**Introduction**

Berin, master mariner of the Great Northwest in ages past spoke about his *astula,* a recollection of stories he was afraid to lose. He was not a scribe, nor a master storyteller, but a reluctant memory-keeper who felt burdened by the task of writing a personal account of his journeys. He was first and foremost an ancient mariner destined to travel endless shorelines of majestic islands that formed the Great Northwest, always in search of *tulnam*, the knowledge that enabled his ancestors to survive with a hope that the experiences of life would enable those of his generation and thereafter, including himself, to survive beyond seasonal as well as daily fears of imminent demise. So, his conscience pressed upon him to write everything down to ensure the *astula*, or gathering of his stories would be thorough. He would not have known the word *autobiography* as just another word for *astula*. I have been faced with the same choice. I could have said dilemma but that would be an exaggeration. Nevertheless, about twenty-one years ago, I decided to gather my stories and begin writing an autobiography. However, I remained undecided about what to call it, as unimportant as that may seem to others. As a consequence my indecision kept the account on a shelf for a long time. Was it a biography, an autobiography, or a memoir, or a collection of memorable events? Even scholars remained equivocal about which was which and the distinctions between them were vague. Australian media scholar Axel Bruns, suggested a portmanteau of words to emphasize the collaborative nature of writing a personal account. He said writing amounted to a process of continuous creation embodied in a hybrid of biography, autobiography, memoir, and collection of memorable events. I wondered whether Berin had been prophetic thousands of years ago by calling such a hybrid collaborative an *astula*, an author-written biographical-memoir? Regardless, when I began writing, *“Berin: Tales of a Master Mariner,”* I became revitalized with a new resolve to finish what I had begun twenty-one years ago, satisfied my account, like Berin’s *astula*, was no more and no less what I have called a *biomem*, the hybrid of an author-written, biographical-memoir, that began in 1945, with but one destinty - “homeward bound.” However, I do not wish to confuse or discourage the reader to continue so early in reading my collection of stories. Nevertheless, the collection is both biographical and of memoir style. However, rather than confuse myself the process, I settled on the more familiar *memoirs*.This accoinmt is Volume One. Or dare I call it my *astula*?

Three events were responsible for the inspiration to write this my account. The first event was the 80th birthday of my father. The date was June 27, 2000, in the new or second millennium according to the Christian calendar. In the summer of 1920, my father was born Christiaan Verstraetein the village of ‘sHeerenbroek along the Ijssel River just a short bicycle ride west of the provincial capital Zwolle, the Netherlands. Decades later during May 2000, when he came for a week to visit Alice and I in our Gabriola Island home he was just a month away from turning eighty. Soon after that visit I became aware that it would be his last. His health had taken a sudden turn downward and within months he was committed to a nursing home in Sarnia, Ontario.

The second event took place twenty-one years earlier, in 1979. It marked the year in which my father completed writing *The Verstraete Venture.* This sixty page book celebrated the Verstraete family's immigration to Canada in 1958. Enough copies were printed for each of his six children and eighteen grandchildren.

The third event was the good news that Alice and I would be grandparents for the first time. Our third oldest, Angela and her husband Jeff announced in March 2001, that during the month of October of that year, they were expecting their first child, our first grandchild.

One Sunday afternoon during the summer of 2001, I was sitting at Berry Point. It is one of my favourite spots on earth at the end of Taylor Bay Road and Berry Point Road on the north shore of Gabriola Island, British Columbia. To this day, it is a special place where Alice and I love to be, sometimes every day of the week. Complete with a hot chocolate or a vanilla latte we stare into the divine mysteries of nature's grand vista. The view is spectacular on any day, rain or shine. Not only is the view spectacular, the experience is therapeutic. A vast ocean; waters as calm as a mirror, storm-tossed waves that thunder upon a rocky shore and winds that know no mercy. And always Berry Point, a refuge from stress, a time to reflect and encourage one another, and not to forget, a handfull of honey-roasted peanuts and a *Werthers* or two.

I was 56 years old and Alice 53. We had been on Gabriola for eight years.

It’s now 30 years since we came as missionaries to this island, and I have as yet not completed my memoir. I am 77 and Alice is 74. However, I confess there has been a fourth event that prompeted me to pick up my narrative again and finish the memoir. Those who were born into a large family will recognize my reason: Sibling Rivalry.

In 2020, my older brother Beert completed and published his memoir, *“Pensees: Thoughts and Reflections.”* Then in 2022, my younger sister Sylvia, completed and published, *“A Rose by Any Other Name,”* which is her memoir. I had to do something to maintain my status as second-oldest in the sibling-legacy of three brothers and four sisters. Not quite the middle child but instead a more precarious position as second in line to the throne.

A nearly two-hundred degree panorama unfolds as the eyes scan the expanse of the Georgia Strait, a body of water that separates British Columbia's mainland from Vancouver Island. To our right and in the often distant haze lies the sprawling metropolis of Vancouver, with endowment lands and buildings of the University of British Columbia gleaming in the afternoon sun. From there our eyes travel along snow-capped mountain ranges that comprise BC's north shore and Sunshine Coast. For a moment the mountains disappear on the horizon as the Georgia Strait flows through the Inside Passage to the Pacific Ocean, only to appear again to our left as the mountain ranges of Vancouver Island form an impressive frame to many spectacular sunsets that grace these incredible shores. To our far left, the growing city of Nanaimo lies sprawled at the base of Mount Benson. A short ferry ride from Nanaimo takes visitors and residents to our home on the rural island of Gabriola. As our eyes strain to catch a glimpse of California bull seals and harbour seals, we hope and pray one day to see a pod of Orca *killer* whales. Our view is interrupted by the ever present play of sea otters, birds of many a feather, float planes, and the majestic fleet of BC Ferries. It was during one such visit to Berry Point that an idea struck me in the form of a question. "Who would continue writing the next chapters of the Verstraete venture?"

Although the idea of writing such a venture was not new to me, this time it was more than just a fleeting thought. My father had written Volume One for his children and grandchildren. Would I dare to attempt to write the next volume for my children and grandchildren? Fortunately, writing is a not a foreign sport for me. From early beginnings in writing, including poetry, some of them published, to many hundreds of pages of teaching notes, course notes, journal entries, essays, newspaper columns and other documents, I have been able to fine-tune some reasonable writing skills. I was comforted in my thoughts by a fellow artist and Canadian drawing master, John Howard Gould. He wrote in his memoirs that “he had never met a great artist who was not a writer as well.” Michelangelo was a writer. When I enrolled at the *Ontario College of Art* in 1964, Michelangelo became my mentor and has been my mentor ever since I first put pencil and conté chalk to drawing paper. Michelangelo was a prolific writer, having penned some five-hundred sonnets and poems complete with commentary. Somehow, as boastful as it may sound, I felt assured at the thought of writing a second volume of *"The Verstraete Venture."*

But one probing question remained. Where to begin?

Could I simply pick up where my father left off in March of 1964, when the Verstraete family officially became Canadian citizens? Somehow I felt a need to backtrack somewhat in order to give my children and grandchildren a greater perspective of the roots that eventually gave birth to many Verstraetes. I needed to return to the country of my birth, *Nederland* (Netherlands ), a name often confused with *Holland*. Holland is the western portion of this small European country as it nestles along the coastline of the North Sea and the English Channel. That western portion is divided into two provinces, *Noord* *Holland*, North Holland and *Zuid Holland*, South Holland, but all of the Netherlands comprises twelve provinces. However, over the years the term Holland has become somewhat generic for describing anything *Dutch*, which is a word derived from *Deutsch*, the Germanic name for things German. Dutch is the language of the people of the Netherlands, a language that belongs to the West Germanic branch. People in the Netherlands do not use the word Dutch in their common speech. To a citizen of the Netherlands, he or she speaks *Nederlands* or *Hollands*. Confusing, right?

So I decided to begin "in the beginning," specifically April 15, 1945, the date of my birth. The times and circumstances surrounding my birth revolved around the end of World War II. The details of my birth were first published in *"When A Neighbour Came Calling,"* a series of personal accounts of Nazi occupation of the Netherlands from 1940 to 1945, published in 1985 by Paideia Press in Ontario. My personal account was titled, *"The Honourary War Baby."* The account is repeated in my memoirs.

In many ways the story that follows is like one of many maps I have. I love maps. I have many maps: city maps, provincial maps, island maps, continental maps, old maps, historical maps, and my favourite, the *Rand McNally Road Atlas,* in which I have carefully marked all the highways I have traveled. I have driven many such highways that stretch across Canada and the United States. Planning a long drive is a genuine pleasure for me. To map out a journey is an adventure in itself. Great is the thrill when my planning proves to be right and my eyes and mind feast on endless miles of landscape interrupted only by occasional urban sprawl.

Essentially three maps suffice the journey I share in this my autobiography. All three overlap as each map is integrally woven into the fabric of the entire journey. There is the map of my earthly journey as husband, father, and member of this great Canadian community. It is marked with many hills and valleys, with smooth and potholed roads. There is also a map of my artistic or creative journey, filled with endless observation and a desire to somehow give voice to the experiences along the way. Then there is the map of my spiritual journey, where words often fail me to describe what I really feel. May those who read these words be reminded and comforted that none on my words are carved in stone. Many were birthed out of human doubt and fear, yet through all the pages runs a scarlet thread that will bring encouragement to those who seek the higher way, where faith and hope are fused into a reality that rises above the mundane, common-sense reasoning of this tired world.

Gerrit Verstraete, Gabriola Island, British Columbia, 2001