

For Kayla John

ROBINA THOMAS

À l'été 2004, Kayla John, une adolescente de 15 ans a été trouvée assassinée dans Zeballos, une petite communauté de la côte Ouest. L'auteure a étudié les rapports, a questionné cet événement dans un village où Kayla a grandi et a été aimée et où elle rêvait de vivre et d'en faire une communauté non-violente. Elle a aussi rêvé d'un lieu où on enseignerait hish'ist'walk—nous sommes tous un. Cette histoire est pour Kayla.

In the summer of 2004, 13-year-old Kayla John was found murdered in the small West Coast Community of Zeballos. The author listened to reports and wondered how this could happen in the village she was raised in and loved. Kayla dreamed of living in a community that was violence free and where the teachings of hish'ist'walk—we are all one. This story is for Kayla.

I was raised in the small community of Zeballos located on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. When people ask me where I am from, my response is most often met with blank stares. “Where is Zeballos?” And, I explain. I say that I am Lyackson through marriage and my grandparents were Snux'ney'mexw, Sto:olo, and Icelandic. And then I proudly proclaim that I was “raised” in Zeballos. I was in grade one when when our family moved to Zeballos in the fall of 1963.

Tragically, in the summer of 2004 this small village became front-page news when a local Indigenous girl was reported missing. Days later, 13-year-old Kayla John was found—essentially in her back yard—murdered. Prior to the arrest of 21-year-old George Roswell Osmond for Kayla's murder, the media had portrayed Zeballos as a community where the youth were running awry and wrecking havoc on the local townspeople and businesses. I sat by the television sadly watching what was reported. I wondered how this could happen in the village that I loved as a child. I simply could not comprehend the tragedy, nor could I believe that a young person would

be murdered there. In many ways, Kayla's murder rocked my foundation. This story is for Kayla.

Zeballos is located on the northern tip of Zeballos Inlet, an arm of Nootka Sound. It is the traditional territory of the Ehattesaht people. In the mid-1960s, Zeballos was a community of approximately 125 people, many from the surrounding Indigenous villages and communities, and many from our family. There were no telephones, televisions, or any other modern amenities. The village had a grocery store, a restaurant, a community hall, an elementary school, a post-office, a bakery, a liquor store, and a pub.

Zeballos was an isolated and remote community, only accessible by seaplane or boat. The main means of transportation to our community was the U'Chuck. This boat transported all our supplies: food, mail, stock, and everything else. Once a week, the boat left Gold River and worked its way eight hours up the breathtakingly beautiful West Coast of Vancouver Island to its final destination—Zeballos. When we could, we sat on the dock and greeted the crew and passengers, waiting eagerly to see if anything being unloaded was for us. I also remember the anticipation of the U'Chuck arriving when we would be boarding to leave on our annual vacation. Every summer we made our annual trip to Vancouver. Vancouver was overwhelming with its televisions, radios, traffic, and crowds; so much so it was almost more than a village girl could handle, but it was so exciting too.

In Zeballos, all our social activities took place in the community hall. About once a month we had a movie night. There were always activities planned to commemorate the official holidays: Easter, Halloween, and Christmas. I remember our Christmas pageants. Everything in our small community was organized by volunteers—everyone did what they could, but more importantly, everyone in the community attended all of the events. One year our Aunty Mel (by no means a professional dancer) taught us to tap dance. Or, we at least danced wearing tap shoes.

We practiced for months. It was so exciting that Saturday evening we couldn't wait to step onto our rickety stage with our headbands and short maroon silk Charleston-style dresses adorned with a sparkly silver note sign and black fringe. We danced our hearts out performing for the whole village. These events always made us feel so proud and gave us such a sense of belonging.

To the north of Zeballos was the Privateer, an abandoned gold mine. They used to say that at the height of the gold rush, the streets of the Privateer were paved of gold. In about 1942, the mine closed and for the most part, many

as the tide was coming in and the river was rising fast. As it was, we had to fight the current and wade up to our hips to cross the river and get home safely.

We had so many close calls. This happened to us once when we were playing at the gold mine as well. We left the mine so late that it started getting dark. The mine was up an old logging road that had not been used for years. Of course, there were no streetlights. By the time we got home we were exhausted because we ran the whole way. With every sound we heard we ran faster, convinced we were being chased by bears or some other wild animal.

Whoever got to the bakery first to pick up the bread got the crusts, and we all wanted the crusts. Everyday we raced to be the first to get the bread....Once we got the bread, you had to fight the urge to bite into it so that you could arrive with the bread intact.

families simply packed their personal belongings and moved, basically leaving homes almost fully furnished. We would hike the five miles up to that old mine and play for hours in those buildings. We especially loved looking at the old magazines and examining the core samples hoping that we would strike it rich by finding gold the miners failed to discover.

We spent hours on the water, usually fishing off the dock or in the Zeballos River. I remember the days when the fish ran so thick in the river they claimed you could walk across the river on their fins. I will never forget when Dad was teaching us to fly fish. I was at the edge of the river casting my line into the river, ready to catch the big one. No sooner than I cast my line, I yelled to Dad that I had caught something. I was reeling in my line as fast as I could. Meanwhile my brother was screaming behind me, but I could not understand a word he was saying. Nor was I at all interested in him as the excitement of catching a fish had my total focus. Finally my Dad yelled at me to stop reeling in. I turned around to see why. There was my young brother with my fly right through his top lip! These incidents were always scary because other than the first aid attendant, the closest facility for medical attention was the hospital at Esperanza, which was about one hour by boat down the Inlet.

Sometimes we would cross the river and visit Dolly. She was an old workhorse that was abandoned when her owners left the community. We used to think that some day we would tame her enough to ride her around the community. But Dolly had other plans. Actually, we never even got close to her. She was a wise old babe. She knew we always brought her food so she was always visible, from a distance. Only when we left would she come and eat our offerings. Once when we were visiting her, we lost track of time and nearly got stranded on Dolly's side of the river

By the time I got to Grama's I was crying. Her home was a haven.

Grama was the backbone of our family. Everyone was at Grama's all the time. I lived with my Grama and my cousins off and on during our time in Zeballos. We lived between Zeballos and Fleetwood because we had to take a boat to school everyday and at times, especially in the winter months, it was safer to stay at Grama's than risk the rough waters. I have such fond memories of her. Grama never drank alcohol, but loved to collect these little alcohol bottles. When anyone travelled anywhere they always brought her back those little bottles. Anywhere you looked in her house you would either see her little bottles or pictures of her grandchildren proudly displayed. She kept every card or gift we ever gave her. But mostly what I remember about Grama's place was love, and, of course, her food.

Every day we went to Grama's for lunch. The arrangement was that whoever got to the bakery first to pick up the bread got the crusts, and we all wanted the crusts. Everyday we raced to be the first to get the bread. I can still smell the freshly baked yeasty aroma of the warm bread. Once we got the bread, you had to fight the urge to bite into it so that you could arrive at Grama's with the bread intact. We fought over the bread. Sometimes by the time we got the bread home, it was all squished and doughy from us pulling and tugging at it. Grama would make one of us return to the bakery and get another loaf; this was always accompanied with a stern word about waste, and a caution not to ruin the next loaf.

Grama was a generous woman. She always remembered our birthdays and always bought us nighties or pyjamas for Christmas. These were always purchased from the local store, Wittons, or ordered from the Sears Catalogue. Sears was the Armani of the West Coast.

Grama was a strong role model. She taught us about respect through her actions. She never yelled but, when she scolded you, you felt so bad. You knew when you “got the look” or when you were “sat down” that she was disappointed in you. She always reminded us to treat people the way we wanted to be treated. She had to work extra hard to teach us this lesson when it came to school. For us, school was more a social event than a learning experience. Our favourite classroom was the outdoors!

It seemed like the teachers who couldn't get a job anywhere else came to our two-room schoolhouse. I can only remember one teacher that I actually liked. He was a visiting teacher from Fiji. Mr. Williams and his family were in Zeballos for one year on a teacher-exchange program. I often wonder what he thought of being in this community that had an average of one hundred inches of rain a year compared to the warmth of his homeland. They used to say that Zeballos had only two seasons a year—spring and fall. As children we didn't mind; we didn't know any different.

What I remember most are the bad teachers. There was a miserable old spinster who enjoyed taunting us. She always wore a knee-length black fitted dress, synched at the waist with a black belt, and buttoned up to the collar. Her outfit was accompanied with pointy black leather lace-up shoes. Her grey hair was always pulled back into a bun; not one hair out of place. She looked mean; she was mean. She sat at the back of the class and walked around with a wooden pointer that she used liberally to “keep us in our place.” Being the social butterfly that I am, coupled with the fact that I was related to more than half of the students, meant that I was a regular target of her behaviour-modification tactics. Daily, I got whacked across the back of my head with that pointer. I can still remember the racist adage she taught us to memorize how to spell arithmetic: “a red Indian thought he might eat tobacco in church.” Clearly, she was not concerned that the majority of the students were Indigenous. We had no respect for her.

There was one person that nearly everyone in the community did have respect for, and that was Dr. MacLean. He was the resident doctor at Esperanza, a missionary hospital down the Inlet. Not only was he the doctor, he was the priest, the dentist, the lawyer, or anything else he was required to be. Mostly he was a missionary and worked relentlessly to convert us all to Christianity. Most of us were not interested, but he never gave up hope. Dr. MacLean always tended to our emergencies.

Once I was chasing my brother through the bush because he had taken one of the grasshoppers I had been collecting for hours. He had put my grasshopper in his huge glass jar. I was angry and desperately wanted my grasshopper back (I am not sure how I knew which one was mine!). I never did catch him, but he tripped and landed right on top of the jar, which broke and cut his chest wide open. The gash was about four inches long and bled profusely. We ran frantically out of the woods, yelling for help. We

finally found someone and told them what had happened. The blood was pouring down Stuart's chest and he looked pale and faint. I was convinced he was dying. I remember the boat ride to the hospital asking Dad all the way, “is he going to live?” Dad was so mad at us. Dr. MacLean stitched him up. Other than a battle wound, my bother was fine.

Every summer Dr. MacLean organized a bible camp at Camp Ferrier. I always wanted to attend, but for one reason or another it never happened. One year I just about got there. My parents had made arrangements for me to catch a ride on a small fishing boat with an old Nuu-Chah-Nulth couple from Queen's Cove. Queen's Cove was just around the corner from the camp and the old people offered to bring me there on their way home. I was so excited. Of course, Mom had bought me new underwear, new pyjamas, shorts and t-shirts, a new sleeping bag, and all the other necessities. I headed down to the boat with my little suitcase full of treasures. I was thrilled! Off we went. We must have been travelling for about an hour when we hit something in the bay near Canada Packing Company. At the time, we didn't pay much attention because the old boat was slow and it didn't seem like we hit the deadhead very hard. But soon, water started filling the bottom of the boat. Quickly we placed an SOS call, put on our life jackets, and evacuated the boat. There I was bobbing around in the ocean and the only thing I could think of was my little suitcase with all my prized possessions. I wasn't afraid of the water, nor was I worried we wouldn't be rescued. I wanted my new undies and pj's! I was sent home that night. Dad felt so bad that he later arranged for another boat to bring me to camp, only this time with my old underwear and pajamas in tow. I made it to Camp Ferrier but only for the last few days.

I guess because we lived on the ocean, I was fearless of water. Every spring there was a pod of whales that would hang around in Nootka Sound for a few weeks feeding on the abundance of fish. For about a week, one of the young whales (maybe Luna), wanting to play and have fun, would escort our boat to and from school. We used to hang off the side of the boat clutching the ropes that were attached to the floats and trying to touch the whale. The whale was not bothered by us and we thought, like Dolly the horse, someday we would tame the whale enough to ride it too.

We knew that not all the animals in the community were friendly and welcomed our presence; in fact, the bears are as territorial as we are. There was a mother bear that lived in the mountains not far from our trailer. When her cubs were born she was so protective and fierce. We had a shed off the end of our trailer where Mom and Dad stored our canned goods and the freezer. This bear learned how to break open the cans. But more surprising, that old Mama bear learned how to get into the freezer too! She cleaned us out. Eventually Dad had to put a door on the shed and chase the bears away.

We loved our community. As a mother of three sons, I always wished that my children had the opportunity to experience the splendour of Zeballos. They have never experienced digging for clams and having a clam bake on the beach. Or hiking over the mountain from Fleetwood to Zeballos. Nor have they ever gotten lost at the gold mine and had to find their way home. They will never experience the feeling of having a whole community pull together after a fire to help a family rebuild their home. Or, organize collections to clothe and feed the family in need. I was lucky to grow up the way I did, in a community

Kyuquot. As such, their arrival time is dependent not only on weather, but also on how busy those clinics are and when they can leave there. Patients in Zeballos who have appointments will be notified by phone when the arrival time is known.

The same is true for social services. For the Ehattesaht people, their social service organization is located in another community. Social workers too fly into the community on an as-needed basis. Where were all the services Kayla needed to be safe in her community? It was a known fact

I can still remember the racist adage she taught us to memorize how to spell arithmetic: “a red Indian thought he might eat tobacco in church.” Clearly, she was not concerned that the majority of the students were Indigenous. We had no respect for her.

where the most frightening things were the situations that we got ourselves into as children.

Of course there were moments. We had the only liquor store and pub for miles. Especially during fishing seasons when all the fishers were on the water, a quick detour into Zeballos to unwind was common. Drinking seems to bring with it a universal set of bad and unacceptable behaviours and our community was no exception. There was violence. But even through these times, as children we did not feel threatened. There was a man that used to come down from the iron ore mine to indulge. I think he was mentally unstable. When he drank, he was completely unpredictable. We all knew this and when he was around, our parents would warn us to stay clear of the pub and liquor store areas—practically the entire downtown core of our small community.

Neither was our family immune to drinking. Most all of our family was addicted to drugs or alcohol. But we always had our grandmother. She was our sanctuary. We could stay with Grama whenever we wanted and she would always take care of us. No one would dare come around Grama's place drunk or drinking.

Much has changed since I moved from this small community. Zeballos now has road access. The population is much more transient. In fact, besides the Ehattesaht people, many folks only live there while they are employed—mostly loggers. People come and go all the time, most not invested in the ongoing well-being of Zeballos. Health services offered now are parachuted in. For example, in the local Zeballos *Privateer* newspaper, they post a medical clinic schedule. At the bottom of the posting is the following disclaimer:

Doctors from Port McNeill Clinic travel by helicopter, arriving in Zeballos after clinics in either Holberg or

that drugs and alcohol had reached endemic levels in the community. How is a community expected to survive when they are in crisis and there are no social services available? And then we wonder, what happened to Kayla John?

Why was Zeballos not the same haven for Kayla that is was for me? Kayla John was from the local Ehatis First Nation. In 1990, the Ehattesaht people were relocated from their traditional territory in Queen's Cove with the promise of a new and better life. I ask, new and better than what? Will anything ever replace the traditional territory of their ancestors? What teachings were left behind? Queen's Cove was struggling to supply safe drinking water and did not have telephones, hydro, or any other modern-day amenities. The solution the Department of Indian Affairs developed and offered the people was to relocate them to Zeballos. The Ehattesaht people moved. However, all the people of Ehatis ended up with were a dozen houses on a rock bed. How does this constitute a community? The children did not even have a proper playground or community hall. We have seen other communities, like Davis Inlet, where relocation has not offered improvement; in fact, relocation nearly devastated that community. What was the cost of relocation in the case of the Ehattesaht people?

So what does my story have to do with Kayla John? Why would I dare juxtapose my safe haven to the nightmare that was her life? For many reasons. First, Zeballos was not always a community with youth running away. In fact it was a community where as a child I felt safe; I could roam and explore freely.

Second, I wanted to show that when a community is together because they want to be together, there is a sense of belonging and responsibility. As children, we never questioned our belonging to Zeballos; we knew this was our community, and we felt a sense of responsibility to the

community. When I read about Kayla's death, I still felt that sense of responsibility. I had a strong urge to defend Zeballos and let people know that it is not a bad place and that Kayla's death was an isolated, tragic, and horrible incident. Who is to blame? This is a complex question to answer, but the blame surely can not rest solely on the shoulders of the youth. Where was the Department of Indian Affairs? Where were the RCMP, social workers, and other helping professionals who might have prevented what happened?

Third, and most importantly, Kayla John had a dream. Kayla was an intelligent, young, innocent girl who worked hard not only in school but also within her family. She had faith in the ability of her family and the community of Zeballos to come together and get along. She dreamed of *hish'ist'walk*—we are all one. She dreamed of living in a community that was violence-free. She dreamed of a community where she was allowed to be the 13-year-old girl that she was. She longed for the right to simply dream—to dream of *hish'ist'walk*. Kayla longed for the Zeballos that I was raised in and I feel such a sense of loss for this girl and her unmet dreams. May her dreams live on and may the people of Ehatis and the local people of Zeballos do what they can to help her dreams come true. So I write this story for Kayla John.

Since I originally wrote this story for Kayla, much has happened in Zeballos. Kayla's dream of *hish'ist'walk* has taken a life of its own. There are now full-time police services in the community. The village of Zeballos built a basketball court in her memory. Tolerance of drug and alcohol abuse has declined partly as a result of the Ehatis Chief and Council passing a Band Council Resolution prohibiting the use of drugs and alcohol within their traditional territories. Chief and Council has asked a number of families who choose to continue abusing drugs and alcohol to move—and they have. Volunteers from Ehattesah have built a community hall and playground in Kayla's name. A number of young people from the community have attended rehabilitation programs and want to live a good life. The Victoria Foundation funded the development and delivery of a parenting program that has been extremely successful. On National Aboriginal Day the community will host their first cultural night. And, Kayla's parents are clean and sober, and work everyday to live as a family—to live the teachings of *hish'ist'walk*. Kayla John you are amazing. Many thanks to you Kayla for making me remember some of the most special times of my life.

Qwul'sih'yab'maht—Robina Thomas—(Lyackson of the Hul'qumi'num speaking people on Vancouver Island) is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria.

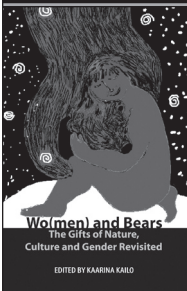


Leah Dorion, "Night Stories," acrylic with beads on canvas, 24" x 24", 2005.

It is said by some Elders that the night is the feminine energy and the day is masculine energy. Women have always possessed this sacred connection to the night and the darkness as such they can draw on the spiritual powers of the night when they comfort their children during night time awakenings. In this painting this mother speaks soothing stories to her child to comfort the little one back to sleep. Before she speaks she called to the Grandmother spirit and Grandmother arrived with her sacred Eagle Feather to help the mother find her own strength, patience, and fortitude to comfort her distressed baby with loving kindness.

INANNA PUBLICATIONS

JUST RELEASED



WO(MEN) AND BEARS:
THE GIFTS OF NATURE,
CULTURE AND GENDER
REVISITED

EDITED BY KAARINA KAILO

ISBN 978-0-9782233-6-6
408 pp / \$34.95

Women and Bears revisits classic debates in feminist, cultural, and Indigenous studies regarding gender, nature, and culture through an exploration of the ancient tale, "The Girl Who Married the Bear." Kailo presents a collection of essays, poetry, art, drama, and fiction that focuses on the mythological, academic, ethnographic, aesthetic, and socio-historic relations between women and bears by scholars, storytellers, poets, and artists from many cultures and backgrounds.

WWW.YORKU.CA/INANNA