor customs. My mother tried to overcome this gap in family native history by adopting Blackfoot traditions herself. Each corner of the house was regularly wafted with the sickly-sweet smell of sage smoke, burning in a fist-sized roll that Mom waved around, leaving a lingering odor in the pink carpeting that poofed out into the air when I walked across it.

Once when I was eight, and my father was away for a few days, Mom filled out little index cards with Blackfoot names and taped them to everything in the kitchen.

Table, *ii ta soo yu pi*. Chair, *a soo pa tsis*. Apple, *a pas ta mi nom*.

On the fridge, over the photo of us, flimsy grins strapped on our faces: Family,

*nizitapimix.*

Above doorway: Home, *nokówa*.

When my father returned from his business trip, he ripped all the index cards off and threw them into the trash. It was a ridiculous language, he told Mom, tongue pops were not something he wanted his daughter to learn. He slammed the trash lid down and reached for a bottle of wine on the countertop rack. *She's also German, goddammit*, he yelled. *Why can't you teach her German instead of this shit.*

Mom tried to say something about how each nationality in my bloodstream had things worth learning, but my father wrapped his fingers tight around the wine bottle neck and brought it down on the edge of the counter, next to where her hand lingered. The glass bottle burst like a balloon, sending shards and purple wine across the kitchen, across their bodies. *I said no.*

I could see one little yellow card sticking through the bag when I took out the trash that evening, edges stained by winey glass shards, and watched as the garbage bin lid slammed down over HOME in Mom's neat capitals. It felt like a sign.

For several weeks afterwards, every time he left the house to go to work, my father would grab my chin and say the same thing— *Auf Wiedersehen*. Goodbye, farewell, adieu. German language to go with my blue eyes and little blonde curls. I would shrug and slink back to my room where I'd built a tipi in my closet, from a quilt and three fishing rods smuggled out of the garage, and mouth words to myself until only the pops and smack of my throat shaping the letters was audible.

Home, *nokówa*. My Home, *a divided place*.

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FRONT HALL: *Open concept foyer, plenty of closet storage, large window overlooking front porch. Door recently painted a charming burgundy. An excellent space to welcome any guests into, whether expected or surprise.*

Four in the morning on a Tuesday, after my father went out for a drink and hadn't come home yet. Not a surprise at all to sixteen-year-old me. I was startled awake by banging on the front door, fists pounding on the window next to it, men shouting:

*OPEN UP OPEN UP OPEN UP NOW.*

I staggered out of bed and to the top of the stairs, where Mom was wavering in her

nightgown, eyeing the front door directly below.

*Is that Dad?*

She didn't answer. I suppose she didn't know; I suppose we didn't need to, because the door burst inwards with shrieking hinges, doorknob punching into the wall as it swung wildly, and three police officers stormed in, guns out like it was a movie.

One spotted us and leaped up the stairs, three at a time, bellowing:

*Where's the weapon I need you to show me the weapon and it'll all be fine.*

Past his blue fabric shoulders, I saw my father rush in, oozing importance and liquor. He pointed up the stairs and another officer dashed up the stairs and into my parent's room. He came back a second later, clutching a pump action shotgun— my father's, never been fired. He only brought it out occasionally, waving it in Mom's face if she started to talk back. The officer held it over his head like a victory, some one muttered to me that I'd be safe now, as my mother was marched downstairs for questioning.

Apparently, my father had called the police from the bar, saying that Mom was going to shoot me, and then herself. As Mom trembled at the kitchen table, police officers milling around her, all he could do was scream, *you selfish bitch you selfish bitch*. His words slurred and bled together. In her cage by the kitchen window, my parakeet flapped around the bars, screeching like a maddened thing, crescendoing the voices. I suppose the officers began to realize the absurdity of the entire situation, because Mom left their suspicions, and my father was eventually escorted out.

*So sorry ma'am; sir you need to calm down, sir please calm down.*

Neither Mom nor I slept for the remainder of that bleary morning. And as the sun came up, she had already pushed a few weeks' clothes into a suitcase and told me to bring only what can be squished into a bag.

*The women's shelter won't let us take much, and we can't bring pets. I'm sorry.*

My heart trembled in my chest, like my parakeet's anxious fluttering behind me. It was the feeling of looking out over the precipice before the leap, even if taking the jump was to save yourself.

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OTHER DETAILS: *This property combines excellent value with great space for any*

*family. Amenities such as grocery stores, schools, hospital and emergency services within close range, ensuring the best care for your every need.*

We spent three days in a women's shelter, crammed in a room with another mother and her two daughters, before Mom sat down and called my father, told him that they were done. I'd never seen her cry because of him, not even when he hit her, when he hit me. But she did then.

During a workday afternoon when my father wouldn't be there, we went back to the house in Okotoks one last time, to pick up the remainder of our possessions before we moved to a crappy walk-up in a little town on the opposite side of Calgary. When I walked into the kitchen, the birdcage in the sunny window was strangely quiet, the door hanging open. I peered between the thin wire bars, and saw a little pile of blue and yellow feathers on the bottom of the cage.

Her neck had been snapped by a pair of big hands, the ivory edges of her miniature vertebrae poking out under a ruff of silky feathers.

My Home, *isziw— it hurts, it burns, it aches.*