North of Vinland

by © Jacob Lee Bachinger

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Abstract

What happens when the romantic and imperialistic stories of Canada's north become clearly outmoded and unsustainable? In *North of Vinland*, my collection of linked short stories and essays, I explore the transition from an older narrative mode to a newer, hybrid mode responsive to the demands of the 21st century.

In the short stories, I chart the difficult progress of a floundering grad student in Labrador. While living in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, he must learn to navigate his new home, find a stoic response to his acute depression, reclaim his troubled masculinity, and repair his relationship with his fiancé, Claire. As in any quest, help arrives in the form of a guide: Virgie McLean, a former trapper who remembers the old ways of "them days" and who quietly shapes the narrator's understanding of the Big Land.

In the essays, which are interwoven with the stories, I discuss Labrador's explorers (such as Leonidas Hubbard, Mina Benson Hubbard, and William Cabot, among others). In examining the lives and legacies of these explorers, echoes emerge between the experiences of my narrator and the explorers who preceded him. Some, like William Cabot, suggest opportunities and possibilities; others, like Dillon Wallace, should be read as cautionary examples and problematic figures from an imperialistic history.

In the contrapuntal relationship between the stories and the essays, a question emerges: are the elements found in narratives of exploration and frontiers (such as *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*) inescapable archetypes or can they be re-imagined, subverted, and re-written?

North of Vinland attempts to answer this question by deploying a hybrid, multi-genre narrative that is ironic and self-aware.

Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgement:

Printed words emerge in relationship to specific times, specific places. This work is a direct result of the time I spent in Labrador. Because of this relationship to the region, I wish to recognize the Inuit of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut and the Innu of Nitassinan and their ancestors as the original people of Labrador.

Further Acknowledgements:

In the stories that comprise roughly half of this dissertation, my un-named narrator, enrolled with a university in St. John's, often runs afoul of the graduate program and English department. My protagonist needed some kind of foil (perhaps even a villain) to add further pressure to his already unhappy experience, so I relied on the stock characterization of chilly, uncaring scholars. This element in the stories was disingenuous of me and had no bearing on my actual experience with Memorial. Instead, many people in the School of Graduate Studies and the English Department were exceedingly patient and kind as I worked through this project.

To begin, I must thank my supervisor Robert Finley for his hard work in seeing this dissertation through to completion. Because of his insights, I was able to re-imagine and re-work this text many times, and each revision was a process of discovery and continual improvement. The time we spent on this project altered my work as a writer and in particular altered my views on the essay as a literary form. I appreciate his effort and dedication.

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Preface

These stories and essays are meditations about my time in Labrador roughly ten years ago. They are meditations on solitude, isolation, mental health, and life in Canada's north, and the ways that Canada's north has been pastoralized. They are written from the perspective of an outsider, which is why I spend so much time contemplating Labrador's explorers, like Leonidas Hubbard and Mina Benson Hubbard, because they too were outsiders. I fully expect Labradorians would have entirely different perspectives, but I hope I have been sensitive to the places they call home, the places that make up the Big Land.

While I've remained faithful to myself and to my experiences in Labrador, faithful and factual are two different species of loyalty. Over a decade has passed since I lived in the Big Land, so memory – a highly fallible faculty – comes into play. This much, I think, is true: when we see our lives portioned into episodes – into regions defined and delimited by the particularities of a unique time and place – we may become keenly aware of the dance between what happened and the stories we tell of what happened. Though years have passed, I have tried to remain aware of the nimble choreography that connects truth to story. To borrow from Yeats, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Within a Forest Dark

Shortly after arriving in Labrador, I began to lose my way.

I moved to Happy Valley-Goose Bay in early July to live with Claire. We had been apart since the previous September, and I was anxious to resume our relationship on a full-time basis. I felt sure we were drifting apart, and I couldn't let that happen.

In hindsight, I can see that I'd left St. John's, the University and my PhD program in English literature a little too quickly. I'd not yet completed my dissertation proposal, hadn't cobbled a committee together, hadn't given much thought to the comprehensive exams, and I'd no clue as to what I'd do about the second language requirement. I've never been much of a linguist, yet I had the doggedly determined notion that I'd somehow teach myself to read French. After the gruelling year of coursework, I was tired—tired and spent. I wanted to be someplace else. And Labrador was certainly someplace else.

As for the dissertation, I had a vague notion that I'd do something about literature and *the North*, but what would that be about exactly? I couldn't quite say. However, Memorial University's library was obliging about sending me books through the mail, so my plan was to sit and read until I figured it out. After all, isn't that what we do at University? We sit and read until we figure things out.

Claire spent her days working as the campus librarian at the local community college, while I spent my days in the back room of our rented house, sitting at a plastic folding table with my laptop, my internet connection, and one of the many library books open on my lap. And thus the summer drifted along, a particularly grey and rainy summer at that. I often found myself

staring out the window of that back room, watching the rain fall into the aspen, birch, and balsam poplar trees that lined our backyard. As the summer meandered, so I found myself meandering. The only book I can recall reading in its entirety that summer was Ian Fleming's *You Only Live Twice*, a dog-eared paperback I'd bought at a yard sale for a quarter.

In that state of mind, I wasn't particularly effective in putting things right with Claire. Often I felt it would have been better for both of us if I'd stayed in St. John's.

When it stopped raining, I went for long walks. I walked every single street in Happy Valley-Goose Bay that summer. Though *streets* really isn't the right word; *roads* would be more like it. Streets have sidewalks and boulevards, and they're lined with grassy yards. In Happy Valley-Goose Bay there were no sidewalks, no boulevards—just sandy vacant lots and flat, scrappy yards. There was no real downtown area, just a few parking lots by the Northmart, the pharmacy, the big hangar-like bar called Maxwell's. Most of these buildings were covered in corrugated metal riveted into place. This gave the town an ad hoc look, as if it had been hastily assembled. Considering the history of the place, it had been hastily assembled. By extension, it could be easily disassembled. All you had to do was pull out the rivets and the town would collapse in on itself. This was a northern town, after all—aesthetics played no part in its planning and that suited me. There's nothing worse than looking at beautiful buildings and flowery gardens when you're in a low mood.

As autumn began to sift in over top of the summer, the library books sat in untidy piles on my desk in hopes of giving the appearance of industry. With every passing week, the daylight hours decreased steadily. In time winter began elbowing autumn. And yet despite the feeling that the season was changing, it didn't snow in November. The temperatures were routinely below zero and often there was a whispering of hard, grainy flakes of the snow in the

air. Every day I expected to wake up to winter, to a blanket of snow under cold skies, but it didn't happen. Snowless, the ground became hard and iron-coloured.

As in keeping with the days, a kitchen-sink grey funk only deepened for Claire and me. When she got home from work, we ate our supper quietly, then spent our evenings in separate rooms doing separate things. When we got into bed, we kissed perfunctorily then turned out the light.

"At least I'm not drinking," I told her one day.

"Saying that things could be worse is an easy out," she said. "You're denying that things could be better."

What do you say to that?

"Try to be happy," she asked. Then she added, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Did she see the alarm in my eyes when I looked up at her? When two people feel the need to re-state their love for one another, there's trouble ahead. First thing the next morning, I made a doctor's appointment.

Within a few days' time I found myself at the bright new Grenfell Health complex on the other side of town. In a rose-painted office, I talked with a young doctor, fresh from med school in St. John's or Montreal or some other distant city. I told her what was troubling me and she responded in soft, soothing tones, as if an unexpected syllable might cause me to snap.

"What do you like to do?" She asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you like to do in your spare time? Do you have hobbies? Do you play sports? Are you a musician?" She looked at me over her clipboard, her pen poised.

My eyes wandered around the room, eventually landing on the smoking cessation and F.A.S.D. posters stuck to the wall with brightly coloured thumbtacks. From there my eyes dropped down to my hands folded in my lap.

The doctor was still waiting for an answer, so I said, "I don't know. I don't do much these days but go for long walks and surf the internet."

"Are you walking to some place on purpose?"

"No, I just walk around."

"Are you researching anything in particular when you're online?"

"Research? No. I should be researching, but I'm not."

"That's a bad sign," she said.

"I know."

She prescribed a small dose of antidepressants. "For starters," she said. If I tolerated the medication well, she promised to increase the dose in a month's time. I put the script in the pocket of my jacket and walked over to the pharmacy. I couldn't help but notice that the pill bottle of antidepressants was labelled Happy Valley Pharmacy. I didn't let the irony deter me; I started taking them that night.

*

Claire and I spent Christmas with our families in Ontario. While it was a nice time, a grey cloud lingered over my head. Whenever anyone asked how school was going, I made cheerful noises, hoping to convince them, hoping to convince myself. After New Year's, we flew back to Goose Bay. As I stared out the plane's window, staring out at the bright white clouds, I resolved to try

again. Fresh year, fresh start. I'd hit the books again and figure out what I was going to do. The Graduate Student Coordinator was becoming impatient with me: When would my thesis proposal be ready? When would my field exam reading lists be ready? Had I contacted anyone in the department about supervising me? In the face of these questions, I was determined to get back on track.

That said, when we returned to our rented house, the train slowly derailed once more. Claire went back to work at the college while I sat in the back room drinking coffee and looking out the window, watching the trees. I could see how I was on the verge of becoming just another grad student floating, sputtering, fading.

One day I went out for one of my long walks. I bundled up in a thick sweater, toque, peacoat and a pair of boots and gloves then headed out into the streets. While the temperatures had been relatively mild for Labrador in November and December, by January a few blizzard's worth of snow had fallen and the cold had snapped firmly into place with temperatures in the minus 30 C range. It was now too cold to snow.

I walked down the road, past the post office and over to Hamilton River Road – HeeVeeGeeBee's main artery – finding the trail past the pizzeria that would take me to the river. From there I'd follow the path that ran alongside the Churchill River, a solitary walk in the winter sun, a walk that would take me through a forest of shrubby willows and aspen trees. It was my typical route, one that would take a couple hours to complete before leading me back home—the better part of the afternoon gone.

After half an hour on the trail, the cold was getting to me. My sweater and peacoat – good enough for winter in Toronto or St. John's – were proving woefully inadequate. The January wind blew hard against me and found its way past the buttons, past the wool, chilling me

thoroughly. I kept walking though, unwilling to head back home. What was waiting for me there? Unread books and a to-do list I didn't want to tackle. The wind was the better option.

I'd stopped in the lee side of a thick-set evergreen. It was one of the few large trees in the area—most were spindly little things. With numb fingers I managed to light a cigarette and was smoking it when I heard the sound of an approaching snowmobile. Coming round a bend in the trail I saw a man on an old Skidoo. He slowed down and stopped beside me. He wasn't wearing any goggles or sunglasses. His green parka was grimy, torn in places, and massive, making him a veritable behemoth. He wore a cap on his head with ear flaps tied snugly under a stubbled chin. He must have been 60 or 70, but it was hard to tell as he had one of those ageless faces. Part of me wondered if he were 80 or 90 or just a hardened 45 years of age.

"Good afternoon," he said as the drone of the engine died away.

"Hello."

"Going for a walk?"

"Yes, I am."

He looked me over and rubbed his chin with a large leather mitten.

"Some cold, isn't it?"

"A little." I tried to smile, but I didn't feel up to it. In fact, I was already longing for the conversation to be over.

He told me that he'd been cutting wood on the other side of the river, that he'd been checking his traplines, and now was heading home. He gestured with his enormous mitten to the sled behind the Skidoo full of cut birch logs. Strapped down on the seat behind him was a dead fox. I'd never seen anything so beautiful. Its orange-red colour appeared depthless.

"Are you heading back to town?"

"Yes," I said.

"Hop on. I'll give you a lift."

"It's OK."

"You look pretty cold."

"I'm OK."

"I don't think you are. Get on. I think you need it."

I swung a leg over the seat of the Skidoo and found a place in between the driver and the dead fox. He hauled at the cord and the machine snarled back to life. In a whirling white blaze we beat back over the trail, re-emerged by the Pizzeria and then swung to the left, following Hamilton River road for a moment before dropping down into the yard of a house I'd not noticed before. It was a small house—a cabin really. Just a squat box surrounded by two piles of neatly stacked wood and a couple of small outbuildings. An old truck from the 1980s was parked in the driveway that had been cleared by hand.

The man killed the motor. I got off and was about to thank him for the lift – my own house was now only about a five minute walk away – when he said, nodding to the fox and the sled full of wood, "I'll deal with this later. Come inside for a cup of tea."

"It's OK."

"You're positively blue, b'y. Come in for a cuppa."

"I'm OK."

"Then come in and give an old man some company, then."

The inside of his cabin was, to my eyes, lost in time: wood panelled walls and an old linoleum floor. In places the flooring had begun to curl up and had been nailed back down. The kitchen table was formica surrounded with plastic-covered chairs of the kind my grandparents

once had. A woodstove sat at one end of the room and beside it was a couch, threadbare at the corners. The place lacked refinement and appeared provisional at best, but it was neat, tidy, and clean. He hung his old coat on a peg behind the door and began working at the woodstove, shoving more wood inside. Soon it was blazing.

"Sit down, sit down," he said, pointing to one of the chairs.

He grabbed a campfire-blackened kettle off the woodstove. As he walked towards the kitchen sink to top it up, I could see it was already half-full of the darkest-looking tea. Like stagnant pond water. He peered in at the darkness, swirled it around, then added three more teabags and set it back down on the woodstove.

"So where you from, b'y?"

"Well, I live here now. I was in St. John's last year. Before that I lived in Manitoba. But I guess you could say I'm from Ontario. That's where my family lives."

"Oh yes, I see now. Say, do you have one of those cigarettes? I gave them up years ago, but the craving still nags some every so often."

I fumbled through the pockets of my peacoat – I'd still not taken it off – till I found the pack and offered him one.

"Thank you," he said cordially and went to a shelf where he kept a tremendous cache of wooden matches. He lit the cigarette and smoked it gingerly until it was time for tea.

I learned his name, Virgie McLean. He was an old time Labradorian, born in "the country," on the trapline, back in what he called "them days," the old days. I had very few points of reference for what he meant by the country, what he meant by them days – where or when, I couldn't be sure – but by the way he spoke, that place and time seemed both close at hand and far beyond reach. When he was just a boy of less than ten years old his parents moved

to Goose Bay to help build the airbase and life began to change. Life was very different in the fledgling town for him, for his parents—for all Labradorians, he said, but his parents had taught him the old ways so those traditions and that body of knowledge wouldn't be lost.

Though he was not what I'd call overly loquacious, he did tell me a considerable amount about himself. And in turn he had a lot of questions for me. He was very curious when he found out I was a doing a degree in literature.

"I would've liked to have studied literature," he said wistfully. For the first time in a long time it occurred to me that what I was doing might be envied, seen as a luxury rather than a burden.

"What are you reading?" He asked.

"Not much lately." I felt sheepish now.

He got up, poured me another cup of black, black tea and then disappeared into a back room. When he returned, he handed me an immaculate paperback book: *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* by Dillon Wallace. The cover showed an old photograph of a small, tightly built man with a canoe paddle in his hand and trim black hat on his head. He stared into the distance with an intense gaze.

"You probably know that one."

"I've never heard of it."

"Really?" He said with genuine disbelief. Then he added, "But you're new here, aren't you? So that book there's your introduction to your new home."

"What's it about?"

"It's a piece of Labrador history now. Although I guess you could say it's gone beyond history, really. A bit of local lore. Local legend. The man on the cover there, Leonidas Hubbard.

He and his friend, Dillon Wallace – a couple of New Yorkers they were – planned to canoe up through Labrador right up to Ungava back in 1903. They had a guide with them, a half-Cree man from northern Ontario, George Elson."

I noticed he said Elson's name with a slight lilt to his voice.

"Well, Hubbard, Wallace, and Elson, they ran into trouble. They started too late in the year for a trip like that. They didn't have enough food with them. And game was scarce, so hunting was no good. Worse of all, they took the wrong river. They wanted to go up one called the Nascaupee River, but they wound up taking another called the Susan. It was a bit like the Titanic's maiden voyage, I suppose—doomed from the start."

I flipped through the book and set it back down on the table.

"No, you take that with you. Consider it a loan. Bring it back next week, say. That should give you plenty of time to read it."

I picked it up off the table with a heavy heart. In my grey mood, each and every book weighed on me like the Mariner's albatross.

"One thing," he said, tapping the cover with a leathery forefinger. "Take good care of it, please. I do love my books."

Fragments of a dissertation: *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*

Of all the expeditions into Labrador's interior, the 1903 Hubbard-Wallace-Elson adventure, documented in Wallace's *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, is certainly the most famous. And yet this is ironic, for, as Lawrence Millman notes in his introductory essay to *The Lure*, "The Hubbard expedition discovered no new features in the Labrador firmament, resulted in no new maps being drawn up, and did not even make contact with the Naskapi or the migrating caribou. In short, it accomplished nothing—nothing, that is, except the retelling of its own story in *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*." The memorable retelling of its own story by Dillon Wallace, published in 1905, has made the book required reading for all who want a literary introduction to the region. Unlike many other turn-of-the-century exploration narratives, *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* is still in print, readily available, and very much kept alive in Newfoundland and Labrador.

But what does the story offer to people well over a hundred years later? The answer is complicated. Wallace's narrative is memorable for its portrayal of the doomed explorer Leonidas Hubbard, but equally memorable is its striking portrayal of Labrador's wilderness. Patrick O' Flaherty comments that Wallace's book speaks strongly to the sheer indifference of wild nature: "The overpowering impression left by Wallace's book is of the rawness, the brutal inhospitableness, of the Labrador wilderness" (110). Though O'Flaherty does not state it outright, he seems to suggest that, beyond Dillon Wallace, Leonidas Hubbard, and George Elson, the book's fourth main personage is the Labrador wilderness itself. The wilderness, if not exactly a character, does act as both an object of Hubbard and Wallace's desire and then later as a foil to their ambitions. Ultimately, it becomes an object of horror. The best way to chart the

character of this region is by examining it in terms of how the book shifts genre or mode. At first *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* reads as a wilderness pastoral. When the explorers' situation begins to deteriorate, it becomes a wilderness gothic, or, to use the term in the current critical parlance, an eco-horror story. This shift from pastoral to horror occurs when Labrador's wilderness fails to live up to the expedition's hopes and dreams and becomes "bare boughs and grieving winds" (Wallace 9).

Like any myth, the story of *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* can be easily summarized. Leonidas Hubbard, a writer and editor at *Outing Magazine*, raises enough money to live out his dream: to explore the interior of Labrador, then a largely unexplored territory. His friend, Dillon Wallace, a New York lawyer, agrees to go with him. They hire a guide named George Elson, a Scots-Cree man from James Bay. None have been to Labrador before. With one canoe and all their gear, they left the community of North West River on July 15th – already late in the short northern summer – but there had been a series of unavoidable delays preventing them from making an earlier start. They had brought a fairly large amount of food, but they were also relying on supplementing their diet by catching fish and shooting game. Things go wrong for them almost immediately: although they had planned on taking a river called the Nascaupee, they mistakenly took one called the Susan instead—a mistake that might seem like a silly one, but we must take into consideration that the only map of Labrador provided an incomplete picture of the terrain. The Susan River proved to be difficult going all the way. In time, their gear proved to be less than effective in the rough and demanding country. Their clothes began disintegrating on them less than a month into the trip. There were recurring bouts of vomiting and diarrhea, and hunting proved to be unreliable. The first signs of winter appeared on August 13th. Hunger began to overtake them. By the time they decided to turn back on September 15th,

it was already too late. A month later, winter had closed in on them. Hubbard was by this time too weak from hunger to carry onward, so Wallace and Elson left him behind in a tent with some meagre provisions while they pressed on, hoping to find help at a remote trapper's cabin. Wallace soon succumbed himself, but Elson, their Cree guide – the real hero of the expedition – pushed on, got to the trapper's cabin and secured help. A rescue party was sent to look for the two others: Wallace was saved, but Hubbard had already died.

To fully understand this remarkable story, we need to understand what motivated Hubbard and Wallace in 1903. We need to place the expedition in context. By the late 19th century, America was a changing nation: Frederick Jackson Turner famously noted that the official closing of the western frontier essentially meant the end of an American epoch (31). Indeed, Americans were no longer westward-moving pioneers; instead, they were becoming an increasingly urbanized population. However, the frontier struggles from the past still cast a long shadow. In the early 20th century, the concept of masculinity for white, American men was undergoing a period of change and uncertainty. White-collar work of the urban centres was "increasingly feminized" and "white-collar salaried employees were particularly hard hit by these newly gendered anxieties" (Kimmel 77). A spirit of intense competition in the marketplace was one route to re-establishing masculine identity, to the extent that "competitiveness and aggression were exalted as ends in themselves" (Rotundo 6). But another route was, in Michael Kimmel's words, "to pretend" (88), and pretending meant "fantasies that embodied heroic physical action, reading novels of the Wild West and cheering the exploits of baseball and football players" (Rotundo qtd. in Kimmel 88). As Kimmel notes, "[s]uch attempts played out the well-worn psychological axiom that what we lose in reality we re-create in fantasy" (88). Two particular examples of this were Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* from 1902 and Jack

London's novel *The Call of the Wild* from 1903 (Kimmel 110-113). Both novels have an all-important feature: they portray life in the great outdoors, well beyond the scope of the cities and their suburbs.

Based on Wallace's characterization, Hubbard apparently felt some anxiety for his masculinity. His father had been a frontiersman who had settled in Michigan to start a farm. Though farming in 19th century Michigan would have been no easy task – by today's standards it might have seemed practically Neolithic – Leonidas Hubbard's life on the farm must have been rather tame and sedate compared to his father's life on the frontier (his father had been a forty-niner in California [Wallace 118]). While Hubbard had a love of wild nature from a young age, his worldly ambitions were bookish and urban. He was educated at university and sought to make a career for himself as a writer, first in Detroit and then later in New York. He would have been part of that white collar class of "feminized" men. Though it seemed that he was always energetic and self-reliant, according to his widow he was also "[h]igh strung and sensitive" (37); perhaps he felt very keenly that he was a different kind of man than his father was? While on the expedition, Hubbard confides to Wallace "[Father] always thinks of me as a child; he's never quite realized that I'm a grown man" (Wallace 118). Hubbard felt very keenly the need to prove himself as a man, by doing what few other men would dare to do. Unlike others of his generation who would re-create in fantasy what was missing in reality, Hubbard set in motion a plan to make contact with a dangerous wilderness region to validate his masculinity.

For Hubbard and Wallace, the wilderness was a testing ground. A question worth asking is, why did they conceive of the wilderness in that way? The answer I propose is that they were relying on a cultural template that continues to inform and influence our thinking, which we can call the *wilderness pastoral*. According to Greg Garrard, this is a version of

pastoral "sharpened into a distinctively New World obsession with wilderness" (54). This pastoral form "continues to supply the underlying narrative structure in which the protagonist leaves civilisation for an encounter with non-human nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal" (Garrard 54). In explaining the root of this narrative, Garrard writes, that "[w]ilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and earth, a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility" (66). Garrard highlights two important aspects of the wilderness pastoral: that it is a travel narrative in which the protagonist retreats from civilization to a wilderness destination, and that it is a spiritually inflected literary mode because of the epiphanic, rejuvenating influence of that wilderness space. The grafting of the pastoral tradition onto wilderness experience is a fairly recent re-imagining of the pastoral, but it is a particularly popular form of the pastoral. It was formulated in the writing of Henry David Thoreau, whose influence – both direct and indirect – extends into the writings of John Muir and well into the 20th century, most notably in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

The wilderness pastoral remains a fixture of our thinking about wilderness spaces even in the 21st century: *Wild*, both the 2012 memoir by Cheryl Strayed and the 2014 film made of her book, are examples of how the wilderness pastoral continues. In both the memoir and the film, Strayed hikes the Pacific Crest Trail one summer in a desperate attempt to change her life. As she hikes through remote wilderness, she works, literally one step at a time, to exorcise her addiction to heroin, her failed marriage, and her mother's early death. Though psychological and physical pain accompany her throughout the journey, she successfully completes the trek, an accomplishment she often doubted that she could achieve. In doing so, she has followed through on a process of grief and transformation ("epiphany and renewal"), which could only have

occurred in that wild space, far from the trappings of civilization. At heart, this follows Thoreau's model in which recreation in the woods is actually re-creation and ultimately someone new emerges from the forest.

Given the context of the times, Hubbard and Wallace had likely bought into this Thoreauvian ideal of wilderness, believing that their experiences in the wild would shape, sharpen, and renew them. Though *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* does not mention Thoreau (instead there are numerous references to Kipling), Hubbard pastoralized the remote northern wilderness by romanticizing its possibilities. In her brief biography of her husband, Mina Benson Hubbard couches her husband's enthusiasm for his Labrador expedition in spiritual terms using quasi-religious diction: when speaking of Labrador, Hubbard's "eyes glowed and darkened and in his voice was the ring of a great enthusiasm, for he had seen a Vision, and this trip was a vital part of his dream" (33). It is possible to read the above passage ironically (the capitalization of "Vision" is over-ripe), but there is nothing in her tone throughout the piece on her late husband to suggest that Mina entertained doubts about her husband, his intentions, or his ability to carry them out. Later, when describing how she learned of the final days of his life, she writes: "he had not only dreamed his dream – *he had attained his Vision*" (41). That said, she was not blind to the boyishness of his romantic enthusiasms and readily admits that they originated in childhood daydreams. She imagines him as a farm boy in southern Michigan "with elbows resting on the pages of an old school geography, chin in palms and feet in air" (33) reading about Canada and its Indigenous peoples who were evocatively "dressed in skins with war bonnets on their heads" (33). By all accounts, Leonidas Hubbard never quite outgrew these early romantic passions.

Wallace's version of events, in *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, strongly emphasizes the wilderness pastoral. Although no one would call Wallace a poet, he will pastoralize the Labrador landscape in romantic, picturesque terms. In the fourth chapter of his memoir, colourfully titled "The Plunge into the Wild," Wallace describes the morning when the expedition begins in earnest. The three men in a single canoe push off from the shores of North West River, heading towards a largely unmapped region within the Labrador peninsula:

> The atmosphere was crisp, pure, and exhilarating. The fir trees and shrubs gave out a delicious perfume, and their waving tops seemed to beckon us on. The sky was deeply blue, with here and there a feathery cloud gliding lazily over its surface. The bright sunlight made our hearts bound and filled our bodies with vigour, and as we stood there on the edge of the unknown and silent world we had come so far to see, our hopes were high, and one and all were eager for the battle with the wild. (34)

Here we see a pastoralized pathetic fallacy between men and nature. The day is bright and cheerful, the men are ready to bound forward with vigour. The Kipling-like phrase "battle with the wild" does seem to veer from a straight-forward pastoralization of the land, but it is in keeping with the terms of the wilderness pastoral: i.e., if the wild presents no challenge, there can be no opportunity for "epiphany and renewal." The passage is not without an ironic touch, as Wallace has already begun to foreshadow from the memoir's beginning that the adventure would end tragically (and Hubbard's death was widely publicized at the time, so Wallace's readers in 1905 were already aware of how the story would end). But it captures how the men felt at the time: the land they were about to explore was welcoming, it beckoned them on. However there is also an unintended irony in the passage. The world that they are about to enter is hardly "unknown," though Wallace romantically characterizes it as such. The local men (who Wallace

refers to as "swarthy natives" throughout the text) had already warned Hubbard's party about the region they were about to enter (34). They obviously know enough about it to know that it was dangerous.

This feeling of optimism and energy continues for several weeks. On August 3rd, Wallace writes of how they ate a freshly killed goose "ravenously" (59); after their feast, Wallace and Elson puff contentedly on their pipes while Hubbard quotes Kipling for them, reciting a few lines from "The Feet of the Young Men." To cap off the moment of perfection, the northern lights come out to perform: they "flashed and swept in fantastic shapes across the sky, illuminating the fir tops in the valley and making the white lichens gleam on the barren hill above us" (60). Wallace describes turning in for the night: "Thus we sat supremely happy and content until long past midnight, when we went to our tent and our bed of fragrant spruce boughs, to be lulled asleep by the murmuring waters of the creek below" (60). Such pastoral moments where Labrador's wild nature underwrites the men's feeling of well-being recur regularly throughout the first portion of *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, when their journey into the interior is imbued with high hopes.

But this feeling of optimism and energy does not last long. Upon taking the Susan, the men find their attempt to get to Lake Michikamau and up to Ungava slow-going and arduous. And there were other mistakes, which also proved costly: arguably they had not brought along enough food for the trip (they had hoped to eat game as they made their way, but game was scarce); arguably they should have bought a gill net in New York as the one that they got in Labrador was rotten and unusable (Wallace 32). Explorer-writer, Jerry Kobalenko, in the unfortunately titled article "Hubbard: Hero or Bum?," wrote that he and fellow explorer Mar Desjardins had once "made a list of everything we thought contributed to the tragedy." The list

contained 32 points, of these "eight, we felt, were crucial: missing the Naskaupi River, not realizing the Susan was a wrong turn, all the delays, inexperience, Hubbard's blind optimism, Hubbard's high metabolism, not turning back earlier, and Labrador's uncertain game supply" (13). Of the eight, "two stand out: Hubbard's inexperience and his blind optimism" (13).

As their luck, energy and optimism begin to wane, the narrative takes a different turn. The pastoralism of Wallace's earlier chapters disappears, and a slow-mounting desperation sets in. Recitations of heroic passages from Kipling are replaced with readings of pious Bible verses. As the difficulties accrue, the narrative "presents the spectacle of three men slowly starving, turning in upon themselves" (O'Flaherty 109). As this deterioration continues, we begin to witness the limits of the wilderness pastoral. We see that it really only applies to a certain kind of wilderness experience, one that ends, so to speak, happily ever after. It is wholly predicated upon the hero's return to civilization, having enjoyed epiphany and renewal. When the hero doesn't make it out, doesn't return to the society left behind, then an extra measure is needed to make up for the loss of the triumphant conclusion. In *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, this extra measure is a turning away from the pastoral towards ecophobia, ultimately to a kind of eco-horror, as Wallace expresses fear and suspicion of Labrador's wilderness.

The Lure of the Labrador Wild becomes ecophobic once it becomes certain that the pastoral promise of "epiphany and renewal" (Garrard 54) will not be delivered. There are already traces of ecophobia early on in the narrative, which foreshadow the disaster-to-come. In the book's first chapter, Wallace refers to Labrador as "the land of 'bared boughs and grieving winds'" (9). Later, when he sees Labrador for the first time from the deck of a steamer, he describes it as "bleak" (15): "In all the earth there is no coast so barren, so desolate, so brutally inhospitable as the Labrador coast" (15). When the expedition begins in earnest after leaving the

shores of North West River, the men in their canoe pass Cape Corbeau, so named because ravens build their nests there. As they pass the nesting ravens, Wallace's thoughts turn to Poe: "Involuntarily, as one croaked above our heads, 'Nevermore' echoed through my mind. 'And my soul from out that shadow shall be lifted nevermore'" (35). Though the overall tone of the expedition's early days are pastoral, there are gothic traces, indicating that all will not be well (as Wallace's readers were already well aware).

As the men make their slow, painful progress through the interior, they begin to harbour strange feelings about the wilderness. At one point, Hubbard admits to Wallace and Elson, "It's queer, but I have a feeling that is getting stronger from day to day, that we are the only people left in the world. Have you fellows experienced any such feeling?" (50). Wallace admits that he has: "I have been feeling that we must forever be alone, going on, and on, and on, from portage to portage, through this desolate wilderness" (50). For Hubbard and Wallace, the wilderness begins to appear as a kind of prison in which their lives are held in a surreal stasis. Hubbard describes the sensation as: "You sort of feel, that as you are now, so you always have been and always will be, and your past life is like a dream, and your friends like dream-folk" (50). Though there are only a couple references to this feeling of apocalyptic loneliness, the sensation seems to persist for Hubbard and Wallace. Weeks later, Wallace, while out by himself picking blueberries, "felt an inexpressible sense of loneliness – felt myself the only thing of life in all that boundless wilderness world" (108). The words "the only thing of life" are telling. For Wallace, the wilderness is deadening. Instead of seeing the wilderness as teeming with life – moss and lichens underfoot, blueberries at hand, birdsong overhead – it has become associated with death, even before anyone has died. And of course, the wilderness doesn't just play havoc with their psyches, the wilderness is fierce with them physically: half-starved and exhausted, on September

15th the men decide to turn back. Wallace describes Hubbard in the moment he decided to turn back as "[w]eather-beaten, haggard, gaunt, and ragged" (120). Their appearance only worsens; later Wallace writes: "Our eyes were sunken deep into their sockets. Our lips were drawn to thin lines over our teeth. The skin of our faces and hands was stretched tight over the bones. We were almost as thin, and almost the colour of the mummies one sees in museums" (138). As in a kind of gothic horror, the men have become virtually the walking dead.

In the final days of the expedition, Labrador proves to be inhospitable and frightening. Though it's only September-October, wintry weather is a repeated occurrence. On those rare days when the weather does become genial – as on October 9th when the sun comes out in a cloudless sky and "set all the lake a-glinting" (158) – Wallace admits, "[i]t is difficult to be receptive to beauty when one has had only a little watered pea meal for breakfast after a long train of lean and hungry days" (158). At this point in the journey, the men are in Patrick O'Flaherty's words, "turning in upon themselves psychologically" (109). This "turning in" is a reflex reaction: it is a way of keeping the wilderness and all that it threatens at a psychological arm's length. The threat is very real. At one point it even becomes something monstrous in Wallace's mind, revealing his deep-set fear of the wilderness. In a scene that seems to echo the ravens' warning at the beginning of their journey, on their last night together, before Wallace and Elson leave Hubbard alone in the camp to attempt to secure help, Wallace watches the fire and listens to the falling rain and experiences a Poe-like moment of panic:

> Gradually the real and seeming became blended. Beyond the fire-glow, on the edge of the black pall of night, horrid shapes began to gather. They leered at me, and mocked me, and oh! they were telling me something dreadful was going to happen. A sudden jerk, and I sat up and stared wildly about me. Nothing but the sighing treetops

> and the patter, patter, patter of the rain. The fire had died down. I struggled to my feet, and threw on more wood.
>
> Again the horrid shapes leered at me from out the gloom. Then I heard myself exclaiming, "No, no, no!" The nameless dread was strong upon me….A confused sense of things evil and malicious, a confused sense of starts and jerks and struggles with wood, and the night wore on. (180).

Shortly after leaving Hubbard behind, Wallace becomes too weak to continue, but Elson pushes on and several days later comes across a trapper's cabin. The trapper, Donald Blake, quickly assembles a rescue party which then goes hunting for Wallace and Hubbard. They find Wallace in a desperate state—barely conscious, barely sane, and lucky to be alive. They find Hubbard dead. They were not able to remove Hubbard's body until winter had fully set in. When they returned to Hubbard's final campsite, it is as though the wilderness is unwilling to give him up: "Hubbard's body, with the tent lying flat on top of it, was under eight feet of snow. Near the spot a wolverine had been prowling, but the body was too deeply buried for any animal to scent it, and in its quiet resting place it lay undisturbed" (238).

Men of the Woods

I used to believe that I could change myself by an act of will, spurred on by some momentous event: New Year's, my birthday, that sort of thing. Instead, change happens slowly, gradually, often as a response to some slight, subtle shift in one's life—something more than just a desire to be different.

Things were a little different now, there had been a small shift. In the days that followed my encounter with Virgie McLean, I'd been reading his copy of *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*. Since I didn't have the heart to give it back to him un-read, I felt I had to. My motivation for reading the book doesn't matter. I was reading again. That's what counted. And this had an unintended side-effect. Since I was reading again, Claire began reading beside me. Lamp-lit in the living room, we sat together with our books on our green futon couch during those long winter evenings. It was still quiet around the house—a little too quiet to pretend that we were contented. But at least we weren't in separate rooms watching movies on our computers.

One night Claire asked me what I was reading. Because I was ashamed of having been rescued on the trail by a stranger, I hadn't said anything about meeting Virgie.

"I met this old guy last week on one of my walks," I told her. "When he found out I was doing an English degree he loaned me this book."

"What's his name?"

Claire ran the library at the College of the North Atlantic's HV-GB campus. She had met many old timers who came in to poke around in the archive, especially for items printed in long ago editions of the local newspaper, which were all kept on microfiche. She told me that there was a steady stream of old folks wanting to reread those articles. I didn't find that surprising: on

the Labrador, the past is everything. It's not just another country, as the proverb goes, it's the preferred location.

"I don't think I know him," she said when I told her Virgie's name. "What's the book he gave you?"

I held the cover up to the light.

"Oh, that one. We've got about a dozen copies at my library. They used to assign that in the college English courses."

"I can see why," I said. "It's pretty good."

At that point I was more than half-way through *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, making Dillon Wallace's literary achievement second only to Ian Fleming's.

Still, it took me the better part of a week to get through the book. I've never considered myself a fast reader. I'm the type who reads commas. And once I had read it, I wasn't sure what to do next. My intention was to give it back to Virgie straight away, but I felt a little odd about phoning him up because I didn't know what I'd say on the phone to him. He didn't seem like the phone-talking type. The only thing to do was to go to his house.

One Tuesday afternoon, roughly a week after our first meeting, I wandered over to his place and found him chopping wood in his driveway. He was dressed in work-clothes with a dark blue toque pushed back on his forehead. When he saw me, he smiled and mopped his brow with the toque.

"Do you know how to make splits?" He asked.

I admitted I didn't.

"Here then," he said and handed me the axe. I took off my gloves to get a better grip on the handle. From many years of use it had been worn piano-key smooth.

"Give it a shot," he said. Then he stepped back a few paces.

Ah, yes, here we go, I thought. A few lines from Robert Frost's "Two Tramps in Mud Time" flickered through my mind:

> Men of the woods and lumberjacks,
> They judged me by their appropriate tool.
> Except as a fellow handled an ax
> They had no way of knowing a fool.

It was obvious to me that Virgie McLean was no fool, which was all the more reason why I had to give it my best.

I raised the axe behind my head and swung mightily at the block of wood. The force of the blow sent a hard jolt through my hands and arms all the way up to my shoulders. I even felt it in my teeth. I'd managed to wedge the axe-blade into the wood, but that was all.

"Don't so much heave at the wood," he said. "Instead, bring the axe down through the wood, if you see what I mean. Work with the axe."

I tried a number of times and managed to splinter off a few pieces that would make decent kindling, but the hunk of wood stood there on the chopping block as mysterious and immoveable as a Stonehenge menhir.

After about five minutes of this, Virgie asked, "Did you finish the book?"

Grateful for the excuse to put the axe down, I reached into my jacket and pulled out a brown paper bag, the kind the liquor store wraps around wine bottles. I'd put the paperback into the bag so that the cover wouldn't become frayed as I walked over.

He took the book and asked, “Did you like it?”

“Yes”.

As if I was about to swing the axe again, he took a step back. “Did you really?”

“Yes, I did,” I said, trying to be clear that I did, in fact, enjoy the book. And that was the truth—I had enjoyed it. And I wanted him to know it.

“What did you like about it?”

The first things to come to mind were my critiques. But I was reluctant to say that I thought Dillon Wallace’s writing was stodgy and stilted in places as well as corny and sentimental. Nor did I want to launch into a discussion of Wallace’s less-than-open-minded thoughts on race and indigeneity. While those criticisms were fair and real, they really didn’t touch on my experience reading the book. After all, I pushed through the story with keen fascination. There was something so lurid in witnessing the men disintegrating, starving, their expedition deteriorating into inescapable disaster.

“Once you get going, once Hubbard, Wallace, and Elson begin to run into trouble, it’s hard to put it down,” I said.

“That it is. I’ve read it a few times myself and I still get caught up in it every single time.”

“Even though you know how it ends?”

“The ending isn’t a surprise,” he said. “Even the first time around.”

He looked at his wrist watch.

“It’s 2.30 now. What time do you eat supper?”

I knew that most Liveyeres liked to eat their supper right on the dot of 5 o' clock. If I told Virgie we ate at 6 or 6.30 he would likely find that rather decadent, so I told him 5.30 and the answer suited him.

"Why don't we go for a ride to Striver? I'll show you something in the museum there that you might like to see."

"Striver?"

"North West River," he said. "People usually just call it Striver."

Being the off-season, the museum was normally closed, but Virgie went inside his house to phone up a friend who would open it for us. When he returned, he unplugged the engine-block heater, wrapped the cord around the driver-side mirror and we got into the pick-up truck, which coughed and rattled a couple times before the engine finally agreed to start. We sat there for a moment while the truck warmed itself, then we chugged down the road towards the highway.

You could say there isn't much in between Striver and Goose Bay, mainly just rocks and trees. In winter, it's mainly just snow-covered rocks and trees. Here and there Virgie slowed down, pointing out a few landmarks. He also chatted about *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, explaining how, two summers later, in 1905, Mina Benson Hubbard, Leonidas Hubbard's widow, re-mounted the expedition with George Elson and three other men, canoeing right up to Ungava. The same summer, Dillon Wallace and his crew attempted Ungava, and it became a canoe race up the centre of Labrador. Wallace's team lost to Mina's by several weeks' time. They both wrote books about the summer. Because they had become bitter enemies, neither one mentioned the other in their published accounts. Virgie spoke of how many people speculated that Mina and George fell in love with each other as they made their way through the heart of the

Big Land—a wonderful twist to the tale, though it had never been proven true. That aside, for most of the 40 or 50 minutes that we spent on the road to Striver, Virgie was quiet. Clearly he was a man who spent a considerable amount of time by himself – in the bush, on the trapline – so the quiet wasn't awkward or uncomfortable for him. It wasn't for me either.

As we drove, I found myself thinking of my late father. At that point in my life, he'd been dead for 10 years. I hadn't thought of him much in recent weeks, but Virgie's presence made me remember him. I thought of how he would've liked Virgie. How he would've loved the life that Virgie lead—it was the kind of life he dreamed for himself. He'd immigrated to Canada from Switzerland, hoping for a life of out-back adventure. Switzerland in the 1960s was too much "yes sir / no sir" for his liking, but Canada was full of wide-open prairie spaces and rocky mountain opportunities. That said, my Dad never made it much beyond Ontario. He settled down in Midland, a small town nearly two hundred kilometres from Toronto, where he married and raised his family in a world of rectangular lawns, McDonald's hamburgers, and parent-teacher meetings. He worked white-collar managerial jobs with RCA and Volkswagen. But he loved The North with a boyish romanticism, longing for frozen muskeg and brilliant white tundra. Instead of going north, he read about it. His bookshelves were crammed with northern Canadiana: Farley Mowat, Pierre Berton, James Houston, and Peter C. Newman – just to name a few – lined up in neat rows in pristine paperback format. He never got much farther north than Manitoulin Island. And yet fate had found me living in Labrador, living out my Dad's dream. Sometimes it takes several generations to live a life. And yet there was that vast gulf between his dream and my reality.

We crossed the bridge to North West River and swung down towards a few small buildings by the riverside. Snow was piled all around. Virgie's friend was good to his word, had

arrived by snowmobile, and opened the museum for us. He waited inside the white-washed building, which, in a previous incarnation, had been an old Hudson Bay Company post. The museum itself was a recreation of what the post would have been like back in the early 20th century when Leonidas Hubbard, *et al*., had used Striver as the starting point for their adventures. Stepping over the threshold was like stepping back about a hundred years: yellow-painted wooden shelves lined the walls, stocked with the kinds of goods that the trappers and their families would've bought, such as blankets and snowshoes, tea and molasses. There was a long counter, perfect for leaning on and passing the time of day, which Virgie and his friend began doing right away, just as their fathers and grandfathers had in decades now long gone. But before they got too deep into their colloquy about the weather, Virgie's friend, Percy, a small-built old-timer in a checked shirt and suspenders, pointed to a room off to one side and said, "You'll want to see those items in there, I think."

In the room there were several rows of glass-covered cases where *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* came to life vividly and unexpectedly. The museum had a collection of items used on the Hubbard-Wallace-Elson expedition of 1903: sunglasses, an enamel bowl, a silver spoon, an Abercrombie and Fitch brass lighter, the Kodak camera, a silk scarf, Wallace's chewed-up felt hat. Those items that they had thought so essential to their mission; all a kind of bric-a-brac that did them little good. There were books, too: the Five Books of Moses, the Bible, the Imitation of Christ, as well as Hubbard's notebook. I stared through the glass at the pages, trying to gain some further glimpse into the man. His hand-writing was hard to decipher. Over a hundred years now since his death, the man himself was hard to decipher. But then, in one of the cases, was Hubbard's gun rod, the one his father gave him. The one that he lost on the trail, but then found again with great joy. The gun rod had meant so much to him because it was evidence

of his father's love. And there it was on display, so touching and pitiable. The things we hold onto in desperate times.

I saw a photograph of the tablet marking the spot where Hubbard – "Intrepid Explorer and Practical Christian" – had died in the autumn of 1903. It featured a quote from John 14:4: "And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know." Those embossed words were stuck on a rock under a cold sky; they were deep in Labrador, largely unseen. With no one there to read them, the words would be dumb, meaningless. The words would sit there on the plaque, facing the sky, facing the flight of the crows, facing the pitiless sun, only later to be buried by the snow.

Percy came into the room and began chatting about the displays. He pointed to a map of Labrador on the wall, following Hubbard, Wallace, and Elson's route through the interior with a tobacco-stained finger.

"Their biggest mistake was that they turned around," he claimed. "They should have kept going. It would have been easier travelling than retracing their steps."

Then Percy chuckled and said, "But without all their mistakes, there wouldn't be a story to tell. And there probably wouldn't be this museum either. Who cares how the winners won? We want to know how the losers lost."

*

Percy locked the museum and roared away on his snowmobile with a wave. Virgie and I stood in the snow for a moment, watching him disappear up a road lined with evergreens. Then we looked back at the ice-covered river, looking across to the opposite shore, to the jumbled-up collection of houses of Sheshatshiu, the Innu community. The daylight was beginning to fade,

the sky was now a pale blue. If it had been summertime, I would have said that the sky was soft. In winter, with the temperature dropping as the sun disappeared, the sky seemed raw and austere. The air was sharp like a knife blade. A dog barked into the cold air, a distant, lonesome sound. Otherwise all was quiet.

"Back when my parents were alive and still young, North West River was the centre of the world," Virgie said. "Back then you had the HBC post here, the churches, the Grenfell hospital, schools—the works. This was where people lived and did their business. People still live here, but almost everything and everyone have moved down the road from here. It's all in Goose Bay now."

"Can you even get groceries here?" I asked.

"There's a small store over there," he said and gestured to a dreary-looking building. "But most people get in their cars and drive to the Co-op and Northmart in Goose."

Virgie then held up his hand towards the river's edge. "Down here, this is where Hubbard and Wallace got started," he said. "Then, a couple years later, this is where Hubbard versus Wallace got started. It's hard to imagine anything getting started here now."

I looked around at the heaped-up banks of snow that surrounded us, that surrounded everything. Striver itself seemed to be hibernating, buried under piles of twilight-blue snow.

"Oh, it would've been quiet back then, too, but it was a different kind of quiet. This now is the quiet of the world having moved on, having gone down the road a ways."

I sensed that Virgie had been speaking as much to the river as he was to me. Then he glanced over at my peacoat suspiciously, as though it might betray me like a false friend. I recognized his glance in an instant. I'd received that keen-eyed look many times from my father. It was a certain narrowing of the eyes. Not unfriendly, but it was not without judgement either.

“Let’s get you back home before you freeze again,” he said.

Fragments of a Dissertation: *A Woman's Way through Unknown Labrador*

In *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, Leonidas Hubbard is reported as becoming increasingly homesick for his wife Mina as his expedition dragged on. At one point, thinking of other trips he hoped to do, he tells his companions, "I want a nice, easy trip that I can take Mrs. Hubbard on" (127). The irony in that moment is overwhelming to anyone who knows the fuller story. Leonidas' widow, Mina Benson Hubbard, would, deferring any "nice, easy" trips, travel to Labrador herself in the summer of 1905 and successfully complete the expedition that her husband had attempted two years earlier. Not only would she complete the journey, but she would do it quickly during the short Labradorian summer, creating a map that was renowned for generations for its accuracy. As well, she would witness the massive caribou migration in the Labrador interior and meet with the Innu in their home territory. She would go on to write several articles and deliver numerous lectures about her expedition; ultimately, in 1908, she published an account of her expedition in her book, *A Woman's Way through Unknown Labrador*. In short, she accomplished all that her husband had set out to do, goals which he himself had failed to achieve. By all accounts, she was remarkable.

However, as the 20th century wore on, her reputation would languish in obscurity. Mina Benson Hubbard died in the spring of 1956 in Britain; she was killed by an oncoming train while she was trying to cross the railway (Silvis 1-3; Buchanan et al. 432). Possibly she was suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's at the time of her death and didn't recognize that the train was an oncoming threat (Buchanan at al. 432; MacDonald 94-95). According to her grandson Hugh, though she was a "grand" and "striking" lady, he thought of her as his "rather eccentric grandmother" (MacDonald 94). At the time, her book was out of print and in turn there was

critical neglect. Patrick O'Flaherty's 1979 study of the literature of Newfoundland and Labrador completely omits any reference to Mina Benson Hubbard, though O'Flaherty discusses Dillon Wallace's *The Lure of the Labrador Wild* at length.

The resuscitated interest in Mina Benson Hubbard is partly due to Pierre Berton. When Breakwater Books ("Canada's Atlantic Publisher") released a new edition of her book, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador,* in 1981, Berton supplied a foreword which no doubt helped to renew interest in her work. A keen-eyed story-teller, Berton recognized that they story behind the book was perhaps more interesting than the book itself. In his foreword, he tells readers that "Mrs. Hubbard's journey was a grudge match" in order to beat Dillon Wallace, who had also mounted a trans-Labradorian expedition up to Ungava that same summer. To spice things up, Berton added that "the intrepid and unflappable" George Elson, who was Mina Benson Hubbard's guide, "was more than a little in love with her."

Mina Benson Hubbard's expedition can be understood as grief work; in turn, grief is the central theme of *A Woman's Way through Unknown Labrador*. Mina Benson Hubbard turns to Labrador's wilderness as a way to address and ameliorate her grief. I believe she did not confront the wilderness psychologically unaided: her guides, George Elson among them, act as intermediaries, guiding and teaching her how to be at-home in the wilderness. They introduce Mina Benson Hubbard to what we would today call Traditional Ecological Knowledge. In turn, she takes this knowledge, this worldview, and reproduces it in her memoir as a version of the pastoral, the pastoral being the only model culturally available to her and to her readers for understanding this relationship to wild places.

When Mina Benson Hubbard received word that her husband, Leonidas, had died in Labrador, she was thrown into a situation fraught with anxieties. On top of the misery she would

have felt at the news of her husband's death, there was the extra added sorrow that she learned about it months after it had occurred. Thus she had lived many weeks with the belief that he was alive when he was really dead—a fact that must have disturbed her further. When Mina Benson Hubbard decided to leave the confines of her home in New York in order to remount her late husband's trans-Labrador expedition, she was defying social conventions. By the norms of the time, she should have been at home doing what was expected of her—*mourning*. Not traipsing across Canada's north. And yet it becomes clear that mourning is exactly what she was doing as she travelled by canoe through Labrador's back-country with her head guide, George Elson, and three men: Job Chapies, Joseph Iserhoff, and Gilbert (Bert) Blake. Mourning, sorrow, and grief work are at the very heart of *A Woman's Way through Unknown Labrador*.

If we conceptualize the process of grieving as an exploratory journey, Mina Benson Hubbard's journey into Labrador's "unknown" interior actualizes this grief work one paddle stroke after another. In tackling this expedition, she encounters her husband's memory time and again, which provides her with the opportunity to find a way through grief. Although the physical and mental challenges of the expedition would allow her opportunities to forget her grief, by journeying to Labrador she encounters numerous reminders of her husband, allowing her to transform this sense of loss into something meaningful. Within the first couple days of the canoe journey into the interior, her team passes the spot where Hubbard and his team (which also included George Elson) had made one of their fatal mistakes—mistaking the Susan River for the Nascaupee River. She is fairly terse in her treatment of this, but the brevity speaks volumes: she admits that she has trouble sleeping because "[t]he thought of what missing it two years before had cost would not be shut out" (48). At other times she seems to be thinking of him and her grief, without fully admitting as much to the reader (though her thoughts and

feelings seem clear enough). For example, Hubbard describes a rainy evening at one of their camps:

> When the showers had passed we had supper, and as we sat at our meal the sun came out again, throwing a golden glow over all. Clouds lay like delicate veils along the hill-sides, sometimes dipping almost to their feet. Walking back along the edge of the terrace I watched till they gathered thick again and darkness came down over all. It was very wild and beautiful, but as an exquisite, loved form from which the spirit had fled. The sense of life, of mystery, and magic seemed gone, and I wondered if the time could come when beauty would cease to give me pain. (71)

At other times, she does mention her husband by name and describes her emotions with particular detail. In one passage, her fishing rod incites strong feelings.

> While the men took their loads forward I set up my fishing-rod for the first time. Every day I had felt ashamed that it had not been done before, but every day I put it off. I never cared greatly for fishing, much as I had loved to be with my husband on the lakes and streams. Mr. Hubbard could never understand it, for more than any other inanimate thing on earth he loved a fishing-rod, and to whip a trout stream was to him pure delight. As I made a few casts near the foot of the rapid, my heart grew heavier every minute. I almost hated the rod, and soon I took it down feeling that I could never touch it again. (95)

Though mired in grief, Mina Benson Hubbard extends the tradition of the wilderness pastoral, precisely because she knows that she cannot view Labrador's wilderness as a primarily aesthetic experience. There is pain within the wilderness. She knows too well the dangers that

Labrador can hold, and she knows that she must confront these dangers herself as she makes her way through the land towards Ungava. While she can play the role of aesthetic admirer, reproducing what she saw in Labrador in picturesque terms for the benefit of her readers (she often describes the scenery using the vague adjective "beautiful"), Hubbard recognizes that in the course of her journey she must earn a relationship with the land, must act as a participant within the land.

This is where her four guides play a significant role: George Elson, Job Chapies, Joseph Iserhoff, and Gilbert (Bert) Blake. Elson, Chapies and Iserhoff were all from the James Bay area; only Blake was a Labradorian. Local people to this day cite Blake's presence on the trip as one of the reasons behind Hubbard's success because he was very familiar with the first portion of her journey (Crane et al. 61-62). Although she readily uses the word "half-breed" and "pure blood" to describe the men – terms which sound racist to us today – Hubbard demonstrates throughout the book that she was able to see beyond any stereotyped notions. The men are guides not merely through the wilderness, but guides in how to experience the wilderness, how to shape that relationship with the wilderness. This is where the camaraderie of her team-mates is an essential shaping feature of her journey.

But before exploring the camaraderie, it's worth noting a few tensions that made themselves apparent during the expedition. As Roberta Buchanan points out, there were numerous barriers between Hubbard and the four men in her crew: namely racial, gender, and class barriers (Buchanan et al. 26). Words like "half-breed" were, it seems, acceptable nomenclature in the early 20th century, which speaks to the racial divide in the crew, with Mina Benson Hubbard, a white woman on one side, and the men, as "half-breed" and "pure blood," on the other. And yet we can't lose sight of the fact that Mina Benson Hubbard was a white

woman and that her femininity compromised her authority. As Dea Birkett writes, women explorers of that era felt "the underlying tensions between being defined at once as racial superiors and sexual subordinates" (qtd. in Buchanan 73 and Buchanan et al. 29). Lastly, there was the class barrier, in which Hubbard, a middle-class woman, simply had access to greater resources than the others. She had *hired* them and they were her employees at all times, and this would have distanced her from the men and from the more grueling aspects of the trip (Buchanan 73; Buchanan et al. 28).

Despite these prohibitive factors, all seemed able to transcend the socially sanctioned barriers in order to establish genuinely fond and friendly relations with one another. If the rumours were true regarding a romance between George Elson and Mina Benson Hubbard – Bert Blake, years later, claimed there was indeed "a romance happening" (McDonald 35; Buchanan et al. 400) – these barriers weren't just transcended but radically leaped-over. Hubbard indicates that there was considerable joking in the camp – sometimes at her expense (50, 73) – but which she seems to take in good-natured stride. She also admires the men's back-country skill, as when she watches Job placidly poling the canoe through the rapids. "The wilder the rapid the more he seemed to enjoy it," she writes (53). As well, she readily admits that in their campfire-side kitchen, the men are better cooks than she (57). But the admiration seems to flow both ways because she proves herself willing to take the necessary risks. After shooting a "fearsome looking" rapid, George tells her, "I have seen lots of men who would jump out of the canoe if we tried to take them where you have been just now (59). In the course of the expedition, they appear to become friends and Mina Benson Hubbard particularly values their company: on one rainy day, when the rain had driven them into their tents, she admits that "[i]t was horrid to eat in the tent alone" (68). This feeling of friendship and camaraderie is keenly felt at the expedition's

conclusion, at their arrival at the HBC post in Ungava when Hubbard recognizes, once again, even in this distant place, the socially sanctioned roles must be resumed: "Suddenly I realised that with our arrival at the post our positions were reversed. They were my charges now. They had completed their task and what a great thing they had done for me" (153). In that instant, she sees that the roles must be rigidly adhered to once again (signaled by the HBC agent's wife's comment: "Your's [sic] is the first white woman's face I have seen for two year" [153]). Upon arrival at the HBC post, the men were then "literally outsiders" as they camped outside while Hubbard had a place inside the factor's house (Buchanan et al. 32).

If Mina Benson Hubbard was willing and able to transcend these barriers, it must be noted that the men might have had some greater degree of reluctance because they had so much more to lose. The feeling between Hubbard and the men was not always easy-going; on a few occasions tensions surfaced, tensions which pointed towards deeper anxieties. Roberta Buchanan focusses on several of these incidents reported in Hubbard's published book and/or in her expedition diary. In particular, on August 17, 1905, Hubbard faced what arguably amounted to a mutiny. In discussing the route they would use should they have to retreat, the men refused to return by the Nascaupee River; instead, they wanted to return via Davis Inlet or via the Grand River. Hubbard's reason for retracing their route on the Nascaupee route was that it would allow her to fine-tune the map she was making of the region (MacDonald 74; Buchanan et al. 30-31). Hubbard's reply to them – recorded in her diary – was to essentially force them to confess to their mutiny: "Now if you refuse to take me back [on the Nascaupee] I cannot compel you to do it and I shall not try but you will record in my diary that I asked you to do so and you refused and state your reasons which you think are good." (Buchanan et al. 249). Buchanan points out that Elson had never objected to any of Leonidas Hubbard's decisions with the same resolve and she

frames the incident in terms of gender: "Mina Hubbard was the leader, too, but Elson was not necessarily going to obey the orders of a woman" (MacDonald 74; Buchanan et al. 31). While it may be true that Elson felt less inclined to listen to a woman, Buchanan's comments reveal an inability to examine the situation from the men's point of view. I think it's safe to assume that Elson had learned, after the tragic summer of 1903, that there were dangers in showing too much loyalty to a Hubbard. Moreover, what if something had gone wrong and Mina Benson Hubbard had died in Labrador as her husband had before her? What if Elson and the men had survived? If such a situation had arisen, what would have happened to the men upon their return to society? Would anything they say – as "Indians" and "half-breeds" – at an inquest or in a court of law be believed even if they had been entirely diligent and were entirely innocent? It's worth noting that Elson's caution for Mina Benson Hubbard's safety while on the trip – to the extent that one of the men act as her chaperone whenever she went off by herself – might not have emerged from paternalistic or chauvinistic motives, but might have emerged from a very real fear for his own reputation, safety, and freedom. The risk was, at all times, with the men.

Joanna Kafarowski interprets Mina Benson Hubbard's role as "more than a mere passenger on a journey through Labrador" (MacDonald 84), citing that her equipment – camera, sextant, artificial horizon, barometer, and thermometer – required participation within the landscape (84). But Hubbard went beyond mere scientific curiosity about Labrador. The men in many small and subtle ways showed her how to live in the wilderness, how to see the wilderness and to love it in ways that went beyond an eye for the picturesque. As Anne Hart writes, "Unlike a lot of explorers, she didn't see the wilderness as a frightening and hostile place, thanks probably, to her four companions who, because of their native roots, felt completely at home in it" (MacDonald 36). It's worth noting that the men create their own community in which

Hubbard learns to participate: for one thing, they often speak "in Indian" (53), which she does not understand, but clearly becomes immersed in the sound of their language. She describes their voices at nights in camp: "Then floating out on the solemn, evening silence came the sound of hymns sung in Indian to old, familiar tunes, and last the 'Paddling Song'" (93). It's evident that the men feel comfortable being "in Indian" when around her. Yet George Elson clearly did not feel this way on the first voyage with Leonidas Hubbard and Dillon Wallace: when they implore him to tell an "Indian" story, he tells a truncated version of one such story and never finishes it. Mina Benson Hubbard notices that when George sees or hears something on shore, he says, "Who's that?" (48), then discovers that it's a bear or some other creature. As in *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, he refers to animals as people—as *who*, not *what*. In such ways, Elson teaches Mina Benson Hubbard various bits of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, as when he shows her a "dry, black, leaflike substance" growing on some boulders. He tells her it is called "wakwanapsk": "which the Indians in their extremity of hunger use for broth. Though black and leaflike when mature, it is, in its beginning, like a disk of tiny round, green spots, and from this it gets its name. Wakwuk – fish roe; wanapisk – a rock" (68). Largely, though, they teach wordlessly by example, as when Job makes poles to help steer the canoe through the rapids (51-53) or in making bannocks for their supper (57). Hubbard doesn't just see this as practical knowledge, but recognizes a spiritual dimension to it, as when she writes that Job "loved to pole up a rapid or hunt out a trail just as an artist loves to paint" (57). Hubbard explains that there was nothing self-aggrandizing in their talent: "When you saw these men in the bush you needed no further explanation of their air of quiet self-confidence" (69). Ultimately, they show her how to be at home in the wilderness. While paddling through the interior, she does not experience the

crippling feeling of solitude that affects both Leonidas Hubbard and Dillon Wallace on the 1903 expedition. She has the very opposite experience:

> The trip was proving so beautiful and easy that my state of mind was one of continued surprise. I had none of the feeling of loneliness, which I knew every one would expect me to have. I did not feel far from home, but in reality less homeless than I had ever felt anywhere, since I knew my husband was never to come back to me. (82)

The above passage both acknowledges and diminishes her grief. The wilderness – revealed to her by the four guides – is a key ingredient in overcoming what she terms the "long months of darkness" (82) she had suffered after her husband's death in the very environment through which she was passing.

While Mina Benson Hubbard's portrayal of her Indigenous guides is refreshing, especially when compared to other explorers like Dillon Wallace or Hesketh Prichard, her encounters with the Montagnais and Nascaupee (now known as the Innu) are not as sunny or cheerful. While she does appear to have an egalitarian relationship with the men, she is not entirely free of stereotypes. When she meets the Innu, she is not entirely free of racism. Worth noting: the men, in particular, are worried about their reception when they meet the Innu on their own land; they fear that there may be violence, and Bert Blake warns Hubbard that she won't be shot—they will keep her for themselves. Hubbard, undeterred by these dire forecasts, responds with "not fear, but aggression" (Buchanan et al. 21) by oiling her pistol. In the latter portion of the expedition, she meets with two bands of the Innu: the first are what was once called Montagnais (at the time generally regarded as "civilized" [Buchanan et al. 19]) and the second are the Nascaupee (then considered the "uncivilized" Barren Ground People [Buchanan et al. 19, 22]). Despite their fears of violence, Hubbard and her crew are openly welcomed by both of the

Innu bands. In fact, Hubbard witnesses how they are victims of violence. She perceives tremendous poverty for both the Montagnais and the Nascaupee as both bands beg her for whatever she can spare: tobacco, tea, flour—even her sweater (Hubbard 128, 136, 140) She describes how both groups complain of their poverty (128, 135), and even the faces of the children seem "sad and old in expression as if they too realised something of the cares of wilderness life" (138). The baby she encounters among the Nascaupee serves a symbolic function for her with regard to the Innu people's overall situation: "The little creature had no made garments on, but was simply wrapped about with old cloths leaving only its face and neck bare….As one might expect it wore an expression of utter wretchedness though it lay with closed eyes making no sound" (138).

Mina Benson Hubbard's portrayal of desperate and grinding poverty tempers any inclination towards romanticization (a romanticization which her husband clearly harboured when he began his journey two years earlier). While it would be a stretch to say that Mina Benson Hubbard's depiction of the Innu offers a critique of the colonial forces that have subjugated Labrador's Indigenous people, she does include a comment from "one old man" who says: "We can get nothing from the Englishman, not even ammunition. It is hard for us to live" (135). As well, these two episodes – which occur at the journey's end – contrast with her earlier picturesque tendencies. Though Labrador is, as we are told time and again, "beautiful," she leaves us with an image of how difficult it is for original inhabitants to make a living for themselves on that land. And yet this image contains a serious contradiction and omission: throughout her narrative she repeatedly admires her guides' excellent woodcraft and survival skills, yet she fails to see or to emphasize these qualities in the two Innu bands she meets on her journey. There would have been plenty of evidence that the bands were indeed surviving on the

land in a way that few others could. This omission is surprising because, given her husband's death, we can only imagine that she would be especially sensitive to any and all evidence of survival in Labrador's backcountry.

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Anne Hart, Hubbard's biographer, writes that her journey was "an exploration of both Labrador and of herself" (Buchanan et al. 353). What she found of Labrador is clear enough; the map she drew illustrates this in fairly objective terms. But what she discovered of herself – here we move into highly subjective terrain – is less than clear, given her tendency to be both emotionally candid and reticent in the book she wrote. Anne Hart writes that "it was in a spirit of grieving that she set out to complete her dead husband's romantic dream" (Buchanan et al. 353) and as she fulfilled his dreams to explore Labrador, witness the caribou migration, and interact with the Innu, "she mourned him along the way" (Buchanan et al. 353). But what comes after the mourning?

We can see that Mina Benson Hubbard's life was bisected by her life-changing Labradorian experience. And after the eventful summer of 1905, her life continued to expand in remarkable ways, suggesting to us that she was not stuck or stalled by her feelings of grief over the loss of Leonidas Hubbard. Upon her return from Labrador, there were lectures, articles, and the book's publication on both sides of the Atlantic. While in England, she met and later married the wealthy Harold Thornton Ellis "the handsomest man in Yorkshire" (Buchanan et al 362) in 1908 and they had three children together. They later divorced (Buchanan et al. 370-390) After the divorce, in middle age, Mina Benson Hubbard, it was noted, "was difficult to live with"

(Buchanan et al. 404) as she was particularly strong willed. Clearly when her mind was made up about somebody, it remained fixed: for example, her dislike of and difficulties with Dillon Wallace continued (Buchanan et al. 405), but her friendship with George Elson remained firm and she was generous with him for years afterwards (Buchanan et al. 403, 415-416).

A question worth asking is, does Mina Benson Hubbard complete her grief work while in Labrador? I raise this question precisely because it's difficult to answer, if not impossible. And it points towards the further difficulties regarding the nature of grief work: how do you know when you have finished grieving? Can you ever finish grieving?

Never Cry

I rarely put any stock in my dreams. That's why, when I have one worth remembering, I hold on to it like a love letter. Like a love letter, those rare dreams express some mysterious worth, partly a charm, partly a burden.

That morning in early February, I had a dream about my late father.

He was standing on the bank of a frozen river. Behind him, pale grey mountains ranged along the horizon. Snow blew hard across the river from the mountains, ragged wraith-like gusts that veiled my father's face—but I knew it was him. It could have been no other. As I approached, the snow fell faster, blotting out both the man and the mountains beyond. They came back into view for a moment, and I saw my father raise his hand, pointing across the river to something in the mountains. Was he calling to me? I thought, If only I could hear him, if only I could see what he wants me to see. There was something on the other side. An obliterating whiteness then raged between us, and we were lost to each other once again.

At that moment, I awoke. It was still dark in the house. Claire was beside me, sleeping. I craned my neck to see the alarm clock on her bedside table. The red digits burned in the darkness; it was a little past five in the morning. I settled down on the pillow, but I couldn't get back to sleep. After tossing side to side for thirty minutes, I decided to call it quits and get out of bed. Soon the coffee machine was burbling away, a source of warmth and pleasure, like a little hearth, in the otherwise bleak kitchen. I ate some instant porridge, a slice of toast, and drank my coffee. I turned the radio on, keeping the volume down low. I was half-hoping that the smell of the java brewing and the sound of the radio playing would wake Claire so I'd have some

company. And it worked. I heard her stirring in the bedroom. Soon she was standing in the kitchen, shielding her eyes from the fluorescent light overhead and asking me what I was doing.

"I couldn't sleep," I told her. Then, like a child, I said, "I had a bad dream."

"What was it about?"

I wasn't sure how to explain, so I said, "You know how dreams are. You can't really say once they're done and gone. Here's some coffee. Keep me company."

"I don't want to keep you company. I want to go back to bed."

"What time is it?"

"It's not even six," she said.

"That's almost time to get up anyway."

"No, it's not."

"Here, have some coffee. Let's talk."

Claire dropped into a kitchen chair with a single slumping motion and took the mug of coffee.

"Things haven't been good between you and me lately," I said.

"Tell me about it."

"What would you like to see change? Between you and me."

She took a long draught from her mug. "There's a lot I'd like to see change," she said.

"Like what?"

She rubbed her face, working her fingers into her eyes, as if trying to massage herself into wakefulness.

"I've been thinking of finding another," she said.

I took a mouthful of my coffee. When I swallowed, it felt like a stone going down my throat.

"What?" I heard my voice trembling.

"I've been thinking of a lover," she said.

"Who?" I asked, then said: "No, never mind."

"I'm lonely."

I looked at her for a moment as she held her head in her hands, then I turned to the coffee pot. I reached for it, wanting to fling it across the room and watch it shatter against the wall, broken glass and coffee pooling angrily onto the floor.

I poured myself another cup and drank it quickly.

"I think I'll go for a walk," I said.

In a few short minutes I was out of the house and trudged down the cold pre-dawn streets. The sun was on its way up, but the world was still dark. As I passed by the houses on our street, I was surprised to see lights on in so many of them. What are people doing up so early? I wondered. In every house I imagined some crisis occurring—some crisis, large or small. Sickness, sadness, suicide. The day already ruined.

Of course, it was ridiculous, I told myself. Claire wouldn't start sleeping around on me. After all, did she even know any other men? The only one I could think of was Jay, the clerk who worked in her library in the evenings and on weekends, but he was queer. He once drove right across Labrador and down into Quebec to attend an Elton John concert in Montreal. She's just trying to get a rise out of me, I thought. And it worked.

It was fiercely cold, but I was prepared for it. A week earlier, I had splurged on myself. My mother had given me a sizeable amount of money at Christmastime. At first I was unsure of

what to spend it on, but after trying to make-do in January with my peacoat and various sweaters I realized what I really needed. I put the money towards a Canada Goose parka, which I actually managed to buy in Happy Valley-Goose Bay at the Northern Lights store. Once I got the parka, I put the peacoat in a far corner of my closet; now I wore only my goose-down garrison, feeling safe and assured inside it.

In fact, the parka became a kind of home away from home. It was loaded with pockets, a seemingly unending amount of storage space. I carried all sorts of useful things with me: naturally my wallet and keys, but also a pen or two, a notebook, matches, cigarettes, a handkerchief, a Swiss army knife, a compass, a small flashlight, binoculars - sometimes even a bird guidebook - and often a slender thermosbottle. My sunglasses were tucked away under one of the flaps and a granola bar was squirreled away under another. I'd even put a half-roll of toilet paper in my parka (just in case). Anything that I thought I might need as I walked around got stored in my jacket.

I headed through the streets towards the trail that followed the Churchill River. The trail on which I met Virgie some weeks earlier. As I followed the snowmobile track, the sun's gears crept a cog or two higher and sky lightened and brightened. There were few signs of life. Except for a raven giving a quick, hoarse call at my approach, nothing else was stirring. The snow under my boots gave an irritating squeaking sound with every step, as if I were treading on styrofoam. The willow and alder grew so thickly here, they were like the walls of a woven basket. After walking for about half an hour, it was light enough to say that I was in daylight. And when the darkness drained away, I began to notice a set of prints on the trail before me. The paw-prints were distinct in the snowmobile track, each one a careful indentation in the centre of the pathway. They were canine tracks, though far too large to be a fox or coyote. They weren't

a dog's because there weren't any human boot-prints other than my own, and dogs don't usually wander too far from home unless lead by their human masters. As I walked, my eyes were riveted on the paw-prints, following them – trying to read them like a line of text – until they veered to the left, branching down a path that lead to the Churchill. I stood there for a moment, looking after them, then decided to keep to the main trail which lead back to Hamilton River Road.

Making my way homeward, I passed the college campus where Claire worked. By this time it was 8.30; her work-day had started. But I had something to tell her, so I went into the library and found her checking email. When she saw me she looked worried, perhaps afraid that I'd pick up where we left off and start a fight.

"Guess what?" I asked. I suddenly felt cheerful and she seemed relieved.

"OK," she said. "What?"

"I think there must have been a wolf in the woods today," I said. "I saw its track on the Churchill River walk."

*

In the days that followed, my suspicion proved accurate. That string of prints came to life. Stories of wolf sightings started to make the rounds and eventually someone caught a wolf on camera. The photo was posted online as proof and as a warning. The image was clear: the wolf was large, a mottled grey and white, the very colour of winter itself. What was it doing so close to town? The most likely explanation was that hunger drove it from the forest to scrounge and scavenge off human society, likely preying on cats and dogs. In turn, the announcer on the local

CBC radio station reminded people to keep their pets indoors, especially at night. He stopped short, however, of warning people to keep their children indoors, especially at night.

Now that I had better clothing, I was in the habit of doing the Churchill River walk several times a week. Because of the wolf sightings, Claire had asked me to stay away.

"There's no reason why you need to go there," she said. "It's a large and potentially dangerous animal."

I didn't share her concerns.

"Look, you've read Farley Mowat too," I argued. "They're just big puppy dogs. There's nothing to worry about."

The next time I went into the woods – a cold, sunny afternoon on the very same day that the photo went online – I saw the wolf tracks again. There they were, on the path right in front of me. I knew they were fresh tracks because it had snowed a little the night before. There wasn't even a Skidoo track yet, just a light layer of snow over the flattened trail and the wolf prints. They seemed to be the tracks of a single animal, but I remembered what a forester at the college had told me: that wolves make a point of stepping into each others' prints. Then when they come to a clearing, an open field or frozen lake, they will fan out and you can see their numbers. I began to wonder, what if there's more than one wolf on the trail before me? And how much earlier had they been here before me? What if they had been on the trail just a few minutes ahead of me? Unlikely, I thought, because it was broad daylight—but not impossible. What if they had heard me already? My own foot-falls in those heavy rubber-soled boots were loud, each step wrenching the snow underneath. Each step an announcement. What if the wolves had doubled-back to see who was making all that racket in the forest? Perhaps they were now behind me.

I took off my heavy gloves and dropped them into the snow. I reached into the pocket of my parka and fished out my Swiss army knife, a knife that my father had given me when I was 12 years old. My chilled fingertips fumbled across the array of tools and I unfolded the ice-cold knife-blade. I stuck the blade into the snow at my feet, got my gloves back on and retrieved the knife. I walked the path with the knife in my hand, just in case. And as I walked I kept looking back and forth, from left to right, my eyes swiveling round like searchlights, straining for any signs of movement—quick, crouching, slinking movements. I kept my hood back and my toque up over my ears so I could clearly hear any noise that might betray the presence of some other. Even wolves can't be absolutely silent, I told myself.

I didn't panic, I didn't run, but I was on high alert until I reached the road. The sight of the brightly coloured cars on the wet, slushy asphalt was strangely comforting.

*

Several days later I was at Virgie's place, having a mid-afternoon cup of pitch-black tea. I'd been in the habit of visiting him a couple times a week, and I was getting in the habit of pouring in some tinned milk to help cut the tea's tar-like quality. There was no shortage of fresh milk in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, but many liveyeres still drank the tinned stuff. While watching the syrupy milk unravel like a frayed ribbon in the hot, dark tea, I told Virgie about my wolf-related experiences in the woods.

"And what were you going to do if you saw the wolf?" He asked. "Wrestle it to the ground and slit its throat with your jack-knife?"

"I felt like I had to do something," I said. "I had the knife with me, so carrying it in my hand felt like a wise precaution. Like locking your car doors."

Virgie tilted back in his chair, perfectly poised, both hands cradling his chipped mug.

"But locking your car doors is about protecting yourself against something that's likely to happen, as opposed to something that's likely never to happen. If you don't lock your car doors, sooner or later someone's going to get into your car. But you can spend years in the bush without having to give wolves a second thought."

There wasn't much I could say to that. He had me there. Men live for these moments when they can poke fun at each other. The test of character is to be good natured in the giving and receiving. This can be extended as a recipe for all aspects of day to day living: be good natured in the midst of those slings and arrows of outrageous fortune when you're apt to look and feel a little ridiculous.

"Have you seen wolves?" I asked.

Virgie became reflective, all four legs of his chair returning to the linoleum with a soft thud.

"I expect they've seen me more often than I've seen them."

"Isn't that unnerving?"

"The forest is full of eyes that you yourself never see. You come and you go, and there's a record of it. You walk and leave footprints, you stop and take a leak, you break sticks and make a fire. You're part of a community, whether you know it or not. But they do."

I turned and stared out the window. It was going on 3 o'clock in the afternoon, but the sunlight streamed from the sky as brightly, as intensely, as if it was a summer's day. The snow and ice beamed the sun back from the ground. Light was everywhere, but it was light without

heat. Beyond the walls of Virgie's small house, it was brilliantly cold. I looked at the bank of snow at the edge of the driveway, the tidy woodpile near the door, and at the quiet street. In a couple hours' time, cars would be steadily rolling down the road for what passed as rush hour in Goose Bay, but then the traffic would become sporadic once again. Beyond the road was the river and beyond the river were the forest-covered mountains. The river, the forest, the mountains, all locked in winter stillness. And within that stillness, wolves.

I walked home that afternoon thinking about the dream I'd had of my father. When he pointed to the mountains in the midst of all that snow and wind, was it a warning? Was it a promise? That's the beauty of dreams: entrenched in ambiguity, they teach us that life is not black and white, that any attempts at certainty are provisional at best. A gesture can have two completely opposed meanings, and yet neither meaning cancels the other out. A warning and a promise.

That said, after supper I tried to achieve a degree of certainty with Claire. A little over a week had passed since our early morning discussion. As we cleaned up, I said, "You didn't really mean that about finding someone else."

I'd intended to make a statement, but it was really a question without a question mark. I was drying the dishes, so I could walk away from her, turn my back on her, ostensibly to put the plates and silverware into their cupboards and drawers. I didn't want her to see the worry – the fear – in my eyes.

"I'm lonely," she said. "Our lives here are grinding to a halt. We're stuck."

With the dishtowel in hand, I rubbed the plate till it shone.

"We get up in the morning, eat breakfast, and I go off to work. I don't know what you do—and sometimes I don't think you know what you do either. Then we come back home, eat supper, and read until it's time to go to bed. What happened to the way we were?"

Yes, indeed, I thought, what happened to the way we were?

In life a kind of erosion occurs in which you lose yourself, or lose something of yourself, day by day, until one night you suddenly realize that what you once valued has gone missing, in the same way that anything can go missing—a coin, a pen, a comb. Every so often, I won't be able to recall where I've placed the Swiss army knife that my Dad gave me all those years ago: is it still in my parka, did I put it in the drawer of my nightstand, is it on the kitchen table when I used it to open up an envelope? I'll jump up from where ever I am – even if I'm in bed and on the verge of falling asleep – in order to search my pockets, drawers, tabletops, until I find my knife, all in a state of near-panic. There are times when you lose something of yourself and you desperately ransack all the coats in all the closets, all the drawers in all the dressers. Sometimes you get it back, other times you don't. Then you realize it's gone for good, then you face a difficult reckoning.

Claire and I used to be happy. When she would visit me in St. John's, we would bundle up in tweed coats, dressed like British academics from the 1950s, as if we'd stepped from the pages of *Lucky Jim*. We would go down to George Street to drink and dance until we could barely stand upright. We would walk uphill in the wee hours of the morning, heading back to my place, a rented room in a rickety old saltbox home, where we would peel off the damp tweed coats and fall into each others' arms as though pulled together by gravity itself. Where did those two people go? It was not so long ago either—less than a year. I did not think it could happen so quickly.

"Finding someone else isn't going to make things better. All we have here is each other," I said.

"Then we have to act like we have each other."

*

The wolf sightings came to an end after a couple weeks. No more pictures on Facebook, no more warnings on the CBC. The next time I walked the trail, there were no wolf tracks. Presumably old Lobo had re-crossed the frozen river and returned to the wilderness from whence he came.

Then early one evening, in the gloaming, as I was driving along Hamilton River Road, on my way to gas up the car and buy some groceries at the Co-op, I saw something standing very still, in the blue margin between the strip of black road and the line of black trees. I saw it only for the briefest moment as I sped past, but I knew what it was as soon as I saw it. Not a dog, not a coyote. Its body was too heavy-set and regal to be anything else. In that moment I was alone on the road, there were no other cars. Alone with the wolf, watching me appear, watching me recede. Once I'd gone, it would have everything to itself again. Before the next car came along, I presumed it would turn back, glide into the trees and return to a darkness that is not bleak, a silence that is not empty. I drove on, marvelling at what I'd seen.

A few minutes later I stopped at a gas station to fill up the car. I was in something like a daze as I stood there holding the gas pump in the falling snow. They were soft, slow-churning flakes, shook free from the dim, distant firmament, falling through the yellow neon light and into

the black wilderness beyond. Falling on me on the tarmac and on the wolf in the forest, equally—a kind of cold communion.

In the Co-op I walked down the aisles of tinned and plastic-wrapped food, thinking of my conversation with Claire. All we have here is each other.

Then we have to act like it.

I recall reading that despite our romantic associations with the lone wolf, a solitary wolf is an animal in peril. Without a pack, a mate, a home, it must wander on its own to fend for itself, a life that will be fierce, cold, and hungry.

I made my purchases and drove straight home.

That night Claire and I made love, as if for the first time.

Fragments of a Dissertation: *Through Trackless Labrador*

H. Hesketh Prichard distinguishes himself from the other explorers with his love of danger, and he styles himself as a fierce hunter, an entirely gentlemanly predator. Prichard's *Through Trackless Labrador*, published in 1911, is an account of his adventure through Labrador's interior during the summer of 1910. Instead of leaving from North West River and travelling northwards up to Ungava, Prichard travelled through a different portion of the region, beginning on the northern coast and then into the interior. A British explorer and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, H. Hesketh Prichard's stated aim for his travels into Labrador's interior was to fill in blank spaces on the map of Labrador: "it seemed to us a pity that such a *terra incognita* should continue to exist under the British flag" (Prichard 28). But the overall tone of his travel is, to my mind, closer to what we would today call ecotourism rather than exploration. Certainly he did help to map that so-called *terra incognita*; however, his real enthusiasm seems to have been for adventure—the desire to travel to remote, difficult places, and experience them because they are remote and difficult. While this is true of all the other explorers who travelled through the region (Leonidas Hubbard, Mina Benson Hubbard, Dillon Wallace), with Hesketh Prichard – also with William Cabot – there is a subtle shift in emphasis away from exploration (with its ostensible scientific and imperial aims) towards experience (with its aesthetic and psychological appeal).

As with all of Labrador's explorers, Prichard was a complex person with a varied career. Before and after his time in Labrador, he enjoyed popularity as a writer, authoring the Flaxman Low occult detective stories. During the First World War, he distinguished himself as a sniper and taught sniping techniques in the British army. In *Through Trackless Labrador*, he presents

himself as stoic and macho, albeit in an Edwardian fashion. And yet he is curiously reliant on his mother at all times. She traveled with him to Labrador (though she did not go on the actual expedition into the interior), and she co-authored many of his books (though his Labrador book is not one of them). In "To Introduce Mr. Hesketh Prichard," a profile piece featured in the July,1903 issue of *Pearson's Magazine*, we find this curious confession: "'I owe everything ,' he says, 'to my mother. She has helped me with all that I have written, and without her I should probably have written nothing.'" Writing rather dryly and yet meaningfully, the profile's uncredited author comments: "This collaboration of mother and son is said to be an almost unique literary partnership."

Prichard's reliance on his mother is a compelling detail. Just as Leonidas Hubbard's journey was in part motivated by a desire to both escape from and prove himself to his father, I can't help but wonder if Hesketh Prichard's journey was in part motivated by a desire to distance himself from his mother. A similar statement could be made about Mina Benson Hubbard: during her Labradorian expedition, she sought both to embrace her husband's memory and to escape that grief and begin a new life. While my studies of these explorers focus almost entirely on their relationship with Labrador's wilderness, it would be worth further investigating their relationships with home, domesticity, marriage, family. In short, why do explorers travel "trackless" lands? The answer might be, in part, to embrace what is (for them) new, unknown, adventures. It might, just as well, be an escape, a way of leaving something or someone behind. Perhaps this is why Prichard focusses so heavily on hunting and heroics; he feels the need to prove himself a man, away from the constraints of domesticity and family. In doing so, he identifies with wildness, especially with wild animals.

*

In the preface of *Through Trackless Labrador*, Prichard introduces Labrador to his readers as a particularly savage place: "The life of the Labrador is entirely predatory" (xi). He writes that, "Its inhabitants live by the chase. The bears, the caribou, the birds, the seals, the salmon, the trout, and the cod form the capital of the country, and the problem of existence is solved by successful destruction" (xi). This pseudo-Darwinian tone presents life in the region as a bitter struggle that hinges upon the death of other creatures. And yet not too many pages later, Prichard ameliorates this red-in-tooth-and-claw statement by presenting the Mission House in Hopedale like a charming English cottage transplanted to the Labrador coastline:

> In front of the Mission House, inside the white palisade, the garden beds were bright with hardy flowers, mostly pansies, and from the greenhouse, where roses were blooming, they cut lettuce that tasted doubly delicious after our long voyage [across the Atlantic]. Later in the season lettuce matures in the open, while rhubarb grows not only sturdily but in luxuriance. There is some wood still left about the station, and the mission gardens away up the hillside held brilliant Iceland poppies and splendid pansies. In a rockery were some delicate native ferns, and close by a healthy plant of edelweiss. The colouring of all the flowers, wild as well as cultured, is extraordinarily vivid, more especially the lilacs and blues. The Arctic primula is something to remember, with its fairy stalk carrying three tiny blossoms of an intense and exquisite mauve, while above, on the dark overhanging mountain, snow still lingered in long streak and heavy patches. (20)

This key phrase in this picturesque description is "wild as well as cultured." Here Prichard shows us the two – the natural and the cultured, the wild ferns and the cultivated roses – existing side by side in harmony. By extension, we see how his appreciation of the "entirely predatory" Labrador can exist side by side with his delight in the pansies, lilacs, and edelweiss.

Even when the scenery he describes lacks overt pastoral signifiers (i.e., gardens with flowers), Prichard's enthusiasm can still shine past an otherwise grim-looking landscape. He reveals that Labrador is, for him, more than just one thing. No matter how bleak the landscape might appear, his aesthetic pleasure in looking at it dominates his description. For example, here is his description of the Labrador coastline, a coast which many others have found to be the epitome of desolation:

> The greater part of the coast line and the islands struck us as being curiously bare and bald, ice-worn, round-headed masses of rock without a sign of vegetation. Occasionally a shelving hollow would hold its fill of dwarf spruce and willow, and now and then an incurving mountain flank shows a patch of deep green velvet lichen, but all without exception were bare of seaweed. There the cliffs do not stand "weed-mocassined in the sea," for the Polar current with its burden of ice has scoured them bone-bare, and almost to the colour of bone. At the same time we saw in the water quantities of kelp floating by and immense flags of ribbon weed, which had been torn from northern sea-gardens by passing bergs.
>
> All day the mainland glowered beetling and sombre to the west. Geologists say that these mighty crags and mountain chains have stood much as they now stand from the remotest antiquity. Their black slopes and summits are formed of the Basement Complex, the bedrock of the world. The realisation what this conveys is beyond the

> grasp of thought, only some faint shadow can cross the imagination of age-long winds and tempests, of vast glaciers crushing through these bleak valleys to the sea, of blackness and of unnumbered blind whirling nights of snow. (22-23)

I quote the preceding paragraphs at length because they illustrate the way that Prichard's pastoral imagination works on the Labrador wilderness (in this case, the "beetling and sombre" sight of the coastline). Certainly he finds it as desolate as others have before him. The rocky coast is "bare and bald," and the cliffs are "the colour of bone." Their very presence, dating back to "the remotest antiquity," is "beyond the grasp of thought." But this is largely just a rhetorical flourish on Prichard's part: his gesture towards the sublime – "of unnumbered blind whirling nights of snow" – quietly indicates that this landscape can indeed be grasped by thought, in particular his own Romantic imagination. Moreover, there are pastoral touches here and there that ameliorate the sense of desolation: the lichen, for example, is "of deep green velvet" and the floating ribbon weed are "sea-gardens." Worth noting as well is his careful use of alliteration throughout the passage, which points towards his aesthetic enthusiasm for what he sees.

An aesthetic appreciation for a landscape often implies distance from that landscape. One *sees* land as *landscape*—that is, as picturesque, like a picture. Generally speaking, looking at landscape often precludes participation on the land. The perspective of a tourist who gazes at a rural region as landscape contrasts with the farmer whose gaze will go beyond aesthetics to include ploughing, planting, harvesting. However, even when Prichard is participating in the land by making his way on foot and by canoe through the wilderness, his aesthetic enthusiasm remains intact (this is markedly different from Dillon Wallace in *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*). Writing of the plateau region of Labrador, Prichard tells us,

> It is a wonderful place, this roof of the Labrador. Ridge on ridge, some of considerable height, roll away seemingly to the world's end. In the valleys and cups of the hills lie thousands of nameless lakes. The winds, during the greater part of the year, rage over it. It is sheer desolation, abysmal and chaotic. (64)

The passage appears to have contradictory elements. However, for Prichard, these ridges can be both "a wonderful place" and "abysmal and chaotic." Their wonder and chaos, though, aren't witnessed from a distanced vantage point, but are instead experienced *in situ*. As he explains later in the same passage:

> But when the clouds ride it, and the wind and rain, sleet and snow rave over it, as they do nearly all the year round, a desolation more appalling cannot be conceived. There is no shelter for him who travels it; hardly one of the glacier-driven stones is more than four feet high; every lake is whipped into wrath and thunders on its shores; the loon may cry out there in the storm, but no human ear could hear him. Lucky the man if he can find a rock beneath which to creep, and in that cold refuge shiver as he peers out and watches the elemental Spirit of the Tempest rejoicing in what seems to be the very heart of his kingdom. (64-65)

The lucky man shivering behind the rock is, of course, Prichard himself. Even aspects of that very Spirit of Tempest are dual-natured: the wind that may be at one point a chilling enemy can at another point become a friend. Prichard reminds us that "[i]t is nothing to be wet all day if you can light a great fire in the evening and dry out, but we had no chance of any such good luck" because the land was generally treeless and "fireless" (96). But then "[t]he wind was our best friend. It dried us, it banished the flies, and, perhaps, more important than all, it blew away

the mists and clouds that in still weather hang thick across the plateau, blotting out all landmarks" (96).

Labrador is dual-natured, being malign and benevolent at different turns. The wind that chills you to the bone one moment can dry your wet clothes at another moment. Yet it is hard to maintain equilibrium between the pastoral and anti-pastoral. One mode will eventually take precedence over the other. Prichard's narrative is weighted towards the grim and bleak because of what it does to Prichard and his companions as they travel through it. They uncomfortably become part of nature, part of that "predatory" life in Labrador where the margin between survival and failure is dangerously thin.

By travelling through Labrador, Prichard and his crew become part of an austere kill-to-survive economy: "Our little exploring trip from the Atlantic Coast to the George River over an unknown route may be taken as simply a phase in the predatory life, since in order to accomplish it my companions and I adopted the life of nomad hunters, carrying a bare ration and living by the chase, killing caribou and sinking the carcases in the snow-fed lakes upon the great plateau so as to secure a line of retreat" (xii). Though Prichard identifies himself with the "nomad hunter," this does not bear out in the bulk of the book. If anything, Prichard is at pains to show how he is set apart from the Indigenous hunters of Labrador, a group of people he often seems to dislike. Though he does admit that his expedition "adopted as nearly as might be the methods of the Indians," he later adjusts this definition, suggesting that his men have done generally better than "the methods of the Indian," travelling with greater efficiency (xiv). As well, Prichard's dislike of his Inuit guide (for example, Prichard's reliance on a racist nickname) goes undisguised in the text. Given this treatment, it's no surprise that once they are some distance into the journey, the guide, a man named Boaz, demands more money from his employer, likely

assuming he now had Prichard at the disadvantage. Prichard refuses to increase the man's wages. It is perhaps no surprise that Boaz abandons the expedition in its early days, leaving in the early morning hours while the others slept (46-47). Overall, Prichard's attitude towards Indigenous people is troubling. Chapter 12 of *Through Trackless Labrador* is an essay on his experiences with "The Eskimo." In this portion of the book, he reveals some admiration for the Inuit, but his tone is paternalistic. At the end of the chapter, he asks, "Is not this a race well worth preserving?" (164) This rhetorical question suggests concern for the survival of the Inuit people in Labrador, but it reveals racist condescension, inviting white people to see themselves as essentially the stewards or curators of the Inuit.

Prichard's real interest during this "phase in the predatory life" involves becoming something akin to an animal. Early on in the narrative, the men engage in a bear hunt. Prichard has shot the bear through the leg and ribs. At that moment, Porter, the guide from Newfoundland, "sprang up, hurled down his pack, and, axe in hand, ran like a berserk into the underbrush after the bear" (56). The "berserk" fit seems to last a little while for Porter. The word-choice – "berserk" – is interesting as it means "bear shirt," that is, putting on the bear fur and becoming like the bear itself, which is perhaps not such an odd thing to do when hunting a bear. This identification with the bear continues as Prichard, at a later stage of the hunt, actually ventures into the bear's home by crawling into its cave to coax the dying animal out (57). He feels empathy for the creature: watching the wounded bear, Prichard claims that he wanted to put the animal out of its misery "for it was a disgusting sensation to sit there waiting for it to die" (58). He waits two hours for the bear to expire. Watching the animal die in pain is a stark example of *et in Arcadia ego* trope, meaning that death is found in any natural space, no matter how beautiful or picturesque.

In this predatory economy, death is the main currency. The human must hunt like an animal and kill other creatures to survive. At one point, Prichard imagines that they have become "some new kind of wolf" (91). Like wolves, their efforts at hunting and killing are smart and largely successful. They often manage to kill a deer when their need for food is great (which contrasts with the Hubbard-Wallace-Elson expedition where they met with no such luck). As hunters, they find that they become part of the food chain. Their kills are quickly spotted by scavengers such as foxes and ravens and by vermin such as blowflies and mosquitoes and they must protect their "scanty" amount of meat (104). The situation with scavengers can prove dire: having placed several pounds caribou meat "in the water of the torrent" (105), a fox raids their riparian refrigerator. They discover that "a great part of it was gone, and as we had practically no flour or other provision left, the loss was a serious one" (105). In short, the back-country economy is fierce and deadly.

The barrenness of the landscape is emphasized throughout. Even the simplest comforts are missing. There are few trees, so there is no wood, and no fire. In near Biblical terms, reminiscent of the Cain's land trope, all Prichard sees is "a stony wilderness, with here and there some coarse grass growing in the marshes, dotted profusely with ponds and lakelets, but without a bush or trees of any kind to break the monotonous and dreary prospect" (65). This is a situation that the other explorers did not have as they followed rivers in the forested valleys. This creates several problems for Prichard and his companions: they have no wood for tent poles and "fire for warmth was an utter impossibility, and for the simplest cooking a problem" (65). Without wood, they are fireless—fire being one of the most basic and primitive tools. But they must make do with only "straggling growth of dwarf birch" (65). Even when they are able to

make a fire, they must still contest with the elements. One evening a fierce gale ("one might in other latitudes call it a tornado") blows their fire away entirely (108).

The men are reduced to raw nature, unavoidably becoming part of the food chain, when the mosquitoes and blackflies feast on them. In this, Prichard's expedition is not unique: all the explorers talk of the ferocity of the insects in Labrador. I too can attest to the onslaught of the bugs—they are fierce, numberless, and unrelenting. However, most other writers mention the sheer awfulness of the insects and then leave it at that. Prichard makes repeated references to their presence so that the reader will keep in mind that the bugs are an ever-present, always-bloodthirsty aspect of Labrador's back-country. He dedicates the seventh chapter to mosquitoes entirely, titling the chapter "The Kingdom of Beelzebub," the Lord of the Flies. He explains the forcefulness of their bites, that nothing they did seemed to ease their attack, describing how he and his companions were "covered with crawling masses" (84). He writes, "As we walked along, I remember that we agreed that no foreign army would ever invade the interior of Labrador. Indeed I do not believe that a mass of men could bear a week of it in the height of summer, the Grey Legions would conquer the bravest and best disciplined army in the world" (84). He later describes his condition as "[n]early demented" (85).

A question worth posing, why does Prichard's narrative accentuate a kind of Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest? Though he suffered some pain and deprivation on his journey, Prichard's experience was nowhere near as grim as the Hubbard-Wallace-Elson expedition seven years earlier. To answer my question, I would say that by emphasizing the "predatory" aspects, Prichard can quietly esteem his own bravery in facing extreme conditions. The worse the conditions, the greater the man who overcame them. This is a rhetorical strategy, allowing Prichard to congratulate himself. This quality of derring-do also underwrites the book's

imperialistic theme. In the later portions of the book, he returns to this theme, writing, "For this country nothing more fortunate can be imagined than that it should be thoroughly explored. At present vast tracts remain utterly unknown" (241).

Yet all the while, he fails to notice that Labrador may not be as *trackless* as he makes it out to be. In the early days of their journey, Boaz, his guide, points out sites in the landscape "of special interest" (40), places where the Inuit have history, where several men on dog sled had died, where a large herd of deer had once been killed, and a place where they haul out their komatiks during their spring deer hunt (42). Evidence of the Indigenous presence is largely glossed over by Prichard, as when he sees "cairns heaped up by the Eskimo of a far bygone day" (62). His phrase "of a far bygone day" is curious, implying that these cairns are no longer used by Inuit. In a deft move he erases their presence on the land. Later he comes to a deserted "Indian camp" (109), further evidence that the land he is travelling through is not exactly a blank slate.

Why does Prichard disregard the obvious evidence that Labrador is neither trackless nor a blank slate? To push at the *tabula rasa* metaphor: a blank slate allows you to write something new, to tell a story about yourself, to create a new character for yourself, even if it means erasing entire histories, entire cultures. In this story, the author is fully autonomous, fully in charge of his own agency (perhaps because he is away from the one to whom he owes everything), and can now enjoy a degree of freedom and wildness.

The Universe into a Ball

There were two items on my to-do list that week.

The first was straight-forward enough. Drive to Labrador City and Wabush with Claire, stopping in at Churchill Falls on the way, then scooting over the Quebec border to Fermont.

The second was less well mapped-out: ask Claire to marry me.

The college was having its Reading Week break. Since no one actually reads during those five days, Claire took some time off from the library. We'd start the trip on Thursday, heading to Churchill Falls to take a tour of their hydroelectric monstrosity. On Friday morning we'd drive to Lab City, spending all of Friday and Saturday there before driving back on Sunday in what would be one long haul of at least eight hours.

On Wednesday night I packed our car, a Nissan Rogue, with all our winter survival gear: a flashlight, toilet paper, a camp stove, tea lights, matches, chocolate bars, a hatchet, snowshoes, sleeping bags—everything and anything that we might possibly need should we have a breakdown and be forced to spend the night at the side of the wintry road. This might seem excessive, but have a quick look at a map of the area. From Happy Valley Goose Bay to Churchill Falls it's nearly 300 kilometres, and from Churchill Falls to Lab City it's close to 250 kilometres. In between these disparate points there are no other towns, no gas stations, no CAA roadside assistance. It's just yourself and whatever self-reliance you can muster.

While I could congratulate myself on my readiness for Labrador's winter road conditions, I was admittedly underprepared for the marriage proposal.

Certain kinds of men make their proposal a Very Momentous Occasion, marshalling brass bands, hiring planes to fly the proposal as a flapping banner across the blue sky, or spelling the beloved's name in flaming letters across a sandy shoreline at midnight. Someone I'd heard of – one of those friend-of-a-friend stories – actually hid the engagement ring in a Kinder Egg which he gave to his lover during a mountaintop picnic just before he popped the question. Supposedly he had a hell of a time getting the halved egg to stick back together. But I had no such plan. There was no scene set in my mind as to how it ought to go. I didn't even have a ring. All I had was a belief that the time had come. I figured I would just play it by ear.

That's a funny phrase, isn't it? "Play it by ear." We use it to mean that we'll take things as they come, doing what we need to do when the situation calls for it. But play-it-by-ear also presupposes talent and ability. Like jazz musicians who can play those old standards by ear, intuitively knowing and owning the song as they hammer it out at the keyboard or blow it through a horn. Then they begin to improvise, going to places within the song that no one knew were there – thoughts, colours, feelings, which no one knew were buried there in that old Broadway chestnut – at least not until they played it and transformed it. They find opportunities and possibilities, depths of emotion and purpose, powerful surges of emotion and purpose. Prufrock-like, I was afraid I might not be able to summon all that up by ear.

With that tucked away, I blithely hit the road with Claire by my side that Thursday morning. The sun burned bright but cold in a big, blue winter sky.

While all Canadians are used to sitting in their cars for long drives, northern driving – real northern driving – is a different experience altogether. Back in the heady days of childhood summer, every July my family packed up the station wagon with beach blankets, bathing suits, and Styrofoam coolers, strapped the canoe to the roof racks, and drove to our rented cabin on

Elizabeth Bay on Manitoulin Island. It was a six hour drive. Back then, it was the longest, hottest, dullest day of the year, and often I felt sick at the end of the trip. And while we travelled through some fairly wild places, with plenty of rocks and trees / trees and rocks on either side of the car for long stretches, we also passed by or through numerous communities, like Parry Sound, Pointe au Baril, Key River, Espanola, Little Current, and Gore Bay. With truly northern driving – the kind you find in Labrador – there's simply nothing. Just the road, just the wilderness. But can the wilderness stretching away from the car be described as simply nothing? Whether you describe it as something or as nothing, it is what it is: a ribbon of road – sometimes paved, often not – halving the seemingly endless forest. And if it's a long trip across Labrador by car, imagine doing the trip by canoe in summer, surrounded by a tornado of mosquitoes, or in winter by dogsled and snowshoe, caught in the middle of the killing cold.

As we began to drive, I thought about popping the question right away. I fantasized that, if she said yes, this trip would be a celebration, a prenuptial honeymoon. Then doubt took hold and I thought, What if she said no? Would I be able to manage hours in the car alone with the woman who'd just spurned me? It was easier to not know and feel hopeful. For the first hour of the trip we talked about all the things you talk about at the start of a long journey: did you lock the door? Who turned down the heat? I didn't, did you? Then we lapsed into silence. The radio signal had died out shortly after leaving Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Though we'd brought CDs, we didn't bother playing them. It was hard to hear the stereo over the rumble of the wheels on the stony highway. The landscape was at first pretty – snowy hills of wintry birch and aspen trees – but in time our minds became numbed to the passing scenes outside the car.

*

We arrived in Churchill Falls in the early afternoon and checked into our room at the Black Spruce Lodge, which, once upon a time, must have been a quaint spot. The sort of place where hunters and fisherman would have stayed, spending their evenings drinking rye and watching the fire or just watching TV. The way we found it, it had become rather threadbare, faded, blackened, though it was comfortable enough. From the Black Spruce, we went to the hydroelectric station to go on our tour. Although the generating station is a marvel, it can also be called one of the worst things to happen to Labrador, altering its ancient topography and ancient ways of life. What did Labrador get in exchange? The inner workings of the generating station reminded me of the evil underground lairs you find in James Bond movies, where the villain sits in a swivel chair surrounded by buttons, dials, gauges, gangways, enormous turbines, and glaring lights.

Afterwards we ate dinner in a dingy restaurant and walked around the town in the fading light. Churchill Falls is a company town in which everyone who lives there works for the hydroelectric company or does work that serves the company's employees, like Canada Post clerks or the waitresses at the restaurant. The town was built without a shred of imagination, without the slightest sense of aesthetics. In spite of that, I couldn't help but feel charmed by its insistent ticky-tacky sameness—call it postwar middle-class pastoral. In the middle of Labrador, it was so far removed from the tidy southern neighbourhoods of Ontario, of New York, that it suggested *garrison* rather than *suburban*.

"How would you like to live here?" I asked Claire.

"I think I'd slit my wrists," she said.

We walked back to the Black Spruce and watched TV while passing a flask of Screech Rum between us.

The next morning we ate a hasty breakfast and returned to the road. On our way out of town, heading west, we stopped in at Bowdoin Canyon to see what was left of Grand Falls. Once comparable to Niagara Falls, Grand Falls' sheer water power had been siphoned off decades earlier by the Churchill Falls generating station. We left the car in a small gravel parking lot and wandered down a snowy path through the woods till we came to the lookout and saw two great rock walls leading to a seemingly limitless wilderness. The sound of the water echoed in the treetops overhead, but all that was left of Grand Falls was a stream of water falling down into an abyss.

We stared into the abyss until we felt that it was staring back at us. Then we trudged through the snow to the car and drove away.

*

We drove all morning, watching the spindly trees and the stunted, raw-looking landscape scroll past the car. As the morning deepened and the sun strengthened, everything gleamed with sunshine and snow. You could easily go snowblind in a place like this—all that bright light, all that shining snow.

It was past lunchtime when we finally got to Labrador City. We found our way to the shopping complex, which is, in a manner of speaking, the city's downtown. We went straight for the Tim Hortons, for some much-needed coffee and sandwiches. Then after studying the map for a while, turning it this way and that, trying to make sense of where to go, we finally found our

way to the bed and breakfast where we'd reserved a room for two nights. The B & B lady was friendly and cheerful, but luckily neither curious nor overly chatty. She showed us our room and gave us a pile of fresh towels and then departed, leaving us to our own devices. Claire and I lay on the double bed, watching the dust motes slowly spin in the sunshine pouring in through the window. Despite the coffee, we still felt worn out from the drive. Our hands touched as we lay there and I thought again of proposing, but then the thought struck me: What then? What next? What would I say or do?

Instead I said, "Do you want to go back to the plaza and go to Walmart?"

"Why not?" She answered.

We got into our car and drove back, returning to Timmy's once more for another round of coffee. Then we entered the neonlit Walmart labyrinth.

Lab City is home to Labrador's one and only Walmart. As shopping excursions go, Walmart offers a lifeless retail experience. But the allure of brand name goods at guaranteed low prices made this location a mecca, drawing people from all across the region. And indeed, we felt drawn, going up and down the aisles, clutching our coffee cups and filling our shopping cart with all the items we saw that were cheaper here than back home in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Most of all, Claire wanted bookshelves.

"Can we really fit it in?" I asked, looking at the long boxes of shelving.

"If we put down the backseat we'll have room," Claire said. "The boxes are long and flat, so we can easily pile other stuff on top of them."

"Let's buy one now and make sure it fits. If it does we can come back later and get the other one."

"There's only two here," she said. "And I want them both."

I didn't particularly want to wrestle both into the car, but I also didn't want to come back later to find that the last one had been snatched-up. Claire would have been furious with me. So I heaved the first one onto the cart (it was too long to fit in the cart), then I heaved the second on top of the first. Balancing this precarious particle-board inukshuk on the blue plastic cart, we trundled over to aisle with the Kleenex and toilet paper.

When it came time to check out, our purchases came close to five hundred dollars. I felt my credit card shudder as I swiped it in the machine.

"I'm hungry," Claire said afterwards. She was clearly happy. Having those bookshelves made her happy. And that made getting those shelves into the car much easier.

For supper, we drove over to the Grenfell Hotel in Wabush. It's strange but true, there are no towns for miles and miles, and then out of the wilderness there are suddenly three in a tight cluster: Lab City, Wabush, and Fermont. And the Grenfell Hotel in Wabush – which was once a Grenfell Mission hospital – featured a renowned all-you-can-eat buffet. At that time in Labrador, many people working lower-paid service positions were from the Philippines; not surprisingly, the restaurant was staffed mainly by young Filipino men and women. I wondered how they felt about living their lives so far from home. Claire and I often felt isolated, so how much more isolated and alienated did they feel?

At first Claire and I didn't say much; there wasn't much to say.

As we ate, I found myself looking at her. And I mean truly looking at her. Like me, she had a heaped-up plate of food, but she ate it slowly, carefully cutting each bite. She would look up every so often, gazing around the room with interest at the other patrons hunched over their tables or at the servers coming and going through the swinging kitchen door. Watching her then, I realized that this was the first time in a very long time that I had truly considered her, seeing

her simply as another person. I recognized that most of the time, when I looked at her, what I saw was usually clouded with emotion, to the extent that I never saw the person before me but instead saw only what she called forth in me at that moment: hope, fear, desire, anxiety. Across the table from me, she ate meticulously. I saw how small her hands were as she held the knife and fork. I saw how small she was—and how delicate. Her eyes glanced around, not noticing me, and I couldn't guess at what she was thinking. I knew then, for sure, without a doubt, that I loved her, loving her smallness, her delicacy, the meticulous care with which she went about her daily life.

"I love you," I said. I hadn't said that in such a long time that it must have come to her as wholly unexpected, without any context.

She didn't look up at me, at least not at first. I turned my head toward the window to see frozen Wabush in the dark-blue winter twilight.

When I turned back she had fixed her gaze on me. I still couldn't guess what she was thinking.

"It's been awhile, hasn't it?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "It has."

*

The next day we drove to Fermont to buy some cheap Quebec booze. Alcohol is particularly expensive in Newfoundland and Labrador. A bottle of wine that would retail for about ten dollars in Ontario might sell for about fifteen on The Rock and in The Big Land. Like Ontario, Quebec prices are cheaper – *vive le Quebec!* – so people often venture over the border to stock

up. As a result, there was a rumour that the RCMP carefully patrol the stretch of road between Fermont and Lab City and were said to pull people over and search their vehicles in order to prevent rum running between the two provinces.

Like Lab City, Fermont – the iron mountain – is a mining community. The town itself is mainly one big V-shaped complex, which houses all the mine's employees, all the stores (including the liquor store), a swimming pool, a hotel, the post office, and a strip club—one of life's essentials in the lonely north. An entire town under one chevron-shaped roof. The place was little more than a shopping plaza from the 1970s, complete with fluorescent lights, plastic chairs, and brassy fixtures. When first built, it was no doubt modern, fashionable, even a little futuristic – an experiment in terra-forming a hostile environment – but now it appeared as outmoded and outdated. A scene from a distant decade and yet without the warmth of nostalgia.

The liquor store didn't disappoint. We loaded up a couple cardboard boxes with wine, whiskey, and rum, and drove fearfully back across the border. We returned to Walmart to buy more stuff and then ate supper at McDonald's.

While watching streaming rivers of children run between the tables, I asked, "Do you want to have kids?"

"Of course," she said.

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Soon?"

"Of course soon. I'm 35 years old."

"How many kids would you like to have?"

"I don't know," she said. I could tell she was becoming annoyed with this flurry of questions.

"One might be enough," she said as a toddler waddled past us with a fistful of french fries and a finger up his nose.

"Should we get out of here?" I asked. I'd suddenly noticed how loud the place had become. A birthday party was going full-tilt and the place was crawling with children, laughing and crying. Parents were standing around in clusters talking to each other loudly so as to be heard over their laughing, crying offspring. The noise had set me on edge.

"Yes, let's," she said.

The parking lot was the epitome of serenity in comparison to the raucous sounds inside the glowing restaurant. Darkness was rising from one corner of the clear sky while the sun set in another. The air had sharpened. The temperature was dropping. Night would soon settle and Labrador would feel as hospitable as the surface of the moon.

"We can go back to the B & B and drink scotch," I offered.

"Sounds like a plan," she said.

As we drove, I took a risk.

"We could get married and have a kid," I said.

The car's heater droned as it pumped warm air around us. The streetlights went by slowly, one at a time.

"Yes, we could," she said. And that was all.

At our B & B I spent about fifteen minutes unloading and repacking the car, carrying inside everything that I thought might freeze, which included our boxes of Quebec booze. Once in our room, I opened the scotch – a lowly bottle of William Grant and Sons – and poured a

couple ounces into a glass on the nightstand. I drank it slowly. I poured another and drank it carefully as well. I poured yet another and the evening went on like that till I fell asleep in my clothes. Claire sat up in bed watching a movie on her computer. I don't know if she had a drink at all.

*

The next day, on our homeward trip, there came a point – somewhere in between Lab City and Churchill Falls – when I felt a sudden change in the car, as though it were slumping. Then in the rearview mirror, I saw black rubber spewing from the car's back corner. With a sinking feeling, I steered the hobbling car to the side of the road and both Claire and I got out to have a look. The rear driver's side tire had shredded and we were stuck.

Somewhere inside me – in that place where all the fears and frustrations get bundled into fire hazards – I began to burn. Seeing red, I kicked at the car's mutilated rear tire with impotent rage.

When I looked up, Claire was standing on the other side with her arms folded.

"Enough?" She asked.

I felt humiliated and set to work immediately. We got the plastic tarp out of the backseat and spread it out on the snowy ground. Luckily, the ground was fairly level and there wasn't much of a wind to make the tarp misbehave. We began emptying the trunk of everything that we'd bought at Walmart and set it down on the bright blue plastic sheet: the bookshelves, the bags of almonds, the packages of socks and t-shirts, the bundles of toilet paper, the bottles of dish detergent, and the cans of coffee. Once the trunk was empty – an undertaking in itself – I

pulled out the tire iron, the jack, and the slender spare tire. I got down on my hands and knees to look under the car.

"Do you have the owner's manual?"

Claire pulled it out of the glove compartment and we began examining the pages on how to change a tire.

"There's supposed to be a notch under the car where the jack should go," I said. We got down on our hands and knees, but neither of us could locate it.

"Is that it?" Claire asked, pointing into the car's shadowy nether regions.

"I don't know."

We heard the sound of an engine and a new Ford pickup truck pulled to the side of the road behind us. A large Innu man got out and approached. He was in his late 30s and wore sneakers and a hooded sweatshirt.

"You OK?"

"Just a flat tire. We're trying to get the jack in under the car," I said.

Without a word, he knelt down beside us and stared into the darkness with us.

"We're trying to figure out where the jack goes," Claire said. "There should be a kind of notch. Do you see it?"

The man looked for a moment, then shook his head. "No, not really," he said.

"Do you think this might be it?" I said, pointing.

"I don't know."

The three of us crouched by the car looking under it for some clue, some sign, that was not forthcoming. Then we stood up together, brushed the muddy snow from our pants and looked around at nothing in particular.

"Do you want some tea?" Claire asked to break the awkward silence. The B & B lady had been kind enough to give us some tea bags and let us fill up our thermosbottle with boiling water before we left. Claire retrieved the big Stanley thermos from the car's backseat.

"Do you have a cup?" She asked the Innu man.

He nodded and got a paper Tim Hortons cup from the cab of his truck. He poured some cold coffee into the snow and then held it out to Claire who filled it with hot tea.

I got our travel mugs from the car and soon we were all drinking tea by the snowy roadside.

"Do you want a doughnut?" He asked.

He went back to the truck and returned with a flat of Tim Hortons doughnuts.

"Help yourself," he said.

The combination of tea and doughnuts made the predicament more bearable. Nothing quite reconciles the mind to a spot of trouble like a splash of strong tea and a hunk of sweet fried bread.

As we ate our apple fritters, we watched the grey jays flit around the spindly shrubs nearby and we chatted a bit. The man didn't say much, but he seemed to enjoy passing the time with us. Like us, he had been shopping in Lab City. The bed of his truck was filled with stuff that he'd covered over with a couple canvas tarps and held down with a length of yellow rope. He was on his way back to Sheshatshiu.

"It's a long way to go to shop at Walmart," I joked. He didn't say anything and I felt sheepish when it occurred to me that he'd probably spent most of his life in Sheshatshiu, so the nearest Walmart had always been about an eight hour drive away. That's remarkably different from, say, my old hometown of Midland in southern Ontario, where the nearest Walmart was a

five minute drive from my mother's house, and we scorned it as an emblem of American imperialism with its robber-baron ethics and poorly paid workers.

We drank our last mouthfuls of tea and then the man said, "Should we try the jack again?"

"Let's try," Claire said.

We crouched down once more. This time we reached a consensus as to where the jack should go and soon had the car hoisted up. Getting the tire off proved tricky. At first the lug nuts wouldn't budge. But in the wake of a long string of swear words, it was soon lying in the snow like a huge, dead crow. I got the spare tire on and within a few short minutes the car was level with the ground again.

"I guess you'll be OK, then?" He asked.

Since Churchill Falls was only a couple hours away, we assured him we'd be fine. He climbed into his truck and resumed the drive back to Sheshatshiu. Shortly after, we were on the road again ourselves.

"The manual says to take it slow," Claire told me. "Don't go over eighty clicks."

"After travelling at one-twenty, eighty will feel like a snail's pace," I said. "We'll get acquainted with every tree along this road."

But I didn't feel chagrined in the least. There was a chance we could get the tire replaced in Churchill Falls. If not, I figured the spare would probably hold out till we reached HV-GB. Things would work out. With that knowledge, suddenly I felt good, I felt cheerful—I felt better than I'd felt for a long time. I turned to Claire and looked at her. She was staring out her window, watching the rocky countryside.

"Why don't we get married?" I asked. Then added, "I mean it."

She turned around.

"Are you asking me?"

"Yes."

"Then ask. Really ask."

"Okay, then. Will you marry me?"

"I won't say yes, but I won't say no."

"Then say it."

"Not yes, not yet. But not no either."

"Let's wait and see?"

"Let's wait and see."

I wasn't sad or sorry about Claire's hesitant answer. It was the best I could have hoped for. The answer I received was the answer I deserved. I felt sure that if things improved between us, the answer would improve as well.

We drove on. It was calm and quiet in the car. Labrador was all around us. The Big Land on a mild winter's day under a broad, grey-domed, snow-promising sky. But I wasn't worried about the weather, I wasn't worried about the road, I wasn't worried about Claire or about myself for that matter. I wasn't thinking about the past; I wasn't concerned for the future. There was, for once, no fear.

Fragments of a Dissertation: *In Northern Labrador*

Of all the Labrador explorers I have looked at so far, William Cabot is at once the most interesting and the dullest. Interesting because he returned to Labrador time and again, one summer after another, revealing the greatest dedication to the region; dull because his journeys in "the Big Land" are largely uneventful, without much in the way of drama or tension. Cabot can be frustrating to read because every so often something noteworthy does seem to be at-hand, but his lack of talent as a story-teller renders him very nearly incapable of communicating those moments in a memorable fashion. As a result, his two books, *In Northern Labrador* (1912) and *Labrador* (1920), make for a rather monochromatic reading experience. Overall, his legacy reveals that he is an entirely capable, sober-minded, and resourceful woodsman, one who made it in and out of Labrador's wilderness region year in-year out without serious incident.

That said, Cabot's career in Labrador might have taken a very different turn. In the summer of 1903, he travelled up the Labrador coast on the same ship with Leonidas Hubbard, Dillon Wallace, and George Elson. Hubbard's wife, Mina Benson Hubbard, was on-board as well. Hubbard-Wallace-Elson were en route to North West River to begin what would be their fated journey into the heart of Labrador. Recognizing that Cabot was an experienced wilderness traveler, Hubbard asked him to join the expedition. Cabot declined. Had he agreed to accompany them, the expedition might have had a very different outcome; on the other hand, had he agreed to join their crew, he might have found his career at an untimely end. Over a hundred years later, such possibilities are speculation.

Among the explorers I've examined, Cabot offers unique perspective on Labrador's wilderness. He stands apart from the others. For one, he does not seem to have any ambition as an explorer. The map he made of his travels, he claims, is "rather a sketch" (*In Northern Labrador vi*). He does not share Dillon Wallace's gothic tendencies, nor does he share Mina Benson Hubbard's picturesque tendencies. Unlike Hesketh Prichard, Cabot does not appear to be interested in portraying himself as a wilderness hero. Cabot's position, which manifests as a strong yet subtle current in his books, is a philosophical position rather than an aesthetic one: page after page, he quietly argues that human and non-human nature are deeply intermingled. His is an ecological vision, focussing on the relationships between the human and non-human and between different species. Placing no particular romantic emphasis on wilderness, Cabot offers a sophisticated perspective which makes his work well-worth closer scrutiny.

For my purposes here, I'll be examining *In Northern Labrador*, largely for biographical reasons. Since *In Northern Labrador* was written shortly after his travels in Labrador, Cabot's memories would have been sharper and his feelings keener. The second book, *Labrador*, is largely just an expansion of his first. That said, on the subject of *feelings*, there is very little in either book that suggests he has an inner life. Stephen Loring, however, has noted that there is a noticeable difference between Cabot's published accounts and the journals he kept while on the trail. While there are a few "passionate" entries in the journals, the published accounts are carefully pruned (Loring *O Darkly Bright* 8). Loring explains, "It is as though in Labrador, away from proper Victorian Boston society, a man might reveal himself for what he was" (*O Darkly Bright* 8) Once back in staid Boston, writing what would become the published books, these "passionate" moments, which include disappointment and discouragement, are omitted (*O Darkly Bright* 8). For example, on his 1910 trip, Cabot's party loses a cache of food and

equipment that had been burned by presumably Innu hunters who then erected a bear's skull suspended from a pole over the site. Although he would claim that the trip was relatively successful in his published book, Cabot's journals reveal his more "tumultuous" feelings, in which he felt this was "a crushing and unexpected rebuttal from the people he had worked so hard to befriend" (Loring *O Darkly Bright* 8-9). *In Northern Labrador* does not describe the incident at all. The message of the burnt cache had a lasting effect on Cabot, for he never returned to northern Labrador (Loring *O Darkly Bright* 9).

Cabot's career does not suggest any particular affinity for wilderness. His life's work was largely dedicated to the urban and technological. Born in 1858, he came from a family of wealthy bankers (Loring "William Brooks Cabot" 168). For most of his life, he lived in the Boston area and a made a fortune as an engineer designing the bridges across the Charles River, the Catskills aqueduct that provided water to New York City, and the subway at Times Square (Dillon). However, even in childhood, Cabot revealed a love for the great outdoors (Loring "William Brooks Cabot" 168). Like other explorers, such as Leonidas Hubbard, his desire for wilderness "pulled his imagination north towards Canada" (Loring "William Brooks Cabot" 168). While in northern Quebec in 1899, he travelled with John Bastian, an Indigenous guide who had accompanied A.P. Low on Lowe's cross-Labrador treks for the Geological Survey of Canada. Bastian told Cabot about Labrador, its terrain, its caribou, and of the Innu people: "a shadowy, little known group of Indians [who] still lived beyond the ken of European eyes" (Loring "William Brooks Cabot" 168; Cabot *Northern* 11). These conversations with Bastian marked Cabot's "beginning in the Indian North" (Cabot *Northern* 11).

Cabot's excursions in the so-called "Indian North" were considerable. He made a numerous trips to Labrador and Quebec from 1899-1924. Stephen Loring summarizes these journeys, which make for an impressive CV:

> With the avowed goal of learning the language and the way of life of the region's small bands of Indian hunters, he spent eight summers (1903-1910) in northern Labrador among the Naskapi (or, as they prefer to be called today, the Innu), five summers (1913, 1915-1917, 1920) along the Quebec North Shore with Indians who traded out of the St. Augustin post, three summers (1921, 1923,1924) with Indian families who traded at Northwest River in Hamilton Inlet, and winter cross-country trips in the Chamouchouane-Mistassini region in 1899, 1902, 1905, 1909, 1910, and 1913. (Loring "William Brooks Cabot" 168).

The summertime trips from 1903-1910 form the basis of *In Northern Labrador* and *Labrador*. While he may have had the "avowed goal" of learning more about the Innu (thus a kind of amateur anthropologist), in his two published accounts Cabot reveals himself to be something of an early ecotourist or a kind of wilderness flâneur. In short, why is he there? Because he had the leisure to do so.

This propensity to wander through the remote wilderness was perplexing for the people Cabot encountered. Consistently throughout *In Northern Labrador*, Cabot recalls that the Labradorian people fail to understand why he is there in the region. Being neither a trader nor a prospector, people have doubts as to why he is roaming around, especially in the often dangerous interior. An Innu leader asks him at one point, "What are you here for?" Cabot's reply is interesting:

> I told him I was not a trader, not a hunter, and stayed in my own country most of the time; but once in a while I liked to travel, to go to a new country, to see the animals and birds and fish and trees and the people; then I went back to my own country again. (*In Northern Labrador* 102).

He then claims that the chief "seemed to understand" (102), though it's not clear whether Cabot means that the chief accepted the nature of the reply or if he understood Cabot's use of the Innu language. And it should be noted that most of Cabot's conversations with Innu people occur in Innu-aiman, which is a further testament to his unique character. He had learned enough of the language to make himself understood. To his credit, he does not pretend to be effortlessly fluent, and at times reveals that he is at a loss for words or does not have the right words. For example, in 1910, when he enters an Innu tent, he asks if this is where he will be sleeping; he is surprised by the response to his question and surmises that he must have mistakenly asked if this is where he will be getting married (*In Northern Labrador* 271-272).

Returning to Cabot's answer to the Innu leader ("I liked to travel"), we discern that Cabot, like a modern-day ecotourist, repeatedly returns to Labrador solely for his own enjoyment in order to hike and canoe, to see different birds and animals. We imagine that he returns because he finds something rejuvenating and regenerating about his time in Labrador, that the summers spent in the wilderness offer a contrast to his otherwise urban life in Boston. Perhaps, like Leonidas Hubbard, he felt some concern for his white-collar masculinity (cf. Kimmel; cf. Rotundo), though Cabot was roughly a decade and a half older than Hubbard and didn't necessarily share in the younger generation's *fin de siecle* anxieties. Moreover, Cabot does not formulate a contrast between his life in Boston and his life on the trail in Labrador. He barely implies that such a formulation might exist. (Hesketh Prichard is similar to Cabot in this: unlike

the others, such as Leonidas Hubbard and Mina Benson Hubbard, who make a number of particular and pointed references to their lives beyond Labrador, neither Prichard nor Cabot have much to say about the matter.) So little mention is made of it, the reader might be tempted to imagine that such a life does not exist. We get only a slender glimpse of his other life when he mentions seeing a boy about the age of his own son, presumably with a degree of tenderness and homesickness. Beyond the statement he makes to the Innu chief, Cabot's motives remain obscure. At best, we can hypothesize that Labrador must have nevertheless held a kind of promise for him. It was a green and wild space that attracted him; a free, unconstrained space where he might "reveal himself for what he was" (Loring *O Darkly Brigh*t 8). And yet whatever was revealed, he kept it to himself or tucked it away in his expedition journals.

Perhaps it was his flâneur-like leisure, distinct from the goal-oriented explorer, which allowed him to see things that others did not. Cabot, who never struggled to survive as Hubbard-Wallace-Elson did, who never raced towards a destination as Mina Benson Hubbard did, enjoyed the freedom to take a closer look at Labrador, its flora, fauna, and the people who lived there. What he saw, which the others did not, was Labrador's ecology. When he looked around him, "to see the animals and birds and fish and trees and the people," he saw not just an animal, a bird, a fish or a tree, but he saw its existence in relationship to other creatures and in relationship to human beings. He observed an ecosystem at work and noted how human beings fit into that ecosystem. Because of this ecological vision, there is an implied ethical consideration in his writings, which is a key features of what has come to be called "post-pastoral."

The post-pastoral is "a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human" (Gifford *Pastoral* 148). In the traditional pastoral, humans are distinct from nature, and nature never intrudes on human affairs unless the effect is pleasing, like a pleasant shower of rain to

cool off an otherwise hot day. In the anti-pastoral, humans want to remain distinct from nature, but nature is fierce and intrudes into their lives, forcing them to become part of nature. Labrador's relentless, numberless mosquitoes – which Hesketh Prichard found particularly fierce – are one example of how humans can be forced into becoming part of nature. Despite the bug repellant, despite the protective clothing, despite the netting, the mosquitoes redefine Labrador's explorers, one after another, as mere links in the food chain. In the post-pastoral, however, the situation is different, the attitude is different, as human beings see their lives and their culture as part of, as integrated with, the natural world.

The main theorist of the post-pastoral is Terry Gifford, who coined the term in the 1990s. He defines the post-pastoral as writing which "seeks to heal the separations of culture and nature by asking, 'What would be the features of writing that can point towards a right way to live at home on our planet earth?'" ("Post-Pastoral" 17). While this version of pastoral might seem contemporary, born out of global environmental crises such as climate change, Gifford wants us to avoid thinking of the post-pastoral as a "temporal concept" like post-modernism ("Post-pastoral" 19) because post-pastoral writers include voices from across a wide span of time. By Gifford's estimation, these writers include Shakespeare, Blake, and Gary Snyder, to name but three.

Gifford maintains that the post-pastoral is keyed towards six issues. I'll phrase these six as "recognitions":

Recognition of awe for the natural world

Recognition that the creative-destructive qualities of the universe are in balance

Recognition that our inner human nature can be understood in relation to external nature

Recognition of culture as nature and nature as culture

Recognition that with "consciousness comes conscience"

Recognition that exploitation of the planet is related to exploitation of other people (Gifford *Pastoral* 152-165; Gifford "Post-Pastoral" 18).

All six need not be present in a text in order for it to function as a post-pastoral (Gifford *Pastoral* 150). As well, post-pastoral texts are not necessarily written or read in order to engage with issues solely and that these issues may be only implied within a text (Gifford "Post-Pastoral" 18). However, at some level, the post-pastoral will engage with one, some, or all of these "recognitions" either implicitly or explicitly. Particularly important, I think, is the ethical dimension: as human beings, we are part of nature and therefore have an ethical obligation to nature and to other human beings.

We do not need to treat Gifford's list as a kind of manifesto but more so a kind of field-guide. He offers a way of identifying those special texts that push past one-dimensional formulations of the pastoral. The post-pastoral can be understood more loosely – perhaps more productively – as an awareness of the pastoral's limitations and a resistance to the anti-pastoral's cynicism. The post-pastoral imagination conceptualizes the whole watershed, a watershed which includes human beings as integrated with the environment. For my purposes here, Cabot's *In Northern Labrador* has a distinct post-pastoral quality as it imagines the whole watershed in an ecological vision. In doing so, Cabot acknowledges the presence of human beings integrated into the environment, and he acknowledges the links between nature and culture/culture and nature. Also, Cabot's work in northern Labrador has an ethical dimension as it subtly acknowledges the link between consciousness and conscience.

Cabot's strength, what sets him apart from the other explorer-writers I've discussed, is that he sees things in ecological terms. He sees the relationship between species and the

relationship between humans and their environment. He doesn't just notice the presence of any particular creature, but immediately perceives its relationship with other creatures and with humans. This is found throughout *In Northern Labrador*, such as when he describes what he sees in a bay:

> It was calm throughout the day. Four or five grampuses circled about, but not near enough for intimacy; they are semi-solitary, for though common enough I have never seen more than five in a bay at once, and these scattered about. Most others of the whale kind seem inclined to go in families. A dense flock of "ticklers," the charming kittiwakes, came close about my shoulders. If the fishermen knock one down the others stay close about and are easy victims. They hover about the fish schools, indeed the occasional flick of a cod's tail explained their presence now. According to the fishermen it is small, oily bubbles rising from the fish that the ticklers are after. How these are produced, though they may be from the caplin [sic] and other prey seized and mangled by the cod, does not certainly appear. (83)

The passage, it must be said, is unexceptional. The prose is not remarkable - it's rather clumsy, in fact – but it reveals Cabot's qualities as an observer. He sees the grampuses, paying attention to the relationships between them, noticing how they differ from "the whale kind" which travel in family pods. He notices the behaviour of the kittiwakes and their behaviour in relation to the fishermen (or the fishermen's behaviour in relation to the kittiwakes). Moreover, he records that the birds are reportedly after "small, oily bubbles." Admittedly this is a bit confusing (why would they be after bubbles?), but it demonstrates that he's watching the birds and listening to the fishermen's lore about the birds. He notices connections between creatures; in recording the fishermen's lore, he also sees how humans have integrated themselves into the environment and

how they explain that environment to themselves. Such observations are found throughout the text. At one moment he watches the symbiotic relationship between a sparrow and a dog: a white-crowned Sparrow lands on the dog's head, eating all the mosquitoes that surrounded his face (56). He notices the relationship between capelin and cod and sea trout (84). He observes the often brutal behaviour of the shrike towards other birds: "Indians give the unpleasant name of Torturer to the shrike" (143). After shooting a wolverine, he records that the animal was full of mice (144). He notices the difference in the caribou meat in summer vs winter, the difference being the animals' change in diet (279).

The conclusion of *In Northern Labrador*, offers a wide-ranging ecological picture of the region in an appendix titled "Mice" (this appendix becomes a full-fledged chapter in the revised version published as *Labrador* in 1920). In "Mice," he proposes that the mouse is a pivotal creature: "an importance quite beyond its apparent insignificance" (287). He describes the ways that creatures rely on each other in an interdependent web (for example, the relationship between rabbits and lynx [287]). He makes the claim that mice are a key ingredient in the bioregion for the survival of birds of prey and foxes. He claims that mice were more abundant in 1904 than in 1903; as a result, hawks were more numerous as well. The impact on people was also apparent: foxes, "the most important fur game," enjoyed readily available mice and would not take the bait at the traps (288). He hypothesizes a relationship between caribou and mice, wondering if caribou "did not care to feed along with the mice" (290). Cabot goes so far as to postulate a connection between mice and fish, even mice and whales: "It would be farfetched to speculate seriously as to the influence of our multitudinous little rodent upon the fish and whales of the deep sea, even if there were any such thing as tracing these matters to their final end. A run of mice, nevertheless, may make itself felt quite beyond adjacent sea waters" (291).

Cabot's detailed-oriented eye made him an astute observer of natural history. Further to that, he was always keenly aware of how human beings were implicated in the natural cycles going on in Labrador, such as the rise and fall of the mouse population and especially the rise and fall of the caribou populations. In Gifford's words, it is "a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human" (*Pastoral* 148). In "Mice," for example, Cabot makes repeated references to how these cycles affect the humans: it affects both the settler population that earns money as trappers (288) and the Indigenous population that lives on caribou meat (290). He also acknowledges that humans, as hunters, have their impact on the ecosystem, mentioning the potentially disastrous effect of unrestricted whaling in Labradorian waters (287). Though he never quite states it outright, the message is clear enough: human beings are part of the ecosystem; we are held in nature's sway, just as the wolves and caribou are.

Throughout his writings, Cabot demonstrates the ways that nature and culture overlap in Labrador. For example, in the passage when his travelling companion, Robert Walcott, shoots a wolverine, Cabot describes "the strong-looking brute," that it weighted forty or fifty pounds, and that after skinning it "an astonishing musty smell" remained on his hands: "[t]o live it down might take weeks, I thought, but in a day or two it faded away" (144). He then describes how the wolverine may follow a line of traps for forty miles, taking the bait and whatever game has been trapped. However, his description soon drifts into the social and cultural implications of "this evil genius of the North," explaining that no other animal is so hated, being destructive yet hard to destroy. Because the wolverine raids caches of food, its scavenging can prove lethal for people relying on those caches. Cabot writes, "'We know he is possessed of an evil spirit,' Indians say, 'because he has been the death of so many persons'" (*In Northern Labrador* 144). Later Cabot admits to eating a bit of the wolverine "and found it perfectly eatable" (151), but he

notes: “[t]he Indians eat it only when starving, and ‘Carcajou-eater’ is a fighting word in some regions” (151-152). He claims that Indigenous men will not put the skin with others, but will keep it separate, or will give it to women to trade (152). These passages on the wolverine show Cabot’s sensitivity to animal’s presence in the land, looking at the wolverine from the perspective of natural history and from the perspective of culture, especially that of Innu culture.

While Cabot recognizes that human culture exists within nature, human culture often has a less-than-salubrious effect on the natural world. In this, we see the ethical element emerge in his text, and he demonstrates how consciousness must lead to conscience. He no doubt feels that the Innu culture reveals greater respect for nature, as when he watches the Innu men build a fire, placing a ring of wet sand on the moss round the fire. Cabot notes: “only white men burn their own country” (166). He expresses doubts about his fellow white men, as when he mentions the indiscriminate killing of bird life. He writes that up to three thousand schooners travel up the coast every year and “their crews, men and boys, are intimate with the habits of the creature life of the coast; little is willingly spared” (79). However, he ameliorates this comment, mentioning that “at least nothing is wasted; they use all, and betimes the ‘inexhaustible North’ replenishes somewhat the supply” (79). That said, his use of quotes around “inexhaustible North” invites us to question when the north will show signs of exhaustion. Like Hesketh Prichard, Cabot is aware that life in Labrador must be “predatory,” but he sees the need for ethics within predation. He complains that “[t]he jigger, the steel trap, and the shotgun as commonly used, are maimers and torturers” (126). He writes, “if we must kill, let us kill mercifully” (126). He makes the case that life is changing in the north: near Davis Inlet he reports that “the bay life was not what it had formerly been. The trees had been burnt, deer no longer swarmed from the interior, the old superabundance of sea and shore game had fallen away; in summer the waters were swept by

schooners from the south" (212). Life, he writes, had been good, but now it was much harder (212). In the final page, Cabot worries that much of Labrador's nature may be "swept from the scene by our remorseless civilization" (292). It is a concern that others, such as Dillon Wallace and Mina Benson Hubbard, do not share.

Light a Fire

Every so often you have to find a way of testing yourself. These tests, some small, some large, are ways of keeping yourself sharp, keen, and bright. My decision to camp out by Muskrat Falls in March, still the dead of winter in Labrador, fell under that test-yourself category. Admittedly, it was not a huge undertaking. It was hardly attempting to canoe across the Big Land or to dogsled up to Ungava, but it was meaningful to me. It was an attempt to jump into a situation involving genuine discomfort and even a little danger in order to prove that I had the mettle to manage. At least for one night.

"What are you going to do again?" Claire asked after I'd hastily outlined my plan over supper one night.

"I'll get dropped off at the road near the falls, then I'll snowshoe down," I said. "I'll set up the tent near the river and get a fire going well before dark. The next morning I'll have my breakfast, break camp, and then snowshoe back to the road where I'll get picked up."

"Don't look at me to drop you off or pick you up. I've got work."

"It could be on the weekend. You could come with me."

"We'd freeze," she said as she got up from the table and began rinsing off her plate. "Why do you want to do this?"

I followed her to the sink.

"Because when the Falls have been dammed and the Lower Churchill is forever changed, I'll always have that night," I said. "That's the Labrador experience, going all the way back to Leonidas Hubbard. Seeing it before it's gone for good."

"I don't think you should be citing Leonidas Hubbard. He's not your best bet."

She squirted dishsoap into the sink and turned on the tap. Soon the sink was full of warm, frothy water. She began piling the dishes into the sink to soak first before washing them. "Labrador isn't going anywhere," she said.

"But the way we know it today isn't the way it will be tomorrow. The way it was back then, in the early 20th century, isn't the way it is now." I grabbed the dishtowel from where it hung on the oven door handle. "You could come with me," I repeated.

"I do want to come with you," she said. "But I hate the cold. I feel cold just walking from the college to the car. This is one you'll have to do on your own."

The next afternoon, Virgie voiced similar concerns when I told him of my plan. We were sitting around his kitchen table with tin mugs of sweet, creamy tea in our hands.

"What would you do if something went wrong?"

"Within an hour's snowshoe I'd be back at the road and could easily find help if I needed it."

"If you really needed help in the middle of the night, who's likely to be driving down that stretch of road?" Virgie asked.

"Not many people, I gather. But what kind of help would I need?"

"Things can go wrong so quickly in the bush," he said. Though I could tell that he was becoming exasperated, his voice was still steady, as if explaining this carefully so that I'd not

misunderstand. "A slip of the axe can do some damage. So bad you can barely move. With freezing cold temperatures, blood loss, and a broken foot, you'd be in a fine mess."

"I'll be careful."

"That's what everyone says. You don't know how careful you need to be until something goes wrong."

I listened to what both Claire and Virgie were saying. Honestly, I did. Though I tried to take their fears into consideration, it was only natural for them to express some doubt. Even though the days were getter milder, the nights were still wickedly cold. Down by the Falls, the air would be damp, making it all the more frigid. It could be uncomfortable, it could be a bit risky, but that's why I wanted to do it. Admittedly, they had some trouble seeing my logic. In spite of his doubts and misgivings, Virgie nevertheless agreed to drop me off at Muskrat Falls and pick me up the next day. As a further surprise, despite her misgivings, Claire decided to join me. I was elated at the news.

"It's a night we'll have forever," I said. "For better or for worse."

"More like for warmer or for colder," she replied.

"For frozen or for thawed."

A few hours later, as we lay in bed, after having turned out the light, I asked her why she'd changed her mind.

"We do too many things separately," she said. "Often it's not a partnership, and we've got to get back to that—that feeling of you and me together."

"We had, didn't we? For a while."

She was making a sacrifice for me, taking a risk for me, for us. I recognized that I'd have to remember what she was doing. It was something I'd have to repay, and this need to repay

didn't feel like a burden in the way that a debt is a burden. Instead, it felt like a promise or a vow. When a debt is repaid, the relationship is at an end; when a promise is fulfilled, the relationship is renewed and grows.

*

On the first Friday in March, Claire got off work a little early and Virgie ran us out to Muskrat Falls, promising to pick us up the next morning at around ten. As I got out of his truck that grey afternoon and jostled our packs from the truck bed, he watched with his mouth pulled tight across his face, a half-smile, half-grimace. He stood there by the side of the road, hands on his hips, watching me as I strapped on the plastic snowshoes and swung my heavy knapsack across my back, struggling to get my arms through the straps.

"And you have enough food?" He asked.

"More than enough for two whole days. We intend to eat well."

"And you have matches and a lighter?"

"Matches dipped in wax in case they get wet and a lighter wrapped in plastic right here," I said, patting the left side pocket of my parka.

"I'll see you later."

"For sure."

Claire gave Virgie a hug and we were off. We stepped over the bank of snow and with stuttered steps we made our way down the incline and toward the path that would take us to the Falls. Virgie waved when I looked back. I waved at him and kept on going. When I looked back a few minutes later, the truck was gone. We were now alone, left to our own devices. I felt

a kind of nervous energy crackling through me, but I also felt calm and serene, eager for what the next few hours would hold.

The path down to the Falls was wide and white. Claire took the lead and we trudged along, listening to the sound of plastic snowshoes in the snow. Far from being a peaceful sound – like the sound of a canoe paddle in the water, or skis going down a track – the snowshoes made an irritating clatter on the now-stiff late-winter surface. As I walked along, I remembered an image from childhood, from back in the first or second grade, watching a boy walking down the corridor of my public school. With every step he took, his new running shoes squeaked. With every squeak, he squeaked right back, saying, "squeak, squeak," as he walked along. I started echoing "squeak, squeak," as I trekked towards the Falls.

"What are you doing?" Claire asked.

"Just passing the time."

"There are other ways, sweetie."

On either side of the trail, the evergreens stood as dark, shaggy sentinels. A day or two earlier, it had snowed heavily, so their branches were snow-clad. They looked cheerful and festive, like a scene on a Christmas card. We were a long way from Christmas, though. This was serious business, I coached myself. As I walked, I made plans, mulling over what we'd do first, second, third, once we'd picked our camping spot. I shared them aloud with Claire, who had heard them all before – many times before – ever since last Sunday.

"First, we'll tramp down the snow with snowshoes, flattening it, making a compact surface for the tent. Once that's set up, we'll stow our packs in the tent and begin to get that all-important fire going. We'll see how quickly the wood is burning up, then assess how much more we'll need to get through the night and to get our breakfast cooked. After making that

calculation, let's gather more wood—all the wood we could possibly want. We won't have much time left to look at the Falls, but that's fine, isn't it? We can always look some more in the morning."

"Sounds good," Claire said, and I thought I heard a touch of laughter in her voice. After all, I was nervously reiterating what didn't need repeating.

"We're going to get a taste of Labrador in its raw form—just a taste, a one night stand out on the land. And fire means survival," I said, continuing my train of thought with what felt like a rhetorical flourish.

Our steps took us lower and lower, closer towards the river. In the distance, I could hear the Falls. At this point, their sound was like wind in the trees. Beyond the snow-capped treetops, the sound of the water grew more definite as the minutes passed, as one step followed another.

But the going wasn't easy. I had made a mistake in using a knapsack instead of pulling a toboggan. A small, well-packed sled is easy enough to pull over the snow; it glides behind you, easily coaxed along the trail. But my knapsack was beginning to protest. It occurred to me – too late – that I'd packed it badly. I'd put too many heavy and bulky things near the upper portion, like my cooking pots and the tent. The knapsack was top-heavy and awkward, wobbling between my shoulders, stubbornly pulling away from me. I considered taking it off and repacking it right then and there on the snow, but that seemed to be about as much trouble as the uneven wobbling. I decided to push onward and follow Claire's tracks.

*

Though we were shielded from the river by a wall of evergreens, it was still clammy and damp. Mist from the falls rose in the air and drifted down. Here the sound was loud and ceaseless, it was like being camped beside a busy highway where the traffic never abates. Strangely, I found myself thinking of that road trip with Claire two summers ago, when we drove halfway across Canada, making our way to Newfoundland and Labrador. I remembered those August nights spent in highway-side hotels and motels, listening to the din of the air conditioners, the TV sets from the other rooms, the cars and trucks rolling on the asphalt. As with those rented rooms, here in the woods we were in one of life's lonely spaces, bivouacked away from the flux and flow of the world. As with those nights by the highway, here it was just the two of us. Everyone else and everything else felt very distant.

"What about here?" Claire asked.

She stood in a sheltered spot by a couple of heavy trees.

"This works," I said, and began struggling like an upturned bug trying to get the pack off my back. Relieved of my burden, I propped it by a tree trunk and we both began tramping down the snow, packing it down hard and even.

Once satisfied with our stomping, I threw down the groundsheet and set up the tent. When out on the land, most Labradorians, Innu and Liveyere alike, use tents made of canvas. The tent poles are thin tree trunks, sturdy enough to support the heavy canvas. The tent is usually large enough for a half-dozen people to eat and sleep comfortably, and there is always a tin stove inside the tent for cooking and warmth. A hole in the canvas allows the stove pipe to poke through, sending a plume of smoke into the large Labrador sky—and no doubt that smoke-plume was a welcome sight for many a cold and weary trapper. Instead, of a heavy-duty Labradorian tent, I had a nylon model, the type you'd use on a summer hiking or canoeing trip.

There was no way a tin stove would fit in my tent, and the stove's heat would have melted the nylon into a brightly coloured puddle. Our plan was to keep warm by zippering-together two old-fashioned sleeping bags. We hoped we'd stay close enough to get through the night with some degree of comfort.

In the late afternoon light, the orange tent looked frail and feeble against the wide winter, especially as night would soon be at hand. I remembered how Hubbard, Wallace, and Elson used a tent made out of balloon silk. That silk tent of theirs probably ranked at about the same level of effectiveness as mine. In other words, winter's cold would just pour through as if those thin walls weren't there at all. But we would have a fire, just a few feet from the tent, and the glow of its warmth would make the world of difference. To that end, we began fire-making: the ancient task, the one that sets the human apart from the animal. The one that would keep us from being just a sorry pair of dead animals.

Using a hacksaw, which is safer than a hatchet, we went round to the nearby evergreens and cut some branches off, a few from one tree, a few from another, till we had an armful. On a spot a few metres from the tent, we began laying the boughs down, creating a green mat on the flattened snow. After that, we went round again, this time collecting twigs and dead branches for kindling. The twigs, with those light green tufts hanging from them, would burn up beautifully. I don't know what the green stuff is – a kind of lichen, perhaps, called old man's beard – but it burns as readily as newspaper. For good measure, I peeled a few scraps of birchbark from a tree here and there. Once there was a decent-sized bundle, we returned to the campsite and left it on the evergreen mat. I went out once more, this time in search of larger pieces of wood. My hatchet made quick work of a few spindly trees, dead and skeletal-looking in the wintry forest. I found a few fallen trees and used my hacksaw to cut off some good sized chunks. My hands

were sore from the work, but that felt good all the same. I trooped back and forth to my campsite with armloads of wood—wood that was more valuable to me than the degrees I had earned. Out here in the bush, those degrees meant little in terms of actualities and necessities.

An hour had gone by and the sun was setting. The sky behind us was growing darker. Time was becoming precious; mere minutes were now essential. On the green mat, Claire – who always loved starting fires – set up a tiny teepee of twigs around a little bundle of birchbark and old man's beard. She added larger twigs to the smaller ones until there was a small pyramid, enough to get the flames going. I reached into my parka pocket for my wax-coated matches and handed them to Claire. She scraped the wax off the matchhead with a thumbnail and struck it against the side of the matchbox. It flared to life and she covered it with a mittened hand so that the breeze wouldn't steal it away. She brought the tiny, fragile flame down to the birchbark-bundle and set it alight. It flickered into being, spreading the flame to the light green hair on the twigs. They caught fire, and soon the twigs themselves were burning. In moments, the teepee was on fire. As rapidly and as gently as we could manage, more sticks were added to the fire. "That's good for a minute or two now. If we put on too much too soon, the whole thing might collapse and smother itself," Claire said, staring intently at the small, bright creation. Luck was with us. The fire grew steadily, and I was soon adding the larger pieces that I'd hacked off with my hatchet and saw.

After a few minutes, a tidy fire burned bright. Not so large as to be ostentatious, but large enough to keep us feeling warm. More to the point, it was large enough to make us feel proud. Claire had done it with just one match, and I could see how she was happy with herself.

"We're not going to die like some sad fucker in a Jack London story," I said. "We passed the first hurdle. Now all we need to do is keep the fire burning."

I pulled the food and cooking gear from my knapsack. A few days earlier, we'd frozen a couple servings of stew in a Ziploc bag. I opened the bag, dumped the stew into a little pot and placed it by the fire. The bag disappeared in the flame. I filled another pot with snow and placed it by the fire as well. As the snow melted, I had to keep adding more because a pot of snow melts into only about a half-cup of water, if that. In time I had enough boiling water. I threw a couple of tea bags into the pot and shortly we had tin cups of hot tea in our mitts. It's difficult to explain why, but there is really no greater joy than a fresh cup of tea in the woods. Perhaps it's because when you're in the bush you feel that you've earned it. All food and drink tastes better outdoors; it's an undeniable fact.

With the tent up, the fire made, and the food cooking, I felt I could relax and enjoy my surroundings. I felt I could finally see, with deserving eyes, what we had come to see. We strapped our snowshoes once more and made our way to the water's edge.

After a maneuvering through the trees and shrubs, the water appeared before us, pouring past us, a torrent, a cataract. We approached it, but we could only get so far. The snow hung over the river's edge in an inviting and yet potentially dangerous fashion, but the scrubby alders and birches formed a natural riddle-fence keeping us a safe distance away.

Oddly enough, Muskrat Falls wasn't exactly a falls. There wasn't the steep drop that I was expecting, but instead it was a powerful rapids with water pouring and churning—fierce, deadly, wonderful. I'd heard that the water level was high that year, so perhaps the falls were largely buried under the rushing water, a literal case of not seeing the falls for all the water. But that didn't matter – high water, low water, rapids or falls – I was moved by what I saw and heard: the white water and white noise, the carapaces of ice and snow forming islands in the boiling rush, slobby ice bobbing helplessly in the strength of the current's pull, and the darkened

pines along the far shoreline presiding like sentinels, motionless, watching. In the distance, the evergreen-covered hills were disappearing into the oncoming night. Looking at the different points in the scene – trees, hills, water – was a study in contrasts; before us we had the relentless motion of the river, and just beyond us was the incredible stillness of the land. For more than a few moments, we stood side by side, without speaking a word; the feeling was one of quiet awe, like staring out at a grand cathedral from under the cover of a shadowy archway. This too was a place of worship.

As I stood there, I had a few precious minutes of rare clarity. I hold myself in, hold myself back, too much, too often, I thought. Especially from Claire, of all people. Likely I do that because she's close to me, and I've always done that with people who are close to me. I've always retreated. Standing there by the falls, I realized that I had to take that simple but difficult step, that old risk, of opening my heart and making room for others, for Claire. I reached out and took her hand and gave it a squeeze through the thick mitten. We looked at each other for a moment, smiled briefly, and then returned our shared gaze to the scene before us. Is that why she didn't quite say yes when I asked her to marry me? Is that why? You can't commit to someone who might not be fully committed. Out here, what else do we have except each other?

We'd seen many other couples split up after moving up north. Life beyond Canada's southern strip, those brightly-lit urban centres, is still lonesome, even in today's era. In the north, it's still isolating, alienating. Most nights you're alone at home while the long winter piles up outside your four walls. In bed, you stare at a glowing screen, hoping that this will somehow soothe whatever you crave. Of course, it can't. Like a carton of forgotten milk hanging around past its best-before date, you slowly go sour. If you're not careful, things really go rancid within you. You stop caring. Then you start drinking too much, hating your job, resenting your lover,

and recoiling from your own life. I think that's why we saw so many couples fall apart, their marriages broken, their engagements called off—because what else do you have except each other? In the north, you see whether or not that's good enough. Often, it seems, it's just not enough.

In eras past, in "them days" of explorers, trappers, traders, and hunters, life in the north was a test and a fundamental one at that. Will you survive? Some things don't change. Even today with high speed internet and the Tim Hortons drive-through, life in the north still results in a testing. Perhaps sheer survival is not on the line, not the way it used to be, and yet it may indeed feel like life or death. Something about you – some facet of your character – is being tested by the pressure of the situation, the environment. It's the coldness and the strangeness of the solitude, the never-ending winters, the strip of highway that leads on and on with the promised destination always hours – even days – away. Did I feel certain that I would pass this test? That Claire and I would pass this on-going, unrelenting test? Another question: would passing result in a sense of triumph, or would it feel more like a mere case of humbly, clumsily getting by?

*

Back at the campsite, we ate the stew while sitting on my big knapsack so to keep our posteriors off the snow. We added wood to the fire, then made more tea. The sky darkened to the deepest shade of blue and the stars began make themselves known.

As I scrubbed the pot out with ice and snow, I said, "I think we ought to collect more wood. It's already cold and it's getting colder by the minute."

While Claire cut smaller evergreen boughs and made another mat on the snow, I went round with my hacksaw and hatchet, taking what I could. I piled my newly collected wood on the mat, carefully knocking off any excess snow.

"Let's get more," Claire said.

We did the rounds again, collecting armload after armload of good-sized pieces that would ideally burn nicely and evenly for hours. I dropped the wood on the pile and looked up at the sky. I'd barely noticed that it was night. It was becoming hard to see now. The surrounding forest was little more than a woolly black shape that was rapidly blending into the darkness.

That's when it happened. Yes, indeed, just like in that Jack London story. The fire's warmth must have heated the snow-clad branches overhead, just enough to warm the snow and make it heavy. Too heavy for the branches to hold. I heard a rustle above us, heard the branches shiver and shake. At first I thought it was a bird or an animal. Then what amounted to three or four armloads of snow fell right onto the fire, right into the flames, quenching them, snuffing them, in one hissing instant. Everything went dark and cold in the proverbial blink of an eye.

Claire summed it up in a word.

"Shit."

Surprised and alarmed, I began pacing around the make-shift fireplace, looking at it from all angles, as if it were a tricky shot on a billiards table. Of course, there was nothing to figure out. What had happened was obvious enough. It was just a matter of deciding what to do, even though the choices were as straight-forward as can be: fire or freeze.

I kicked at the snow-sodden wood. It sizzled and smoked in the night air. I took the branches used for a mat and dragged them out into the open. We picked a spot safely away from any over-hanging branches and tramped down a new spot in the snow. I placed the branches

onto the packed surface, making another mat. The branches were charred, so I added some fresh green boughs that I quickly sawed off from a nearby tree. Claire arranged a teepee of small pieces of kindling and added some tinder – mainly birch bark and old man's beard, plus a few blank pages torn from a notepad I'd brought with me – to the centre of the teepee. Claire pulled off her gloves and struck a match. Because we were now further out into the clearing, we were more exposed, and the cold night breeze blew out the first three matches. I reached for the lighter in my pocket. My fingers, feeling cold and numb, fumbled the lighter, which disappeared into the snow. I had to fish around for it in the darkness, which only made my fingers colder, number, clumsier. But I found it. With stiff, stubborn fingers, I handed it to Claire who lit it and soon the tinder bundle and the small pieces of kindling were burning. I added more wood and we watched the fire rise higher and grow warmer.

"Crisis averted," we said in unison. That said, another problem presented itself. The fire was now about 10 metres from the tent. I had hoped that the heat radiating from the fire would help to keep us warm in the tent, at least for the first portion of the night. Now that the fire was father away, we'd feel little if any of its heat.

"Do you want to move the tent closer to the fire?" I asked.

"We'd be more exposed to the wind. At least now the tent's partly sheltered by the trees."

"Should we take our chances then?"

"What else can we do in a situation like this?" Claire said. "We take our chances and hope for the best."

With that, I unzipped the tent flap, and we crawled inside, hauling the knapsack in after me and zipped the tent shut. We took off our boots and left them by the door-flap. I found my

flashlight and an extra pair of woolen socks in a pouch of the knapsack. I flicked the flashlight on and was glad to have the light. I rolled the socks on over my feet, then pulled out the two sleeping bags. They were the old-fashioned kind – heavy, rectangular, stubborn – but we managed to zipper them together to create one bigger bag. We had two therm-a-rest air mattresses. With a huff and a puff, we got them inflated and centered on the tent floor. My parka wrestled with me as I tried to get it off, then we clambered into our shared sleeping bag, trying to position ourselves over the paired therm-a-rests. With a few chilly fingers poking out of the sleeping bag, I pulled my parka over us and turned off the flashlight. That was it. We were done for the night. We'd done pretty well, all things considered.

Through the tent's thin walls, I could see the fire still burning, still glowing. It was peaceful-looking. I could hear the night wind in the trees. The wind sounds so much like a voice. Or is it the trees that have the voice? Beyond the wind in the trees, I could hear the steady stream of the falls, the waters churning and churning. I'm tempted to say that it was beautiful, but it was irritating as well, just like any droning noise.

The Innu have a story about the falls, I remembered. More than a story though, it's a legend about young girls who drowned in the falls long ago. According to the legend, the girls live there still, underneath all that churning, boiling water. The presiding spirits of this place. When the falls are dammed, turned into a generating station, what then happens to those spirits? What happens when we lose our spirits, the ones that haunt our wild places? Do they rise up in anger through the asphalt and concrete to drive us crazy, filling us with depression, anxiety, dread? When the water stops flowing at Muskrat Falls, will they find two girls among the rock, the river's water still soaking their hair, their eyes like black stones, their hands reaching out and

imploring? Suddenly we would be the ones drowning. Driven crazy, lost and drowning, unprotected by even our asphalt and concrete.

I couldn't be sure if it was the cold or the thoughts of the two drowned girls, but I shuddered and shivered for a moment.

Breathing deeply and slowly, I felt the night air – sharp as razor blades – in my nose and in my lungs. I watched the vapour of my exhalation in the tent like a grey smoke. I did this four or five times, feeling calmer. I might have scared myself a little, thinking of those drowned girls, with their blank, pebble-like eyes. One thing was for sure, I was cold. I could feel it on my back, as the snow-covered ground below me seeped up through the tent's floor, through my thin mattress, past the sleeping bags. I was wearing thermal underwear, plus a sweater, and yet the cold was finding a way through all those layers.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"Yes," Claire.

"There's an old ballad with a line I've always liked: 'huggle me from the cold.'"

"Why don't we just fuck?"

"That works too."

With an embarrassing lack of grace and choreography, we blundered towards our goal. I figured that this was how Labrador regenerated itself, through stumbling love-making on all too-chilly nights. Though we were no doubt participating in a great tradition, we seemed to be little other than a collection of elbows and knees in the darkness. However, at one point we arrived at the need for a condom. Just in case, I'd squirreled one away in the pocket of my parka. The first adventure was pulling it out of the pocket, the second was extracting it from the wrapper. Then, deep within the zippered-together sleeping bags, the condom was somehow – I'm not sure how –

secured in place and we began making love in earnest. When the climax occurred it was mercifully, miraculously warm, but almost immediately afterwards I felt that something was amiss. Reaching down, I felt that the condom had been defeated.

"I think the condom broke," I said, and the flashlight confirmed it. "I guess it was the cold. I had it in an outside pocket of my parka and the cold must've weakened it."

A chill settled on us, nearly as unshakable as the cold air that surrounded us.

"We can get married, you know," I suggested.

I wrapped the broken condom in a handkerchief and shoved it back in my parka's pocket.

"It's what I want," I said, staring up at the tent's ceiling, watching my words form a small grey cloud spiraling in the air above me. Beyond the tent walls, I could see that the fire was already failing, that it was already much dimmer and duller.

"It's what I want too," Claire said, and everything changed.

We curled into each other. Her back and her hips were close against my chest and stomach. We kept our feet together, and our legs and arms were intermingled. The sleeping bag was pulled up to our foreheads and I felt practically smothered by the bag. Toques were still pulled tightly over our heads and down over our ears, which were as warm as could be expected. We lay very still so our parkas wouldn't slide off from the sleeping bags. The night would be a long one and a cold one, and it stretched above us wildly, offering nothing but frozen stars and shivering constellations. The cruel wind lashed the forlorn branches, providing us with a hollow and mournful sound. And yet there was comfort between those thin nylon walls. We had one another. This partnership, this pact, might be – I hoped, I prayed – good enough. It was this promise – exactly this promise – that would see us through the night.

When dawn came, it was cold and grey. We pulled ourselves from the tent feeling cold, feeling stiff, but the night had done no damage. We grappled back into our parkas and re-started the smouldering, subdued fire, which mercifully came back to life once again with minimal struggle. In time, we had a pot of melted snow on the boil and soon we were drinking instant coffee with a copious amount of sugar stirred into our cups. Instant porridge followed. We looked at each other in the sharp morning air, and we began laughing—at what, I don't know. That we survived, I guess. Without actually saying it, we acknowledged that we were willing, always willing. Here was a new day, our new day, with all its prayers and promises and compromises. Clouds crouched at the edges of the sky, but the bright, pale furrows of blue above us pledged that the morning ahead would be clear.

Fragments of a Dissertation: *True North* and *Northern Nurse*

Unlike the other writers I've discussed, Elliott Merrick was not passing through Labrador. Instead, he attempted to make Labrador a home for himself, living in the region for over two years. His innate talent as a writer makes his Labrador writings, such as *True North* and *Northern Nurse*, particularly rich, which can't be said of William Cabot's *Labrador* or Hesketh Prichard's *Through Trackless Labrador*. The Thoreauvian qualities of his writings make his use of the pastoral motif particularly interesting as he purposefully foregrounds this trope in his work, clearly aware of the unlikely marriage of the pastoral tradition with Labrador's snowy wilderness. Because of the length of his stay in the region, his writings gesture towards an intimacy with Labrador, the land and its people. It is a work-a-day intimacy, which others, such as Dillon Wallace or Mina Benson Hubbard, cannot claim. This invites us to trust him, yet his romantic and idealistic tendencies also put us on guard. In spite of these tendencies, we can never be dismissive of him because Merrick provides one of the most carefully observed accounts of the lives of trappers in central Labrador. His descriptions of life on the trapline and of remote communities such as North West River, Mud Lake, and Traverspine during the late 1920s offer a picture of what could be called "the last of the breed," for, with the onset of the World War II and the building of the Goose Bay airbase, the old ways of life in the Big Land would be irrevocably changed.

Although *True North* and *Northern Nurse* could be classified as travel writing, his main concern in both books is reinhabitation, the process by which we consider the complicated nexus between a sense of self and a sense of place (as Gary Snyder characterizes it, "the 'where' of our 'who are we?" [*Place* 184]). Though the term would not come into vogue until the 1970s,

reinhabitation was Merrick's goal while living in Labrador, taking it on as a project both as a writer and as a man. As Dale Blake – a critic from Labrador – wrote in the 1990s, Merrick's writings "still speak to Labradorians" ("Re-inventing Labrador" 126). I suspect that Merrick's writings still speak to the people of the region because his work portrays Labrador not just as a wintery backdrop to adventurous tales of derring-do but shows that Labrador is a place (not just a space) where people live their lives, raise families, and survive in a harsh environment. He shows that with knowledge, wisdom, mutual cooperation and a dose of humility, a good life is possible in Labrador. In Merrick's writings the Labradorian people are never just cardboard figures, but they are warm, fully-realized (if idealized) human beings.

*

Elliott Merrick was not, from the outset, a likely candidate to adopt the life of a fur trapper in the remote interior of Labrador. He was born in 1905 in Montclair, New Jersey. He was, according to Ronald Rompkey, "[c]omfortably placed" as his father was the president of Hoyt Metal, a branch of the National Lead Company (xi). He was educated at Yale, where he studied English Literature and French. Early on, he had writerly ambitions, but "he had no idea how he would earn his living doing this" (R. Rompkey xii). He worked as a journalist for a while, then began working as an assistant advertising manager at the National Lead Company, writing copy for Dutch Boy White Lead Paint and commuting into New York City daily. But he was temperamentally unsuited to this life. His influences while growing up included Jack London, Ernest Thompson Seton, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau (Blake, "Elliott Merrick's Labrador" 8); as Merrick's friend Lawrence Millman wrote, "how could a young man for whom

Thoreau's *Walden* was almost a sacred text devote his heart and soul to producing copy for Dutch Boy paints?" ("Elliott Merrick" 73) In the summer of 1929, Merrick volunteered as a WOP (Worker Without Pay) at the Grenfell Mission Hospital at Indian Harbour, Labrador. At the end of the summer, he stayed in Labrador, teaching third and fourth grades at the mission's school in North West River. While there, he met and married Kate Austen, an Australian nurse also working for Grenfell (R. Rompkey xv).

Though he stayed in Labrador only two and a half years, those years had a tremendous influence on him. In a letter to Dale Blake, Merrick wrote, "Labrador has been a major factor in my life and even today at 87 molds my attitudes" (Blake "Elliott Merrick's Labrador" 40). It certainly provided grist for his mill. Four books emerged out of his time in the region: *True North* (1933), *Frost and Fire* (1939), *Northern Nurse* (1942), and *The Long Crossing and Other Labrador Stories* (1992). And he enjoyed some success as a writer. Both *True North* and *Northern Nurse* – which will be my focus here – were published by Scribner's and were edited by the publisher's legendary editor, Max Perkins. They were favourably reviewed and sold reasonably well (*Northern Nurse* was on the bestseller list for 17 weeks). Yet in spite of that success, Merrick was unable to make a living as a writer (R. Rompkey xvii-xviii). The Merricks, back from Labrador, farmed in Vermont (xvi) and later Merrick worked as a research editor with the US Department of Agriculture (xviii). Over the years, his work has fallen by the wayside, his name growing obscure (I have yet to find a contemporary anthology of nature writing that includes his work). In spite of that, both *True North* and *Northern Nurse* have managed to stay in print.

A case could be made that *True North* and *Northern Nurse* don't have a place alongside *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*, *In Northern*

Labrador, and *Through Trackless Labrador*. After all, Merrick didn't self-identify as an explorer and didn't share the same ambitions as Leonidas Hubbard, Dillon Wallace, and Mina Benson Hubbard. Yet both Merrick and his wife, Kate, travelled extensively throughout central Labrador. Even if they didn't have exploratory designs, they nevertheless saw a region of the world that few other people have seen, and Merrick's account of what they saw and how they experienced it offers an important counterpoint to the likes of Hubbard and Wallace. Though *Northern Nurse* is more so a medical narrative of Labrador's Grenfell mission hospitals, it is an important companion piece to the earlier book, *True North*. I feel that they need to be read alongside each other to gain the fuller picture (though they were published as independent volumes nine years apart).

Like many pastoral-writers, Elliott Merrick's relies on contrasts, on calling forth a series of opposites that revolve around a nature-society dichotomy. In Merrick's hands, this involves a stark choice. To live in one place is to reject another: it's either the wilderness settlement or the urban centre (though he would later turn to farming, at this stage in his life and career he doesn't entertain the possibility of any rural middle-ground). This does not make Merrick exceptional as Harold E. Toliver's *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* argues that dichotomies are typical of the pastoral genre: nature has generally pleasing associations, such as freedom, honesty, innocence, and simplicity; its opposite category, society, has grimmer ones, such as constriction, mechanical formality, and hierarchy (3).

Overall, Merrick's associations with Labrador – its nature and its people – are agreeable and gratifying. No other writer sings the region's praises as loudly or as clearly. Like Thoreau before him who found new life in the woods by Walden Pond, so Merrick found a new life in the backwoods and wintry traplines of Labrador's interior (one of *True North*'s section is titled

"New Life"). Elliott Merrick's *True North* and *Northern Nurse* imagine a mutually nurturing relationship between the individual and his/her bioregion, one that changes the person for the better, one that respects the integrity of the region. Taking that one step further, Merrick also imagines how the bioregion itself has a healthy influence on the community that lives within the region, creating a group of people who are morally and physically able to withstand any hardship that may fall their way. In Merrick's writings, Labradorians emerge as near-super humans with astonishing resilience.

Merrick's career in Labrador begins with a rejection of urban life. In the opening pages of *True North*, he identifies himself as one of the "thousands of sad young men" who have graduated from "the educational grist mills" and feel that they are unsuited to pursue a career in business and "have no aptitude that can be converted into cash" (3). He reveals that he loves what the natural world offers, when "the morning breeze whispered in the leaves and the sky was blue and dotted with fleece" (4), but these have no value in the utilitarian and industrial world of New York City because "[n]othing is beautiful for its own sake. The earth is to be squeezed for what can be got out of it" (4). Setting himself apart, avoiding what Thoreau would call a life of "quiet desperation," he admits to himself, "I prefer mud to cement sidewalks, and water out of a bucket to water out of a faucet" and tells the reader "I got out" (5). His wife's Labradorian adventures begin in a similar fashion: In *Northern Nurse*, he describes how Kate Austen, an Australian bored with nursing in France, asks a fellow-nurse, who had experience working for the Grenfell mission, if Labrador is "real," unlike Paris. She is told that Labrador is "[t]he realest place you ever saw" (6) and immediately prepares to leave (though she admits that she had little idea as to its location). Labrador promises to be an escape from the anxieties of civilization and, in Garrard's words, offers an "authentic relation of humanity and earth" (Garrard 59). That

Labrador is often dangerously cold in winter and then hot, muggy and bug-infested in summer only seems to add to its pastoral promise of a purer, rawer reality or authenticity.

In both cases, acceptance of Labrador means rejection of some other place: New York, Paris—urban locations. This points towards a troubling spot in *True North*, because Merrick implies that a choice *must* be made. This stands in stark contrast to his hero, Henry David Thoreau, for, as Leo Marx notes, "Thoreau is not a primitivist. True, he implies that he would have no difficulty choosing between Concord and the wilderness. What really engages him, however, is the possibility of avoiding that choice" (246). In embracing that choice instead of coyly or wisely avoiding it, Merrick's wilderness writing stands as a strong example of what William Cronon would call "the trouble with wilderness." Cronon argues that we tend to see wilderness as being a kind of holy ground that skews our ability to properly see the wildness that surrounds us, such as "the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it" (86): "Indeed, my principal objection to wilderness is that it may teach us to be dismissive or even contemptuous of such humble places and experiences. Without our quite realizing it, wilderness tends to privilege some parts of nature at the expense of others" (86). Like other nature writers, such as John Muir, Merrick enforces a dualism that privileges wilderness. As is the case with so many other wilderness enthusiasts, Merrick easily concludes that wilderness regions do have unique, intrinsic value, but what makes his work interesting is that he also focusses on how it influences the human lives that are in contact with wilderness.

Basically, at heart, Merrick contends that living in close relationship with wild nature makes people better, happier, and more capable. They get at the root of their very human-ness when they are in touch with the wilderness. In *True North*, at the end of part one, (titled "Awakening"), Merrick quotes Bert Blake, one of the guides who helped Mina Benson Hubbard

on her 1905 expedition to Ungava, who says, "You know, b'y, I never seen outside where you comes from. But I finds this pretty good—the country and the huntin' and all. I wouldn't want to go and live away. Sometimes I thinks, me, we're, happy here" (10). This moment largely sets the tone for much of what follows as Merrick constantly reasserts that he has found paradise far north of New York City. The biggest portion of the book is an account of a 350 mile trip from the village of North West River up Grand River (now known as the Churchill River) that he and his wife (called Kay in *True North,* but Kate in *Northern Nurse*) take with the trapper John Michelin ("a devil-may-care young Hercules" [16]). They spend the fall and early winter months living with Michelin in his small cabin by his trapline, helping him, learning from him, and experiencing the remote wilderness first-hand. In the days and weeks that follow, Merrick lives a life that far exceeds – in terms of remoteness and self-reliance – what his hero, Thoreau, accomplished at his cabin in Walden pond. In doing so, he discovers what makes the Labradorians "kinder, stronger than we, and wiser in the business of living" (7). Moreover, in this story of self-transformation, he discovers a seemingly inexhaustible source of happiness for himself.

Told largely in a series of diary entries ranging from September 9, 1930, to July 25, 1931, the book's narrative begins in earnest when the trappers – as a group – begin their annual trip up river to their furring grounds. As a woman of the white, settler culture, Kay's feminine presence on the trip is rare, but unlike Mina Benson Hubbard (who insisted on sleeping on a pneumatic mattress for her journey), Kay requires no special privileges and asks only to be part of the team. No doubt the men would have seen the value of having a trained nurse on the journey and in the back-country. In the early pages, Merrick depicts the egalitarian nature among the travelling trappers (they were "all brothers in the river" [24]) as well as their consummate skill and

knowledge (the men all "know the river high water, low water, fall winter or spring-breakup time, individual rocks, eddies, points, cliffs, better than the lines in their own palms" [39]). He admits that there is considerable "grossness of life" in the bush, as you see, perhaps for the first time, the "blood and entrails in the business of preparing food" as well as all the copious quantities of "dirt and sweat" (97). But he also describes the rituals of back-country etiquette: "[t]he old rivermen always wash their hands before they mix bread, and leave off smoking their pipes lest ashes fall in the dough" (97).

Once settled in John Michelin's cabin, Merrick finds that life in the bush quickens the spirit and the senses. Despite the unending hard work of the trappers, Merrick extols the virtue of weeks and weeks of freedom (contrasting it with "the half-life" of the city where the only moment "of freedom and truth" is the moment when you wake up [108]). In a passage that seems to anticipate David Abram's work, Merrick describes how the spirit of the sensuous evolves and increases in the wilderness:

> This uncivilized life is worthwhile for a civilized person as a sharpener of the senses, if nothing else. We can smell wood smoke half a mile away. Our sense of taste is remarkably sharper. "Food's got no taste after you been down home awhile," John says. We seldom have all we want to eat, but our simple meals seem like banquets. When we sit down on the floor to partridge stew, we can distinguish between the rich oiliness of cubes of salt pork, and the partridge's own fat. Every kernel of rice tastes good. Our weekly dish of prunes or apricots is an event. (108-109).

What Merrick describes is not just an increased sensual awareness. There is a moral dimension at work. Sounding like a latter-day Transcendentalist, he writes: "The smell of a tree or the willows, the air or the taste of water, we are conscious and glad of everything. Everything is true

and simple and good to the core" (109). However, for Merrick, life in Labrador's wilderness goes beyond a passive recognition of the true, simple, good world; you must pay for it and this alters the self: "This is the antithesis of being bored. How do we pay for it? By work of a certain kind, work which makes us stronger and keener still" (109). Earlier in *True North*, he gestures towards how this work makes one part of the land itself. Though "[i]t costs in backbreaking toil, in sweat, and shivering cold, in hunger and wet, in aching knotted muscles," you can then "feel a part of it, to be a part of every sand bank and driftwood stump and shadow of mountain and ripple" (46).

While you may "feel a part of it" (46), there is always something in nature that holds back (like Heraclitus, Merrick might also say that "nature loves to hide"). This discreet, mysterious quality is symbolized by what Merrick calls the "Unknown Lake" located in the heart of Labrador: "how I've dreamed about it, a mystery even to the trappers. Ossokmanuan the Indians call it and the inaccurate maps give little idea of its size or shape; a huge inland sea, unexplored, like its name, unknown" (130). One morning, Merrick catches sight of it, "an enormous expanse of crooked whiteness studded with night islands like shapes of dark animals crouching" (130). Looking from the ridge, "we could not make out any limits to the lake" (130). Here he has a moment akin to Thoreau's epiphany on Mt. Ktaadn. Merrick writes:

> I've never been happier than that morning on the hill. I thought to myself, "This is the place in the world where I would like most to be, and I am here." People say it is no use poking off to far corners, that you are still you and you see but yourself through your own eyes. Well, they lie, poor things. I am a thousand different persons, and today I am the freest, strongest, happiest of them all. (130)

It is here that he feels he has found a spiritual home for himself, as he tells the reader: "I'd die five years sooner to be allowed to die here alone without benefit of clergy, for the clergy is no more necessary to my religion than ships are to the sea" (130).

Though this ridge overlooking the Unknown Lake may be a spiritual home, he quickly accepts that it could never be an actual home for him. He imagines how "fun" it would be to build a cabin and live on the shores of the lake "just Kay and I" (130), but he admits it is only "[a] pleasant dream…one that little suits this country" (131). He itemizes the problems they would encounter if they were to live at that spot: the flies; a short growing season; no place to procure necessary goods like nets and knives; as well, they would have to live the hard, nomadic existence of a hunter-gatherer, travelling hundreds of miles to find food (131). Moreover, he adds a bitter irony: "When we died at an early age, we would have the dissatisfaction of knowing that we had been kept alive even so long by products of the civilization we despise" (131). He recognizes that there is no clear path away from civilization, no sure way to live off the land. He acknowledges that there may be no escape from the urban world. Despite their independent spirit and incredible self-reliance, the trappers are a link in a chain that connects Labrador and its fur bearing animals "to the grimey Jewish fur shops" of New York where the pelts will be "haggled over by the little men who buy and sell" (180). Although his racism is disheartening, Merrick's comment demonstrates how he is aware that the urban world – *many* hundreds of miles away – is the economic centre which cannot be denied. Of all the writers who travelled through Labrador in the early 20th century, he is the one most keenly aware of the region's subservient economic status. While others (Mina Benson Hubbard or Hesketh Prichard, for example) will gesture towards the region's status as a colony, only Merrick will explore the disadvantages of this status. Likely his own failed attempts to make a living in Labrador lead to

this insight. In later years, Merrick wrote to Ronald Rompkey that "wilderness living does not buy many groceries" (qtd in Blake, "Reinventing," 125).

Though Merrick never misses an opportunity to rhapsodize about the beauty of Labrador's wilderness, he spends an equal amount of time and attention on the grinding hardship of the trappers' lives. This aspect of *True North* and *Northern Nurse* makes these texts more than just boreal adventure stories as both works capture the difficulties that Labrador's settler population faced keeping body and soul together. Recording and chronicling in detail the lives lead on the trapline and the daily business of the mission hospital, the books take on a particular historical importance (Dale Blake mentions that Merrick's Labrador writings were fairly accurate in this regard [Elliott Merrick's Labrador 32]). As the men travel up the river in *True North* to their various traplines, Merrick pays close attention to the various dangers they encounter on the river and in the backwoods. The water by Gull Island, for example, features "open-jawed, ravenous waves" (31). Merrick nearly loses an eye on a dead branch as he is leaving the tent one night (40); not too much later Kay cuts her thumb to the bone with an axe (49). While at the John Michelin's cabin, Merrick accidentally shoots himself in the thigh with a pistol (73). He nearly slices off his big toe with the axe (104); Kay's foot nearly freezes (163). While it is tempting to blame the Merricks' greenness with regards to wilderness survival, Merrick writes in his own defense: "I've seen John come within an ace of cutting himself [with the axe] too" (194). The axe, he tells us, is both a friend and enemy rolled into one (75). The threats and dangers can come from many corners while in the remote woods:

> Merely to lose a mitten, to put an axe down flat in the snow when it is getting dark, to fall through bad ice, to forget a match safe, to leave a poorly silvered, "verdi-greasy" spoon

> in a kettle of stew, may lead to a serious situation. It is easy to lose one's way when travelling after dark. (75)

The awareness of how a slight accident or oversight can lead to a dire situation impresses the "old Scotch, fear-of-God Christianity and an even older fear of nature" in the trappers, though Merrick claims that it is not really fear but respect as they see that nature can be both kind and merciless (75).

It's not only nature itself and the occasional slip of the axe that the trappers fear. The people who Merrick calls the "Inu" in *True North* (84) are also seen as a threat. He refers to the old-timers who can "remember hard times, with the Indians burning his tilts [cabins] and stealing his grub" (33). At one point in early November at John Michelin's cabin, an Innu family of ten people pay them a visit. John wants the father of the family, a man named Mathieu, to build him a sled. They begin to haggle over the price and discover that Mathieu wants to be paid right then and there in food (especially flour), which Merrick feels that they cannot spare. The situation in the cramped cabin – in which all thirteen of them sit – becomes tense. Merrick writes, "If our hearts are hardened against them it is because they do this same thing every year" (85):

> Every winter they come out to the trading posts and they have been *sham sheevan* (very hungry). And sometimes the strong men are staggering with weakness and must hasten back with food to their women and children who are keeping themselves alive on squirrels and mice and jays a week or two weeks back on the trail, where they dropped with hunger. And every year a family or two comes down Grand River and all down its length eats up the precious flour in the tilts, and their dogs smell out the lard that is buried in the snow against them. And always they say they were starving, and a starving man

> will fight or steal for his food and they could not help it. And the next year they do the same and the next and the next. (85-86)

Though Merrick is aware of Labrador's subservient status in relation to distant economic powers (New York, for instance), he fails to see how the Innu have suffered the most under that very system. But Merrick's hard-heartedness isn't necessarily misplaced. Though we see racism in his response, it is also in a sense realistic. He appreciates how the margin between life and death on the trapline is slim and giving away too much flour will only reduce that margin to even slimmer chances. The two parties do come to a genial arrangement (in which Mathieu and his family receive a half-bag of flour, some beans and peas, a small amount of sugar, and one hundred rifle cartridges plus six shotgun shells [85]) and Merrick notes that the tension dissipates immediately in language fraught with racist stereotypes: Mathieu and his family become, in Merrick's estimation, "happy children of the forest again, and not evil, threatening beggars" (86). In this, we see that Merrick's overall attitude towards the region's Indigenous peoples is romantic and racist. Throughout *True North*, Merrick admires the *idea* of indigeneity but, like Thoreau and Muir, most of his actual encounters with *real* Indigenous people are less than sunny.

The trappers' lives are physically grueling, with little in the way of comfort. Merrick often describes being tired to the point that he is past exhaustion. He writes that the trappers, going by snowshoe, "travel almost to the limit of their own endurance": "They do not baby themselves and they are kind enough not to baby anybody else. It is hard, it is torture" (133). The cold is also an ever-present hardship. Already exhausted from the day's labours, the cold creeps in at night as the fire dies in the stove, preventing a restful sleep: "the thin sharp cold that sets one's subconscious on edge and makes sleep a tiresome labor" (169). The trip homeward in

which the men, once again, reunite and travel as a group by snowshoe, pulling sleds back towards North West River, is an ordeal.

Walking the land to get home is a particular hardship. The men are pulling sleds of fur, food is short, the going is slow and cold, the daylight hours are short, and the travelling conditions are often poor as they navigate bad ice and other perils. While walking across frozen Lake Winnikapau, Merrick muses on the monotony of how "one walks and walks and gets nowhere. The landmarks are huge rock headlands, bulging out against the sky like insulting chins. At the end of hours and hours of trudging they are neither sharper nor bluer than before" (203). Merrick notes that the men do not wait for stragglers. The pace is set by the fastest. Given that food supplies are low, they do indeed need to move quickly. But the rejuvenating qualities of a bite of bread and a cup of tea are not to be underestimated: "After our tea and toasted bread and a little rest by the fire we are not only as good for it as before, but better. That is the best time for all of us. For three or four hours after the first halt we feel as though we could go on forever" (205). At the end of a hard day's travelling, more hard work awaits as they must make camp for the night: "We thought we were weary to the point of exhaustion and hungry to the point of weakness, but from somewhere we unpeel another layer of energy and work for an hour making camp. The strength comes and keeps on coming" (216). In spite of all their weariness, they move at a good pace. Merrick notes that in one 48 hour period they managed to cover 80 miles (239). At the end of the journey, when they have finally got back to North West River, Merrick summarizes what he and his wife have learned in the sometimes grueling time they spend with John Michelin and the others in the interior.

> Well, it was a glimpse into a life we never knew before. It is unbelievable what a trapper can accomplish. We knew before that they were remarkable men, but now we

> know they are supermen. Away in the country they are absolutely ruthless with themselves; they will not even take time enough to eat and sleep; pain, cold, fatigue, hunger, cannot bend them. They are there to get fur and they get it. Yet they are kind and full of fun. Staked up against their iron self-discipline, their fortitude and honor and knowledge of nature, our little store of civilized facts and worldly clevernesses seems very small. We would like to be more like them and less like ourselves. (267)

In addition, he speaks lovingly of the country itself: "It is the land, the long white lakes, the forests and mountains and rivers, the space and the northern light and the cold and beauty. Nothing within the scope of our comprehension is as worth knowing as the heart of that" (267).

Merrick's glowing words at the end of the journey do not mitigate the difficulties encountered in the back-country. If anything, he highlights those difficulties – the exhaustion, the hunger – but he also contextualizes them: the backbreaking work and the hardships encountered are precisely the route to an authentic relationship with the land. This relationship cannot occur as merely an aesthetic experience. To truly inhabit a place, you cannot just sit back and passively enjoy its beauty (though loving its beauty is part of the experience). You must participate in the land, which involves work. In Labrador, in the early decades of the twentieth century, this involved considerable hardship and deprivation. Merrick's underlying belief that the hard work will pay off in terms of spiritual renewal is what makes his writings, especially *True North*, particularly pastoral in orientation.

Authenticity is a thorny issue in Merrick's writings. In northern studies, there is, as Renée Hulan notes, "a high priority placed on the idea of northern experience" (4). Certainly Merrick comes to us as one who has a high level of northern experience (or, to echo Hulan's guarded terms, with regards to the *idea* of northern experience, Merrick comes to us with a high level of

first-hand knowledge). But for all the gritty details of the difficulties of the lives of trappers, there is a certain quality to his work that does not sit well with contemporary readers and questions arise from this: does he romanticize? Idealize? Exaggerate? The question of authenticity has been raised about his work and it is worth further questioning.

Blake, for one, notes that many of the details that Merrick records in *True North* are indeed accurate (Elliott Merrick's Labrador 32). Until Labradorians began writing books, such as Elizabeth Goudie's *Woman of Labrador*, Merrick's *True North* was a rare glimpse of a life that was already disappearing during the decades that Merrick was publishing. In 1942, the year that Merrick's *Northern Nurse* was published, the Goose Bay airbase was built. The airbase marked a major economic and demographic shift in Labrador as people moved to work on the base for wages and away from the coastal areas and the truck system of the trading posts (B. Rompkey 96). As a result, 1942 represented the beginning of the end of what Elizabeth Goudie refers to as "the old life of Labrador" (159) and the dawning of a new age (for good and/or for ill) of various mega-projects such as the mines at Labrador City and Wabush and the large hydro-electric dam at Churchill Falls. In this light, Merrick's work can be read as a nostalgic homage to that "old life."

Many moments in *True North* chronicle Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in Labrador. TEK is certainly an important aspect of any reinhabitory project, as this knowledge provides the know-how for living on the land and with the land, especially at a time when consumer goods were fairly rare. For example, Merrick writes of how a mother once made a bottle for her baby using sealskin and a doe's teat (60). He writes of how the sap of spruce balsam has multiple uses: for cuts, for chewing gum, and for patching canoes (109). He also writes of how infections can be cured by juniper (a.k.a. tamarack or larch) poultices (109, 196).

He mentions that Beaver castor makes traps more "alluring" to carnivores (118) He explains how using hairy sealskin, lashed to the bottom of the sled, helps it run smoothly on wet, sticky snow (250). Merrick also writes of the folklore and beliefs of the trappers, chronicling the Muskrat Falls legend (that it is haunted by two drowned "Indian girls" [26]), and he writes in detail of the trappers' Sabbath day traditions (if you shoot your gun on a Sunday, you'll have bad luck hunting with it ever after, though if you borrow someone else's gun to shoot the owner won't have bad luck with it [55]). It is beyond the scope of my work here to authenticate all his observations, but it's worth mentioning that some of the stranger stories he tells are corroborated by other writers. Merrick tells the story of the Traverspine "gorilla" (a series of Bigfoot-like encounters), which is also described by Wilfred Grenfell; as well, he describes an unlikely lynx attack on a local woman, which is also told by Elizabeth Goudie (who was the person attacked). The book is rich with such moments and observations, many of which might have been lost without Merrick's keen eye and notebook.

The issue of authenticity is thornier in *Northern Nurse* than *True North*. Generally speaking, *Northern Nurse* is a more complex text. As Lawrence Millman writes in his introduction to the Countryman Press' 1994 edition, it is "a somewhat slippery book" because:

> [i]ts wealth of hands-on medical detail suggests a straightforward nurse's memoir told in the first person by the nurse herself. Merrick would seem not to be in the book at all until the last few pages when Nurse Kate discovers him 'poking his nose into everything.' But he is in fact everywhere in the book, in nearly every turn of phrase, storylike vignette, and philosophical aside. The voice is the voice of *True North*, a bit leaner, it's true, but nonetheless the same voice. He could never have adopted this voice or indeed written the

> book without his own experience of Labrador. All of which makes for a husband-wife collaboration highly unusual in the annals of literature. (xiii-xiv)

Northern Nurse, told in the first person by Nurse Kate (called Kay in *True North*), is a filtered voice, coming to us via her husband. This layered quality practically asks for a contrapuntal reading of the text, in which we "acknowledge the infinite representational possibilities" (Humber 50). Elizabeth Humber's and Dale Blake's work goes far in terms of questioning Merrick's narrative, its possible omissions and obfuscations. Both critics question his depiction of Nurse Kate as unflaggingly energetic and ever-ready to tackle any emergency that comes her way. Blake questions this unerring success, pointing out that it's a likely sign that Merrick is "overshadowing the voice of his wife" ("Reinventing Labrador" 122). However, Blake also admits that "[p]erhaps Kate Austen was actually as self-confident as she appears" (Elliott Merrick's Labrador 72-73). Still, it's worth noting that Austen never encounters any of the issues that plague the well-being and peace of mind of many other northern nurses: stress, power, control, isolation, gender, and cross-cultural identification (Humber 52). Humber expresses doubt because Merrick "alludes to [these issues] infrequently, if at all" (52), pointing out that Merrick's overall representation of Labrador rarely indicates the presence of "serious social ills" (52). For example, take this passage from Dr. Harry Paddon's memoir, in which he describes a poor household, desperately sick with tuberculosis:

> In one wretched hovel, a single room, were gathered no less than sixteen people. On a rude wood bunk lay an old man coughing away his life in the last stages of consumption. A middle-aged woman, reposing on the floor, was in little better condition. A young woman crouched dog-like beside the stove, her clothing rather obviously limited to a single porous dress. There was an atmosphere difficult to breathe in, with no ventilation

> at all, and the air must clearly have been laden with bacteria. Close by was an empty shack, but they preferred to aggregate in one. Perhaps there was no stove or other equipment available for a second household. Naturally, eating and drinking vessels were shared by diseased and healthy, if anyone there could be healthy. It was a depressing household and a depressing district, and what could be done about it? (76-77)

Paddon describes this in some detail because it was obviously a distressing scene to witness, but he indicates that it was not the only scene of this nature which he had witnessed (to the extent that he considers the expediency in removing children from their homes to be placed in healthier, more sanitary circumstances [82]). Nowhere in Merrick's writings do we see that kind of stark, "depressing" poverty. Either he never encountered it (though this seems unlikely as Nurse Kate, who worked under Paddon, would have seen similar households) or he simply turned a blind eye towards it and never wrote about it since this kind of grinding poverty did not suit his agenda.

The question of Austen's relationship to the natural environment is worth examining in some detail. Here the text speaks with two voices, showing her both at home in the environment and alienated from it.

In *Northern Nurse,* Austen describes the wilderness of Labrador as refreshing, renewing, to the extent that it seems she is very much at home in this northern environment. During the rare moments when she can enjoy some leisure time, Austen will head out into nature. On one occasion she describes sitting on the shore, watching icebergs floating by:

> Some were squat and smoothly sculptured, other Gothic, lacy, tall and all of them glittered and changed color as they rolled on the long swell. All around the compass such wild space fell away from the smooth rocks of the forehead as would surely rest the tiredest heart that ever beat. And when the vastness was too much, there were…clusters

> of bright wild flowers in hollows of gravel, fighting for life, pretty and strong and resilient. The far or south side of the island showed no sign of man whatever as I went down below the "rockline." (34)

Austen will also mention that along the rocky shoreline "there were special spots for swimming and for thinking and for sleeping" (34-5). She explains, "I often lay with my face close to the waves, watching them come and go, feeling their cold breath. And there, somehow I was renewed. It was nothing I did. It was the ocean's doing" (35).

This passage is interesting for several reasons: the icebergs could easily be associated with images of death (e.g. the Titanic catastrophe), but instead only their beauty is emphasized. There is "vastness" in the "wild space," which she recognizes, but she does not dwell on it morbidly; instead, the focus changes to the wildflowers, which are "pretty and strong and resilient." Then there is the interesting phrase "no sign of man," which may mean no sign of human life. But if women's northward journeys are often an escape from men (as Margaret Atwood suggests in *Strange Things*), then "no sign of man" may mean exactly that—no men in sight to disturb her reverie. The passage finishes with a strong statement of communion with nature: she is renewed, and nature – the ocean, in this case – has done this for her.

While this shows Nurse Kate immersed in the natural beauty of Labrador – clearly a willing reinhabitant – a later episode suggest that there is another side to her feelings. One summer day, dogs get into her precious flower garden, ripping it to shreds, leaving nothing behind but "[t]orn earth, great holes like some pock-marked no man's land" (273-274). She refers to the now-destroyed flowers as "[m]y only pleasure, my only joy" (274) and then she breaks down: "I sat and sobbed for my lovely, bright-eyed flowers, killed with no reason whatever – just as people die – struck down by the blindest chance – like little Martha in the

ward – and no one to help – you do what you can and it isn't good enough" (274). Once she begins weeping, she finds it hard to stop: "I wept for every injustice and indignity I had ever known, and tears kept coming and coming, and I couldn't see any use in stopping them or trying to go on. I lay in the grass and buried my head." (274). In this passage, we see another side to Nurse Kate, seeing her as someone who has dealt with the difficulties of nursing in Labrador with resilience, yet who has all the same suffered during her time in the region as buried sorrows and heartache come to the surface. The destruction of her flowers (the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back) which prompts outpouring of grief is telling. According to Humber, this episode "illustrates where her true affiliations lie" and that "she has not assimilated to the extent that Merrick portrays" (57). It is instructive to see that her attempts to create a conventionally pastoral scene (a garden) is utterly ruined by the actual wildness of the region (symbolized by the half-tamed sled dogs). This episode reveals a tension between the pastoral dream and the wild reality, and this tension – which is finally revealed as being *within* Nurse Austen as she weeps and weeps – calls Merrick's overall representation of Labrador into question as being too idealized, too sunny, too good to be true. Moreover, she warns the dogs' owner that "I'll shoot the next dog that gets in my garden, I'll keep my gun loaded, and I'll shoot him through the head" [274].

This opens up an important question for any reinhabitory project: how do you know if / when you've reinhabited? (Or to use Humber's word, "assimilated.") Ironically, perhaps it is at those moments when you feel rejected by the environment and its culture, such as when the dogs ruin Kate's flowers in *Northern Nurse*. Perhaps it is at those moments when you realize that *you* are *other*, such as when Merrick and Austen return to North West River at the end of their journey into Labrador's interior and recognize that, as much as they admire the fur trappers, they

are not one of them. Perhaps it comes at those very moments of humility (and humiliation). Time and again, it is made clear that the only true response to the land, especially one as fierce as Labrador, is humility. And humility always comes at a price.

New Life

A northern spring begins long before the trees find their leaves, long before the snow melts. It begins with a subtle shift in the air. The air softens and no longer has that razor-sharp edge. Icicles drip all through the afternoons and birds return—birds I hadn't noticed were missing, like the bald eagle. The snow becomes heavier and slushier and recedes from the edges of the lawn, from the trunks of trees, from the slopes of the hills. At one point, people decide it's no longer safe to go out on the ice, even though a few weeks earlier the ice had been as thick as a couple grand pianos stacked on top of each other. In time, the river-ice cracks into millions of mini-icebergs and they drift with the water's flow.

Almost daily I'd tell myself that spring had arrived, that it was truly here. Then the sky would darken and more snow would fall. And yet eventually there came a day when the snow was indeed behind us. When the sky darkened, it rained instead, and the rain felt friendly, even peaceful. At this point, I stopped wearing my parka, favouring instead a jacket backed with a sweater, until eventually it was either just the jacket or the sweater. I'd even leave my toque at home. With furry little nubbins on the willow trees, the smell of wet earth ripening underfoot, and new leaves emerging like a mist among the branches of aspen and birch trees, I found myself jumping over springtime entirely and telling myself that *yes*, it's now *summer*.

On a Sunday afternoon in June, Claire and I drove out to the Scenic Waterfall on the North West River Road, about a twenty minute drive out of town. We parked the car and began to follow the trail into the woods. It was as if we'd left the boreal, sub-arctic north and had stepped into a temperate English fairy grove. The woods by the waterfall were moist and green,

and the new leaves overhead formed a shadowy canopy that sheltered us from the now-strengthened sun. The rocks were covered with a rich green moss. The waterfall was a white veil streaming over the rocks, tumbling down a steep bank, splashing over toppled birch trees. In the shade of the forest, the temperature had dropped just enough that there was a damp chill and we pulled fleece sweaters on over our t-shirts.

I poured myself a cup of tea from my thermosbottle and watched the water. Claire pulled out her camera and began taking pictures of the falls, the ferns, the moss. She shared some tea with me, then we packed our things away and began to hike the path that lead through the trees, up an incline, until we reached an open plateau with a view of the surrounding landscape. There was only bare rock, sky, and the sun was once again hot, so we struggled out of our sweaters. Through the haze, we could see the pale blue hummocks of the Mealy Mountains.

From this pinnacle, the tree tops – all pointed evergreens – were like an ocean of never-breaking waves rolling steadily towards the horizon. The grey strip of highway bisected the scene into two seas. The highway began in the distance and pushed through the land until it disappeared in another distance. Occasionally a brightly coloured car barrelled down the road; it would flash in the sun for a brief moment, then it would drive itself out of sight. There was a tremendous stillness and silence at work. The scene before us augured an almost incomprehensible immensity—and this is no exaggeration. What we saw before us seemed to go on forever, towards all points of the compass. All that could be seen stretched to far-away reaches. In theory, we could have simply stood up, ambled back down the trail, and then travelled from treetrunk to treetrunk, like going from pillar to post, trudging northward for months. The trees would eventually thin out and would be no more, and if we kept going across the tundra we'd finally reach Ungava. I suppose we could call it our *ultima thule*. Travelling

through the woods like that, we might never encounter another human face. We might as well be travelling between the lonely stars. What we saw before us was impossible, unattainable.

We had decided that it was time to leave Labrador. Time to pack up and start again elsewhere. A couple days before, I'd been offered a job, a rare full-time job, teaching English at a small college in northern Ontario. The school was about a six hour drive to our mothers' houses, but at least it was in our home province. I told the school that I'd take the weekend to mull it over, but really it was a foregone conclusion. Of course, I'd say yes to it. Were there any other options?

"If you take this job, will you get the PhD done?" Claire asked.

"If I take this job, I don't know that I'll need to get the PhD done," I said. "What's more, I'm not sure that I can get it done at this point anyway."

A few weeks earlier, I had emailed a package to the English department's graduate student coordinator in St. John's. I call it a package, but it really wasn't even that. Just a bunch of jumbled-up ideas, neatly typed and formatted, about examining Canada's north as a kind of pastoral place. He saw right through my laboured attempt. He wrote back later that same day, telling me that he couldn't see a PhD dissertation emerging out of what I'd outlined: "If the north is so pastoral, then where are the sheep? Where are the pastures?" Still, he promised to send it on to a few other professors in the department. One by one each wrote back telling me more or less the same thing. And yet that was strangely liberating. The PhD had been a heavy yoke upon my shoulders for the better part of two years; now I was relieved to feel it lifting from me, even if that relief came from having, in a sense, failed at what I'd intended to do.

"But I have been writing," I told Claire. "About us, about life here."

Back in our rented home, piled inches deep on my work table, there were at least a half-dozen spiral-bound notebooks. Every page in those notebooks was filled with scrawled lines of poetry, prose, and hastily scratched notes. All that I'd seen, done, heard found its way into those pages.

In an email to the coordinator, I mentioned the notebooks to him. He wrote back: "As you know, we have a Creative Writing program."

I'd already begun to wonder if there were stories in the notebooks, stories that could become a book of some sort.

Claire turned to me and said, "Is this one of those books where you find out at the end that the whole thing has been written by the lead character? Where you find that the story never really happened, but it was always premeditated, always being written, being shaped."

"Aren't they all like that?" I asked.

Claire was now well into the first trimester of her pregnancy. Our misadventure with the condom at Muskrat Falls inspired us; we figured the winds of destiny had been blowing against our tent walls that night, and so shortly after we eschewed birth control altogether. The fruit of that decision was ever-growing, and we spent many hours talking about the days ahead. Sometimes these conversations were anxious; sometimes they were full of hopeful expectation. We often felt like we were in a wonderful limbo. What the academics would call a *liminal* space—an inbetween-ness of creativity, choice, peril.

We leaned on our elbows, our hips and backs against the sun-warmed rock and looked out at the scrolling sweep of pointed treetops. My gaze travelled to the horizon and all the way to that distant, imagined Ungava.

"It would be nice to bring a baby into this, wouldn't it?" I said, nodding towards the view before us.

"We need to be near family," Claire said. "We can't do this alone."

The pregnancy had been going well. The doctors were all pleased, the tests were all coming back with encouraging results, especially for a mother of "advanced age" as one doctor put it. There had been no bouts of morning sickness. Eager to do my best, I'd even picked up a few of those what-to-expect-when-you're-expecting books from the public library and read them every night for an hour or two before bed. When I checked them out, the librarian, an elderly lady read the titles and then looked at me with shrewd eyes.

"Don't take these instruction manuals too seriously," she said. "Treat them like fiction. Things that might happen, but probably won't. You forget most of what you read anyway, so you'll make it up as you go along."

All things presaged a happy outcome: a healthy pregnancy, a healthy child. And yet Claire was right, as usual. Why would we try to go it alone? It was difficult to relinquish the idea of bringing a little Labradorian into this world, but it only made sense to follow Claire's instincts and take the job, go home, be closer to family.

Sitting on the slab of rock in the sunshine with Claire, sitting under a bright northern sky at the start of summer, I wished that I could have filled my hands with all my antidepressants and thrown them over the rocky ledge, losing them in the forest below – or some such grand, symbolic gesture – indicating that I was free of the pursuit of the black dogs, the noonday demon, the formless little fears. But I wasn't about to do that; I couldn't have done that. I knew what I needed. However, moments of pain and anxiety were just that—moments. And a bad day was only a day, only a handful of hours. Depressed and anxious feelings weren't the fabric of

my life but merely threads woven into the fabric, and it was a cloth that included much more than just a miserable weariness. For the first time in a long time, I felt I had purpose in life. That's such a hackneyed phrase, isn't it? Purpose in life. Yet it contains so much: etymologically, purpose is related to propose—and propose invites a tentative quality. When we propose, we are suggesting, essaying, trying-out, working things through, and making the best of what we've got. That's all we can ask for in the long run.

"Why don't we go see a justice of the peace tomorrow?" I asked.

Claire squeezed my hand.

"We'll honeymoon in Labrador," she said. "That's rare."

*

Chances are, you've read this before. An overgrown boy journeys to the howling northlands and encounters adversity from others, from the environment, from within himself. Ideally, in the middle of all that ice and snow, he falls in love. In confronting all the various tribulations, in finding succor, he becomes a fully-realized man and then returns to a more southern city as a renewed version of himself, a version that will withstand all of life's slings and arrows. It's epic, it's heroic, it's a cliché, and yet it holds true or at least true enough. At the very least, it's what we expect.

Before returning home, renewed, reinvigorated, I had to say goodbye to the north. And when I know that I must leave a place, I walk around the town for a couple of weeks beforehand, thinking *goodbye, goodbye*. Perhaps it's just anxiety masquerading as attentiveness, but I'll look at a birch tree presiding over a lawn – a tree and a lawn that I passed every day for a year –

thinking of how I'll never see them again, how I might not even think of them again. There is, for me, a definite low-level fear when I must watch my present moments unavoidably recede into the world of memory.

During that time, I walked around Happy Valley-Goose Bay giving parting glances at everything I saw. Not just the picturesque views, like the Mealy Mountains across the river, but the squat, dreary buildings too, like the drugstore, Maxwell's, the North-mart, the PO, all covered in that corrugated metal surrounded by gravel and dirt parking lots full of potholes. For one last time, I walked past the house – a few streets over from where Claire and I lived – where the owners had raised large wooden letters, each a metre tall, across their lawn: MERRY CHRISTMAS LABRADOR. They left their festive message standing all year long, though in December the letters were festooned with gleaming multi-coloured lights. For one last time, I walked around "on base," looking at the remnants of the cold war, at the padlocked bunkers and the broken windows of the old warehouses. For one last time, I went into the Tim Hortons by the hospital, bought a coffee and doughnut from the Filipino man behind the counter; when he handed it to me, I raised the cup as if to say *cheers*, then I sat down to look at the sandy field and evergreens on the other side of the drive-thru lane.

Perhaps this all seems a trifle sentimental, even a trifle morbid, but I felt that this was an episode of my life coming to a close. When you're seeing something or someone for the last time, you need to acknowledge that fact.

The hardest part, of course, was saying goodbye to Virgie. A couple days before Claire and I drove away, I went for an evening walk with Virgie. It would be our last. We started at his house, walked past the pizzeria, and followed the stretch of dirt road towards the river. From there, we branched to the right, following the trail that paralleled the course of the Churchill. On

either side of the trail were the scrubby alders, now fully in leaf. Though we had doused ourselves liberally with bug dope before heading out, we still spent a fair amount of time slapping the mosquitoes away. The trail brought us out to the wide, duneless beach where the sand lay flat, smooth, and grey. There was a breeze travelling with the river; its presence helped to deter the mosquitoes. We strode across the sand towards the water. Beyond the opposite shore, the Mealies edged up over the horizon. The pale, evening sky was large, clear and distant.

"It's a nice enough beach," Virgie said, looking around. "But you never see anyone swimming here. The river's some strong."

Though the day had been hot and the evening was still warm, we had the beach to ourselves. There were no houses nearby, and the highway was at least a kilometer away. I didn't notice any other footprints in the sand except for our own.

"If this place were in Ontario, it would all be developed," I said, gesturing to the trees behind us. "There would be a row of summer homes with two-car garages, and each house would be worth a million dollars."

"This place was developed once. Birch Island, it was. A little community with people and houses—the works. That's all gone now as you can see."

As he spoke, he appeared sad. For the first time, it occurred to me that Virgie might miss me when I was gone. I always felt, with doubt and pain, that he just entertained my presence, that he was just being patient with me. It hadn't even crossed my mind that he considered me as a friend. He had lived here for so long, knew so many people, what need would he have of another friend? Of someone like me? An awkward, unhappy come-from-away.

As we stood on the sand, looking over aspens and alders that covered over what was once Birch Island, we were close to the spot where I'd first met Virgie months earlier.

"I guess you're all packed up by now?" Virgie asked.

"Mostly," I said. "We've sold a lot of our stuff. The couch, the table and chairs. If it doesn't fit into the car, we're not taking it."

"That doesn't leave you with much."

"It doesn't," I said. "Just the clothes on our back, a few books, the pots and pans."

"Sometimes that's the best way."

"A fresh start."

We walked along the sand, slowly strolling from one willowy shrub to the next, many metres apart. How they managed to grow in the sand, I've no clue, except to say that the roots must have surged past the dry grains to the moisture below. In that way, they found what they needed.

"I've always lived here," Virgie said. "I'd come close over the years, close to packing up, but I've always stayed."

"I belong to a transient generation. We're always packing up and moving on."

"Going for a job is a good reason to go."

We sat on a tree trunk deposited on the beach. Without bark, it was naked and grey, as if fossilized, with roots splaying at one end and a few stumpy branches protruding from the other.

"If you don't mind, could I ask—what's a college teacher make these days?"

I told him. Virgie whistled quick and low.

"Yes, I should've gone to university."

My salary, it should be noted, wasn't huge by any stretch. I was still many years away from joining the lucky folks on the sunshine list. But for most of his life, Virgie had made his money one hour at a time, one pelt at a time. To have all that money, all five figures, spelled out

in the line of a contract, just waiting to be handed to you, was rare indeed, especially for his generation of Labradorians.

"But you'll need that money out there," he added. "The cost of property will be high, I'm sure. And you'll want to have house and a yard."

"We'll rent for a year or two and save our money, then we'll look at houses."

"You said the school was north of Sudbury, so why not just make a tilt in the woods—that would be cheapest." He laughed and stood up.

We looked again at the river. Its current was slow, almost deceptive, but powerful all the same. We turned down the trail and into the cloud of mosquitoes and made our way back into town.

At the end of his driveway, Virgie handed me a brown paper bag. Inside, I found his copy of *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*. I tried to refuse it, I knew how much it meant to him, but he was resolute. The book was to be mine.

As I said goodbye, he stood sharply, stiffly for a moment like a man posing for a photograph he didn't want to have taken. He was oddly formal, even mechanical, and I knew that this was an acknowledgement of our parting. An acknowledgement of this finality. I felt quietly panicked as I stood there, a pained witness to the facts of my own life.

Like all moments, it passed. I saw him settle back into himself. I realized then that I too had been standing there rigidly, awkwardly. Then I also eased back into myself and waved at him carelessly and turned my steps down the road once more, as if we might have such evening walks like this for years to come.

*

When we left Happy Valley-Goose Bay, it was early afternoon at roughly the mid-summer mark. That first day we drove as far as Churchill Falls. Rain fell in a steady stream. The drive felt slow and long. The rain affected Claire and I as we drove, putting us in a contemplative mood for most of the journey. We didn't speak much for the first hour or two. Our eyes took in the road ahead and the scenery around us. I'd never seen the land looking so green before. At one point we passed through a thunderstorm. Lightning pulsed in the grey-blue sky. As we approached the town, we drove past a soaking wet fox at the side of the road. The way it looked at us, it may very well have envied the comfort of our car.

The next morning we ate the typical road-trip breakfast of bacon and eggs, then drove to Bowdoin Canyon for one last look at what little is left of the falls. We held hands as we stood at the edge looking down at the two sheer rock walls that create a corridor leading outwards to that seemingly impossible wilderness. As we stood there, the sun came out and the heat began to build. The forest was soon humid and fragrant. We found a moose hoof-print in the mud and bear scat on the trail.

When we returned to the car, which was loaded with suitcases and cardboard boxes, I felt glad for the road ahead of me and yet some point in the afternoon we would cross the border into Quebec. That would be the end of our lives in the Big Land.

Leaving Labrador is definite, absolute. There are many places you can leave and say to yourself, "I'll be back." You can tell yourself that you'll return to Paris or to Rome or to New Orleans as you board the plane to fly away. In your heart, you doubt you will return, but you can tell yourself you will and you can tell yourself you believe it. With Labrador, you don't have

that luxury. You leave it behind, and that's the end. It's surprising you got there in the first place.

Everyone is a house of winding halls and clustered rooms. Within me, one hall separates from the tangle and leads to Labrador. I can open the door, look through it, step through it—to the caribou moss, the crackerberries, to Hubbard's gun rod and Bible, to a conversation with Virgie, to the blue snow at twilight, the blinding ice under a sun that burns cold. To that rock, that sky, that long winter with that sharp, ulu-shaped moon. I carry them with me as a kind of hunger. When I lie down in my bed, I travel back to the grey hills rising into a snow-filled sky. To the snow that falls all through my dreams, all through my days.

I think of Labrador, oddly enough, when I'm sitting in a plane, that most artificial of environments. Once the jet has risen through the clouds, its wings riding the cold air currents high above the earth, the light there is raw and wintry – all is blue and white and so bright – that it reminds me, longingly, almost painfully, of January afternoons in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. I haven't seen that quality of light anywhere else on earth: only in Labrador, only above the clouds.

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