Family and Place—A Memoir
Mary Grimm

I am delighted to have been charged with the pleasant task of welcoming all of you to this symposium, and to Case Western Reserve University, and some of you to Cleveland as well. We at the university share a part of our name with you—Western Reserve. Every time I hear that phrase, I can see our forerunners, the first Clevelanders, pushing their way through the snarled, brambly forest to the settlement on the banks of the Cuyahoga, and nothing but surveyors’ marks to show where they were supposed to build a city. As a latecomer to Cleveland, I’m more than grateful for the amenities that are the result of their efforts, as I am sure are all of you.

I am a latecomer, not a settler, but I have lived in Cleveland all my life. I know that there are some people who think that Cleveland is not the right place for a writer to live. It’s not New York. You can’t go to lunch with agents and editors here, or meet them at parties and casually drop the idea for your next book over a tray of rumaki. You don’t have the contacts. You don’t have the crackling excitement in the air of thousands of desperate writers pounding their keyboards at three in the morning and then going out to walk until dawn, ending up on the George Washington or the Brooklyn Bridge with an attack of soul destroying angst.

How can you write in Cleveland? these people might say, where the only agents are trying to sell you insurance? where the bridges are not soaring and intense but playful, going up and down like elevators, or snapping like the jaws of a giant alligator? Are there any writers in Cleveland anyway—haven’t they all left for New York or L.A.? And if you can find a poor pitiful few, what could they possibly find to write about?

But there are writers in Cleveland, I answer, plaintively, or angrily, depending on my mood. And there are plenty of things to write about, more than enough things. We writers of Cleveland can write about whatever we want. We are not bounded by the city limits to Cleveland, or even to the Western Reserve, or to Northeastern Ohio. If we want to, we may write a story set in Mexico or seventeenth-century China. We may write a poem about the lifting of the apartheid in South Africa or the way the light looks on a field in Bosnia when the smoke has cleared. We can imagine, and then write, a novel about fairies flitting over the flowers of an English garden, or about the problems of an anthropologist sent to a distant planet to study the habits of a species who make a virtue of being alone. I haven’t mentioned these possibilities at random: I haven’t made them up. All of these works have been written by writers who live in Cleveland.

But even if, by some awful edict from the Supreme Board of Author Control, we Cleveland writers were restricted to subjects and settings of a Clevelandish origin or inspiration, we should be confronted, once we had swallowed our chagrin, with unimaginable riches. Or rather more to the point, imaginable riches, so much that we could recover from our memories and the surroundings, from the very soil and the air, that we could spend all our lives in the attempt.

Sometimes I like to plan what I might write if I had the time. I like to be wild and impractical. I like to sit with my notebook (for these mad planning sessions go better on the page, from the pen, than on the computer screen). I sit with my notebook on my lap, my pen drooping from my fingers, on the porch, or at the picnic table that looks out over Big Creek, or on the beach at Huntington, and I think—why has no one ever written a book about Moses Cleveland?—a historical novel, the flats a wilderness of trees and cholera mosquitoes instead of smokestacks and bars. What about a series of prose poems on the beauties of the steel mills? Their many-colored smokes, their thunder, how the workers used to come out, faces blackened, to drink beer at the bar at the foot of Jennings Hill, where the men’s room flooded when it rained. And what about the story of those bridges? Can’t I write a novel whose main character is one of the operators of those bridges, in particular, the Eagle Street bridge, with its weights as big as houses, surrounded by mountains of gravel and salt and sand? The life of this bridge-operating character, who goes up and down all day long in his little room that is a part of the bridge, can’t that be a kind of metaphor for unrest, uncertainty? For the frenzied movement of our lives which yet keeps us in the same place? Maybe fortunately, I haven’t written any of these yet. (Although I have an enormous fondness for the bridge man, whose name might be Leonard. He might have a number of geraniums in pots that go up and down with him all day. He might have a cat who never goes out of the room on the bridge, because she has never lived any place else and can’t tolerate a place that stays at the same elevation.) But let me put Leonard more firmly aside.
I haven't written these yet, although I might, for the stories that have taken the strongest hold on me have been stories of place, stories where I can imagine the landscapes, the rooms, the ceilings and floors and windows, the back yards, the streets, brick-paved, asphalted over, salted in winter until they are white. They are stories of place, but maybe even more than that, they are stories of family. (Although it is not true, as one of my cousins claims, that I owe her and her whole family money for stories that she told me for free and I am now getting money for having published them in a book. She says this at family gatherings, at the Labor Day picnic dinner or Easter breakfast, and she always ends by saying she is only kidding, but I am not sure she means it.)

As I said just a minute ago, I have always lived in Cleveland, in this place, and the reason for that is my family. And if it were not for Cleveland, my family would not exist in its present form, and neither would I. Let me just say a bit about Cleveland history, if I might. I want to make it clear, in this room of historians, that the only history I am an expert on is the history of my family. But their history impinges on the larger one, and so I am going to say, with some trepidation, think of Cleveland before the first World War. It was on the way up, an industrial center already, and had already been linked to every place important by the railroad, and the canal before that, and the Great Lakes. It was big and growing bigger, more people, more houses, more big buildings, more factories. The house I live in now was built around then, in 1911, to house the workers who could ride the trolley and the streetcars to their jobs downtown or in the Flats.

People were leaving their farms, they were looking to the cities, and lot of them, from West Virginia and Kentucky and southern Ohio were looking to Cleveland in particular. My mother's family had emigrated from what was then Austria-Hungary not many years before. My grandparents, Josef and Victoria Morrow, had hoped to own their own land and to farm, but they had found themselves renting, managing general stores, taking in boarders, running a saloon. They started out in Pennsylvania (my mother was born there, in Avella), but my grandfather had what was known as an "itchy foot" and during the course of their married life and the births of ten children they moved through that state in a westerly direction and then into Ohio, turning west and north. At last, my grandmother found herself alone: her husband's foot was too much for her. She wanted to put, and where she made this decision was in Cleveland, where there were places in the steel mills for her four boys, and jobs for the six girls at the telephone company, the drug stores, the textile mills. They gave her their wages every week and she gave them pocket money; my mother tells me. They saved and they bought a house, and although the yard was only big enough for a vegetable garden, a sycamore tree, and two rows of roses, it was a piece of land, and my grandmother owned it.

My father's family, meanwhile, was in West Virginia. My grandfather, Augustus Grimm, was from a long-settled German family, my grandmother Emma, born in Scotland, a newcomer. They had the same desire for new horizons, but their trip was more precipitate than that of my mother's family. They came up to Cleveland in the wake of some cousins. My father says his father owned a house for only one year in his life, in 1919, and lost it the next. They were good times for the country, he says, but not for his family. All the boys worked in the steel mills, except for my Uncle Paul, who was the one designated to go to college. My father started work at Otis Steel in 1926, when he was 19 years old, and he worked in all three of the big mills in Cleveland—Otis, and Jones and Laughlin, ending up at Republic Steel (now LTV). After work, he and his brothers and the other men from the mill might have a beer together before they walked home (he and his brother Ted had a car, but they worked different shifts, so one of them was always having to walk home). Some of the other men that he drank with, or who walked with him, or offered him a ride home were my mother's brothers—and that is how I came to live in Cleveland all my life.

These stories, and these people, living in this place, have always had a powerful hold on me: their moves and removes, their struggles, their happinesses and sadnesses. When my sister and I were little, more than any other bedtime story, we wanted to hear about those old times, the stories of our mother's and father's lives, so exotic to us, ensconced in our two-child, 1950s family. We begged them to tell us how our mother's brothers had ridden the pig, or how our father and his brothers had put a Model A on top of the schoolhouse roof. I never thought of it then as riches, a treasure house of oral history, of laughter and sorrow and colorful characters. But I know better now.

When I began to write, I felt that I had lots to say: I felt it was going to burst out of me if I didn't get it down on paper. But this energy was wordless and inchoate. I "wanted" to write, but I didn't know how to go about it. I had read a great many books, and loved them and been inspired by them, quoted them, remembered some of the rooms and people and events as if I had been a part of them, had walked and spoken there. But when I was searching for what I might write, I came to think that my experience was not in
any of those books. And eventually, I realized that I might write about the people and the place that had formed me.

I resisted this idea though, for a while. I tried writing stories that were set in places I’d never been, about people I didn’t know. But the first successful story I wrote was a family story, and even though it was not about my family, the characters were people my family would recognize. I began to think of the things my mother, that consummate storyteller, had told us when we were young. I began to think about Cleveland in a new way, as an amazing place, both ugly and beautiful, a stage variable enough to be the setting for almost anything. I thought of people I had known or heard about or only seen from the bus window in the years I was riding it. I started writing, and I have not yet come to the end of what I could do. Although not everything I have written is set in Cleveland, or is about the kind of people I grew up with, I find I am perhaps most engaged when that is the case.

Cleveland and the surrounding area is full of places that have amazed me or delighted me or appalled me so much that I had to write about them. In a recent story, loosely based on the myth of Demeter and Persephone, I drove the characters along Chester Avenue, analogous in the story to Demeter’s journey into the underworld to rescue her daughter.

As they approached the turn-off, the rain let up, although it was still dark, cloudy, the clouds curving unbroken to the horizon like the ceiling of a cave. From the Alyway, they could barely see the lake, but Donna imagined the dull glitter of the smoothed out waves, the dead lake, the dead deserted shore. The city was damp, gray, an underground city. Every road, it seemed, led down, sucking them toward the river that had once caught fire, moving sluggishly between its banks, full, maybe, of blind fish that had never seen the sun. They passed the small blip of downtown, and moved along a broad avenue lined with enormous falling-down houses enclosed by rusting fences. Silently, they passed churches, the gold leaf peeling from their steeples, great fields of trash and shaggy grass where houses had been torn down, marked off by No Trespassing signs. Bars with metal gates drawn across their doors. Buildings that had housed manufacturing concerns, now empty, vines crawling across their windows, their concrete yards broken, weeds pushing through the cracks. And no one walking, no one sitting on a porch, only the silvery streams of cars running through the devastation. Donna felt her throat contract. Could anyone live in this place? Was this not a city of the dead? (from “Return”)

In “Stealing Time,” a story about a visit to a nursing home, the main character and her sister decide to go through the old neighborhood on their way home, and for this, I used my old neighborhood, which is near Archwood, on the north side of the zoo. In “Stealing Time,” a story about a visit to a nursing home, the main character and her sister decide to go through the old neighborhood on their way home, and for this, I used my old neighborhood, which is near Archwood, on the north side of the zoo.

And now I remember the trees, and the gate to the alley, and the stained-glass window at the top of the stairs. We loved the alley because it was brick, empty—secret, like a hidden path. We used to go down it from Grandma’s to Aunt Ren’s; down to movies at the Lyceum; down to the Dairy Dell, with its green, cool, marble soda fountain; down to our old street, our old house, which looks the same, except it is blue.

There is a car in the driveway. We park in front, pointed the wrong way. “How did they ever move away?” Kate says, meaning our parents. I say that was their generation’s thing—to move away, to move up, out. “Ours is different,” I say, but I am not sure; I am trying this out. (from “Stealing Time”)

I have written about the VFW Hall on Clark Ave., and now long-gone Euclid Beach, and the fountains on the mall downtown, and the long escalator in the Higbee building (now Dillard’s). My characters have ridden over the Harvard-Denison Bridge and looked down at the steel mills. They have walked down Euclid Avenue, have eaten at Cleveland restaurants past and present: Clark’s, where they used to have a box of presents for children who cleaned their plate; Boukair’s, with its exotically named sundae; Alvie’s Delicatessen (in its old location where the BP Building is now); the MacDonald’s on Ridge Road.

It’s not that I think a writer ought to bar herself forever from writing about Tahiti or Tierra del Fuego if she hasn’t been there, but could I find as much satisfaction in describing a beach on which I’ve never sat, for which I feel no love or hate? That beach is only a beach to me, no matter how beautifully I describe the sand, the waves crashing green and translucent on the shore, the fragrant breezes that move the foliage of the palm trees. But if we are talking about a certain bench on Public Square: I sat there a hundred times
waiting for a bus. I was bored, I was expectant, I was thirteen, fifteen, twenty, twenty-six, I was pregnant, I was reading a letter from my sister who was in Pittsburgh, I was trying to decide if my new dress matched my shoes, I was listening to the man I believed I loved more than anything in the whole world tell me that he needed his freedom. Now that is better than some scenery, a bit of sand, a palm tree. That bench is a novel to me, it’s my autobiography. I can’t do without that bench in my writing, not possibly.

If a bench can carry this kind of significance, then how much more resonant and meaningful are the houses that we live in. One of the delights of writing my first novel was that I settled my characters in the houses of my childhood. The main character, Lucette, whose vulnerability and subsequent pregnancy start off the action of the book, lives in the house I grew up in, on Mapledale Avenue, off West Twenty-Fifth Street. Lucette’s best friend, Bev, who sees her through all her troubles, lives two blocks north on Dover Avenue where my cousins lived. And to Cynthia, the troubleshaking cousin of Lucette’s lover, I gave my grandmother’s house on Daisy Avenue.

It was handy for me to have places that I didn’t have to build up from scratch. I didn’t have to think about where Bev’s room was in relation to the stairs, or if it was possible that Lucette could stand outside in the hall and hear her mother talking to herself—I knew it was, for these houses were as familiar to me as the palm of my hand. But more than the convenience, it was a pleasure to write about these places where I had been happy, and to give life again to the stained glass window at the top of the stairs, the mulberry tree at the bedroom window, the glass-fronted china cabinets.

You’ll remember that I mentioned my cousin who gives me a hard time at family parties. Well, it’s true. I have written things about my family. I have taken stories my parents and others have told me and used them for my own purposes. But I hope that this isn’t a matter of stealing, of selfishness. One of the reasons I wanted to be a writer, I think, was that I wanted to get things down on paper so that they might not be lost.

This was a very strong feeling I had when I began, that there was so much that might be lost, the kinds of things that are of interest to historians as well—documents, love letters, diaries, records of transactions—all of those. But I was also interested in the things that are more intangible, especially when those things have to do with families that are not important in a public way. It is important to me to know that a woman in 1925 had a baby, and that her baby died and that a picture was taken of this baby, in its best dress, when it was dead. This picture was in my house when I moved in, and although I don’t know this woman’s name or the name of her baby, I don’t want them to be forgotten. It is important to me that my Aunt Milly had a suitor in the 1930s, but that she refused to marry him because he injudiciously, if fondly, compared the hair on her arms to peach fuzz. It is important that I have a grocery list written by my grandmother, undated, and that she wanted to buy a pound of mince that day, and some fresh peas. I don’t want to forget the way my parents smiled at each other in a photograph taken on their honeymoon. I don’t want any of this to be lost. Another woman who was not a writer might feel the same, and she might have a different way of memorializing these things, but I am a writer, and making stories out of them is the only way I know.

The last part of this talk is a sort of demonstration, a story, in fact, which is somewhat autobiographical, which I might have written as a memoir. It is based on a real incident, and by happy chance, was the kind of story which almost writes itself. It is a story about family.

**We Who Are Young**

This is on a day four days before the dead middle of summer, heavy with heat, flowers opening from the pressure of their own fertility, dogs panting, children demanding the sprinkler.

“Aunt Sylvia is staying over with your Uncle Jim Connors,” mother says, “and it would be nice if you went to see her. We went yesterday and she said how nice it would be to see you all, your dear brother Richard’s girls.” We have eaten too much dinner, so unlike any dinners that Kate and I are likely to make at home, a dinner that only your mother would make when her children and her grandchildren come over on Sunday. Too much gravy, too many white floury rolls with butter, too many pieces of pie with syrup-glazed fruit oozing from its sugared crust. The promise of activity is daunting.

But mother goes on (noting, no doubt, our sighs, our inert, reluctant bodies). “She’s over eighty, if you remember. Who knows if she’ll make it back this way to visit again.” And, knowing this is true, feeling the weight and the duty of all her eighty-one years (or eighty-two?), we nod, we agree. We will go and see Aunt
Sylvia, we will fall into our roles as nieces, as great-nieces.

We: Richard's girls—me (Markie) and Kate; Kate's daughters—Claudia and Vicky. Kate's husband Dak will come later because he is not a social person, and she is not his aunt, after all. He'll take his time—he may want another piece of pie.

"Don't walk," says mother. "Take the car, it's so dusty."

But no, we say—we always walk there. It takes only fifteen minutes. Half an hour at the most.

"It's too hot," mother says. "Wear hats. Keep to the shady side. Your father will follow in the car and you can flag him down when he passes. Let me lend you some suntan lotion. Are you wearing good walking shoes?"

It is hot, really hot—sweat drips from our noses, the tips of our bangs, and quivers in the short hairs that shine gold on Claudia's neck. Kate and I used to walk this way to see the Connors cousins when we used to hang out with them, on long hot summer days, when we were too young to have jobs, when we were boyfriendless teenagers (except for our cousin Ricky who was girlfriendless), when we had nothing to do for long long stretches, such unimaginable stretches of empty unfilled time.

Everything was so slow: we could look into a mirror then, at our hair, at the unsatisfactory shape of our lips, at the mysterious expression of our eyes when we were thinking about certain things—and when we came out of that long dream only an hour had gone by. Sometimes to escape all this we would walk the mile and a half to the Connors house. The Connors cousins felt these things too, but when we were together the nameless feelings would be spread out, be dissipated through the five of us, so that we were eased.

What did we do? We drank Cokes at a long wood table. We lay on the couch or in the lawn chairs or on the cold linoleum floor. We played records in the basement where it was cool on the old record player that played at varying speeds—now a little fast, now a little too slow. We went into the wild part back of the house and lay on the long grass in a triangular space between three trees that stretched up beyond the second growth of the newer woods, and smoked—marijuana once, that Ricky had gotten from a sailor at the bus station downtown—"take it," he'd said to Ricky, hitching up his duffel bag, "they'll just find it on me back at the base."

We used to go to the park by the back way to go rock-climbing—this was a good thing, the best thing, because it was hard. The rocks were not a jungle gym, not meant to be climbed, they were just there, and they used up that energy and torpor that we could feel through all our bodies, that slowed and tensed our muscles. Sometimes we went to a different part of the park, where there were no rocks, and it was so featureless that we could pretend we were lost.

But now, when we get to their house, they, the cousins, all are gone, physically in their present selves, as well as their dearly loved past selves. One is working overtime at her job in insurance. One is married and living in Oregon. One now is dead. Only Uncle Jim Connors, our father's brother, is there, and his wife, our Aunt Betty, and Aunt Sylvia, who wanted so much to see us.

We all sit down: Uncle Jim Connors in the chair by the fireplace, Aunt Sylvia on the couch between Claudia and me. Kate sits on the end of one of the long wooden benches by the table, just under the phone, where sometimes we used to call up boys who we hoped might be but never were our boyfriends. Our father sits in the wooden rocker that was his own father's. Vicky sits in the chair that Ricky (who now is dead) always sat in—the captain's chair by the window from which you could lean out and see your reflection in the pond.

What can we talk about? Coffee? Orange juice? A little gin and Squirt? Is it too hot? Is the air conditioning high enough? How is our mother feeling in this heat? Did we notice the height of the corn at the fork of the road?

No one says, "Oh, Aunt Sylvia, you look so old, your skin is stretched so tight over your temples and your jaw—how can you be alive?"

We are afraid to touch her and as afraid to say anything to her, for if we speak of the real things of our lives they would be like bruises, intrusions—our work, our lovers, our cars and washers that need to be fixed. And what else is there? But we try: the loveliness of Kate's children, Claudia and Vicky, their schoolwork, their hair. This is in the right direction—to the future. And the past, Aunt Sylvia's life as a teacher: how she taught grades one through six, sometimes all at the same time, how she never whipped anyone, how she made the bad boys chop wood.
But this, the present? We are saying goodbye in these little bits and pieces of foreseen and remembered time. When we all rode Aunt Sylvia’s neighbor’s horse, except it threw Kate on its way to the barn. When I got burns in my hair, playing in the wind with the little boy who lived down the road from Aunt Sylvia’s house and they thought my hair would all have to be cut off, but Aunt Sylvia combed and combed until it was as smooth as ribbons. When Claudia was a baby and had no hair and Kate took her out to see Aunt Sylvia at the farm and she ate one of Aunt Sylvia’s own dill pickles at five months old and loved it.

And then our uncle and father tell older stories. When Richard, our father, was a boy and stole the ice cream from the back step that was meant for the Ladies’ Aid. When the girls, their sisters Sylvia and the beautiful Louise, ate cocoa dry from the box and got sick out their bedroom window so their mother wouldn’t know. A question comes up about Louise’s trailer in Florida—did she have it five years? Ten? Didn’t she lend it to their cousin for his honeymoon? Yes, but that was in ‘58. Many of these people are dead, but I think of them standing silent in the room with us, straight and still. They listen and smile. They know how long Louise had her trailer, but they’re not saying.

Aunt Sylvia speaks. She is eighty-one, she says. She will be eighty-two in four months. “I taught school for twenty-seven and a half years,” she says. The half year was when she had a heart attack and retired, so as not to have another in front of the children. She says about her husband that he loved his pipe, that he loved to read and smoke on summer evenings like this one, sitting on the porch glider. Her husband is from so long ago that we cannot remember even the color of his hair.

But now we feel quite giddy with the success of our visit. Claudia and Vicky sip their Cokes, Kate and I stir and swirl our coffee cheerfully. Only when Aunt Sylvia gets up to put away her cup and saucer do we feel uneasy. Everyone leans forward, in case one of the bones we can count under her skin should give way. Uncle Jim Connors tells a joke to cover our concern, about what one of the grandkids said about spinach. Children don’t like vegetables, we answer. Except carrots, sometimes, and maybe peas, but never turnips or spinach.

“Though Ricky liked spinach,” Aunt Betty says.

“He never,” says Uncle Jim Connors.

“Why, he did too,” she says.

“You know the last thing Ricky wrote me?” Uncle Jim Connors says.

Aunt Betty leaves the room, pretending that she has to tidy up a little, has to go to the bathroom, needs a Kleenex.

Uncle Jim Connors leans forward. “He wrote me what his flight instructor said about how when birds are scared sometimes they fold up their wings” (he demonstrates with his arms) “and drop like a rock and you have to watch because sometimes they drop right into the plane engine. Isn’t that the damnestest thing?”

We sit in silence, receiving this story, witnessing the fact that Ricky is dead now these many years, shot down in the jungle, his twisted body brought home some number of missing years later.

Aunt Sylvia shakes her head. She thinks how the last thing her husband said to her was a swear word. She doesn’t hold it against him.

Claudia and Vicky are restive, and when Dak finally arrives they jump up and attach themselves to his very solid body. “How about some ice cream,” he says, “on a hot day like this?”

“Ice cream!” Claudia and Vicky shout as if they were much younger than they are. But where can it be got—on a Sunday when the store down the road is closed? Like a magician, Dak produces it from just outside the door, a gallon of strawberry.

We will eat it outside, by the pond, in the shade of the willow branches, and there is a lot to do, finding dishes, clean spoons, enough lawn chairs. Aunt Sylvia says she wishes to sit so that her legs are stretched in the sun and we have a bad moment when she insists on moving the chair to the right spot by herself, pulling it by fractions of inches over the rough grass.

“And what grade are you in now?” she asks Claudia, who is in seventh grade, and so rounded, blushing, healthy, so trustingly embellished with eye shadow and lip gloss that she is painful to look at.

“And do you and your sister get along?” she asks.

Claudia nods her head, keeping back all the older-sister things she does to Vicky, all the younger-sister things that Vicky does to get even.

“That’s final- Aunt Sylvia says. “That’s the truest kind of love, the love between sisters. It’s what lasts the longest.” She remembers now, but does not mention, standing in a field in another hot summer long
ago wearing a cotton dress with a small blue flower print and feeling such a pain in her heart because she
was not as pretty as her sister Louisa—the beautiful Louisa, as beautiful as the day, who is only a photo-
graph now and a memory of hurt and desire. Sylvia stood there and wished to be dead with a powerful
spellcasting wish, but she continued to feel her dress blow against her body and the pinch of her metal-
rimmed glasses—she continued to live.

Now, with this memory filling her mind, the hot wind blowing her thin gray hair away from her face,
she looks at Claudia and Vicky, marveling at their youth, and she eats her strawberry ice cream, a milky
pink that is the same color as her cardigan sweater. Are these Richard’s daughters, too? she wonders. She
doesn’t ask, doesn’t want to hurt their feelings. She doesn’t want them to know that she has forgotten. Here
we are in the present, she thinks, but not everyone has come this far.