Back in 1971 when I was in grade eleven, the student council sponsored a literary reading during lunch hour. I remember it was a gorgeous sunny day towards the end of the semester, and the sort of noon one would normally sit outside braiding a friend's hair, chainsmoking, and listening to Black Sabbath on the school lawn, but a hundred of us, in a kind of hushed wonder, filed into the dark auditorium. We didn’t know what to expect. A writer? I suspect the only live writers we’d seen were the dapper gent on Front Page Challenge and perhaps we’d read Joan Baez’s autobiography and seen her sing morosely on The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour. As we unwrapped our sandwiches, odours of egg and tuna sitting in the air, the council vice-president offered an introduction in a shaky voice and then the poet walked out and stood before us. She was a woman. She seemed very pleasant. She looked like she could have been a friend of somebody’s mother, or perhaps a mother herself, or a business person; I don’t know what I’d expected. I was moved by her words and the soft, clear way she read them. Sometimes she talked about what had inspired the poem, or how she had revised it, or the influence of another writer. When she finished reading a selection, there was a silence as brief and perfect as the one before somebody makes an important wish and blows out the candles. At one point, she told us she’d studied at the Department of Creative Writing at UBC, and I felt a shiver. From where I sat, only twenty miles straight west, there was a place people learned to write.

I had been writing, in the way many children write, since grade two: Barbie and Ken go-on-a-picnic stories, a six-page sequel to Tom Sawyer, and more recently, due to the patience of a biology teacher and in lieu of lab reports, poems about spunky microscopic bugs swimming in pond-water. Not long before, and I’m still talking about grade eleven, I’d read a novel by a young writer who’d attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. I’d kept turning to his picture on the inside back jacket—something I still do when I’m reading and I want to know more about who is behind these words, who is dreaming this up—a black and white photograph, shot outdoors, with the writer looking extremely serious, moody, unapproachable, and exciting. The librarian had helped me find the address and I’d written to Iowa for information on applying and had been disappointed when they’d sent back a booklet and was informed they required a bachelor’s degree first. However, after I heard the poet read at my high school, I discovered I could apply for Creative Writing at UBC as soon as I arrived there.

I didn’t. It took another year for me to work up my nerve and send
material for the introductory workshop. Doug Bankson, then the Head, instructed that particular class and he was the second writer I ever met. There were twelve of us around that table—sullen, shy, and terrified, wearing dark granny glasses, long skirts, bellbottoms, and loud go-to-hell boots. He had us write fictional unsigned autobiographies and read them aloud at the next class. He also commented on them, and encouraged us to tactfully offer our own opinions. That was intense. My heart felt like it was going to bounce out of my body through my brain. That was one of the happiest moments in my life. From that workshop, there are four of us (that I know of) still writing, seriously and professionally, eating by our words; those other three—Morris Panych, Dona Sturmanis, and Andrew Wreggitt—are included in this anthology.

It would also be fair to say that some of the unhappiest moments of my life occurred in writing workshops, not only at UBC but at Columbia, Stanford, and at Knopf editor Gordon Lish’s notorious gatherings—when the report from peers has been less than enthusiastic, when the play has been missing the through-line or the story’s ending “seems not quite there yet, I’m afraid.” But there has always been that buddy from the workshop—who else in the world understands what you’re going through?—who says, “Put the story under your pillow for a week” (or month, or year), or listens to you mumble in a depressed fashion over the phone for an hour, sometimes long distance, and says sleepily, “But I liked the beginning.”

I returned to Vancouver last summer after twelve years in the United States and I’m now teaching Creative Writing at UBC. I’m sitting in a different place at that long table and it’s still intense and terrifying and wonderful. I remember my own years in the program as five years of a whispered Yes. The forerunner of the Nike ad: Just Do It. Certainly I received pages of critical queries and suggestions for revision, but always the writers leading the workshops found something worthwhile, whether it was one line, a point of view, or sometimes a word well-placed, by luck or instinct, in a poem. And I believe every work—from the first deeply felt poem by a forestry student to that dazzlingly polished first novel from the dedicated grad—shows a soul, and the writers teaching here respond respectfully to the work in that way. It’s always the work of a fellow writer with something to say; we’re all just there to get it said better, truer. The other strength of UBC Creative Writing must be the diverse nature of its genre offerings: one doesn’t have to hike over to Theatre to study stageplays, or to Film to pen scripts, or to Education or night school to write works for children. At other graduate writing programs, writers may often only officially work in one area, but here all the genres are offered and the disciplines of each craft reinforce one other. I
didn’t become a fiction writer until I’d studied playwriting and poetry. Many of the writers in this anthology shine in two or more genres.

The idea for Words We Call Home was born in August 1989 during a faculty meeting. In 1990, the Department of Creative Writing would be twenty-five years young, and it would also be the occasion of UBC’s seventy-fifth anniversary. After I’d researched the project, I realized that one couldn’t simply gather the writers of the last twenty-five years since the official inception; legend travelled further back, as far as Earle Birney’s first workshop in 1947. I consulted several writers intimate with Creative Writing when drawing up a list of contributors: Sue Ann Alderson, Doug Bankson, Hart Hanson, Robert Harlow, George McWhirter, Daphne Marlatt, Jerry Newman, George Payerle, Andreas Schroeder, Bryan Wade, and Jake Zilber. I also received advice and support from Don Bastian, Roo Borson, Susan Crean, Cathy Ford, Cynthia Good, Bob Hilderley, Angela McWhirter, Keith Maillard, Pat Nakamura, Julian Ross, Blair Rosser, Cherie Smith, and Pierre Stolte and the UBC 75th Anniversary Committee. When I’d finally narrowed the list to sixty-nine writers who’d participated in a single UBC Creative Writing workshop, or majored, or graduated with an MFA—and it was a difficult decision to stop there—the contributor was invited to select their own work for submission. Sometimes, if the writers worked in more than one genre, I asked them to consider the one with the lesser word count. All I asked was that they loved their selection and that it didn’t exceed the length requirements. They also included their own short biographies and introductions. Patricia Gabin, a graduate student in the department, took time out from her own writing to work on this commemorative project, and her editorial assistance was absolutely invaluable. The result is in your hands.

It has been almost twenty years since I heard the “lady poet” read at lunch hour in a Coquitlam high school. But, in a way, it seems as if there was a direct line from that very moment to this one, and when I read Rona Murray’s submitted poems one late Friday night last January—holding the pounds of this manuscript on my lap—I felt another shiver, a different sort this time. It had something to do with being far away from home for many years and coming back; it had something to do with the impact of a woman writer and her poems on a young girl; it had mostly to do with the love of a gift passed on, when you care enough to give the very best, the words that travel.

Linda Svendsen