

EVERYTHING IS WHAT IT IS

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Everything Is What It Is

by

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Abstract

The stories in this collection raise questions about the nature of Newfoundland cultural identity. As characters oscillate physically and mentally between home and away they are forced to examine the nature of their relationship to place. They face conflicts that help them get a better understanding of their place and themselves; they also learn about gender biases in the construction of their cultural identity. These themes are examined in an accompanying essay, which looks at the collection in the context of contemporary Newfoundland literature.

Everything Is What It Is

Noah's costume was easy to make: an easel smattered with indigo and yellow paint, a brush, and a fake ear that he tore with a carpet knife. Anne *became* the flower first, like an actor, and then got what she needed for the part. First, she cut the middle out of a plastic sunflower she bought at Walmart. She squeezed her head in to replace the center of the flower, the yellow petals extending out from her round face like degrees on a compass. Then she dotted yellow marker splotches on top of her freckles to create the effect of the buds on her face, the stamen. To bring the whole thing together she used a fishnet stocking that criss-crossed her face, reducing her infinite number of facial expressions to just a few. She stood in front of the porch mirror and called to Noah in the living room, sitting on the couch playing with the paint and easel.

"It isn't sexy, I thought fish net was supposed to be sexy?"

"I guess not when it covers your face," he said, entering the porch and standing behind her, looking at their costumed selves in the mirror.

"Maybe it just clashes with my stem. It's the only thing green that I have."

He leaned his head over her left shoulder so that the fake torn ear was on the outside and squeezed her, then lifted his head, moving back to take in the whole costume.

"Are you going to cover up the MEC on your fleece?"

“It’s fine, Noah,” She turned around to face him, “Did you know a single flower is actually many flowers?”

“Look at you, smarty pants.”

“The net might be uncomfortable, later.”

“Can you take it off?”

“I can, but the whole thing might fall apart.”

On the way to the party they walked across the long swath of grass—a demarcation, a no-man’s land -- that divides the suburban cookie cutter homes of Churchill Square from the colourful-yet-squalid downtown row houses. Decisively down-at-heel downtown had been settled by squatters who arrived at the place with big dreams, building what they thought would be only temporary dwellings, until they found they could barely eke out a living, and had to remain where they were. Noah’s parents had grown up in one of those downtown shanties that clung to the side of the hill in the Battery overlooking the harbour.

Noah, admiring a large-ish oak on the walk to the party, said “You don’t get many trees like this, around here.”

“No, and growing so straight, must be ‘cause of the valley.”

“Dad told me there used to be a dump here once. Funny. The soil is good for roots, maybe.”

"This net is choking me, remind me again how come you got to be Van Gogh?"

"We could always switch."

"Yeah but the ear doesn't fit me, remember?"

"I know" said Noah, "and without that no one would know who you're supposed to be."

"As long as I can be a sunflower too, not just a painting of one."

"At least you don't have to suffer." Noah pointed to the bloodied fake ear as if he was pointing a gun at his head.

"Without the suffering, Van Gogh wouldn't have become famous, whereas the women who suffer are just hysterical, madwomen in the attic."

"Yeah, I s'pose you're right."

"Hey look, swings. Let's do it!"

The party is in a house downtown with a quadrangle shape that Van Gogh thinks is funky. Sunflower says she couldn't live there, it feels like the walls are closing in.

They dance kitty corner with each other along with Sonny and Cher to a song by Spirit of The West. Sunflower bounces out of her skin at the chorus: *I'm so sick of the drink, take me home for a rest.*

Fake-mustachioed Sonny follows her husband Cher off the living room floor and into the kitchen to get fresh beers. Van Gogh does a head nod to indicate to Sunflower that he wants her to follow him. She mimes she wants to stay up, and his face shows his disappointment in her. His face said: why would she want to be dancing by herself amongst near strangers?

“Anne dances like Snoopy,” Cher says.

“She dances like nobody is watching,” Noah adds.

Noah knows how compelling Anne is to observe, gyrating like a banshee, like she did *back there* at folk festivals on the west coast; but *there* is not *here*, here only has flashes of what it used to be. Flashes of blue-skied homesickness they felt in Vancouver had made them come to love the traditional music they hated growing up. When The Irish Descendants played at Deer Lake Park in Burnaby, Anne spun like a whirling dervish amongst the crowd of mostly men. They both knew it’s wasn’t the real thing. It wasn’t the haunting intensity of Emile Benoit singing *the land we’re walking on, it all belongs to you*. It was a taste of home, like condensed milk, maybe too sweet but familiar. Noah knew from the faces and clothes of most of those men that they were from small towns and bays; likely they had come from working all over the Lower Mainland for this night of revelry, this circus act under artificial lights. They salute the players with beers thrust in the air. The announcer comes on to tell them, in the middle of a long list of rules and thank-yous to corporate sponsors, that the “newfs have drunk the place dry of beer.” Undeterred, the men start ordering red wine. Noah, slightly drunk himself, tells Anne that

the scene reminds him of a Brueghel painting, the strange and lively inhabitants of the village at the carnival, their teeth stained red in the joy of harvest; "Like foreign devils," Anne jokes, the phrase learned during her ESL stint in Japan. Noah *is* as happy as the devil himself, just like these men. It's a reunification with a tribe he knows: good and bad, it's what he knows. Years ago, travelling through Europe the summer after university, he'd been teased by his cousin as they craned their necks to look up at the final panel at the Sistine Chapel: *Noah is drunk and disgraced*. "You can't escape it, b'y, dat's you," he'd said. While Michelangelo's final thought was about humanity's degradation, Noah feels this gathering is a celebration, an honouring of a place they all long for, here on earth, a purgatorial plea. This feeling at the festival is the spark that ignites their return home. Within a few months it is no longer enough for Noah to look out the window of their functional tenth story apartment and see the snow on the mountains, and for Anne to repeat "they're big, beautiful and for everyone."

At the party Cher is going on about his costume and how he now has more sympathy for women. "It was a bitch putting make-up on," he says, unaware that the joke's on him. He fights his way through the kitchen to get them both beers.

"Not used to parties like this are ya, b'y?" Cher says, handing Noah an India. India beer is back in vogue, after thirty years of neglect. Noah thinks the old-style label is out of place. It belongs on a stubby, he recalled his Old Man drinking it, his short sleeve shirts, drawing on a cigarette, all of them sitting around watching their black and white floor model. He'd tell them to shut their mouths if the hockey was on. And his mother brought to tears when John White sang on *All Around the Circle*.

Noah sips, only half listening to Cher go on about the price of houses downtown. Sonny calls to Cher in the kitchen from halfway down the stairs, "Jim, can you come help fix the toilet?" Cornered by the crowd in the kitchen, Noah spies Sunflower standing alone in the living room: she's drooping.

She was so alive and uninhibited back there, on a sunny fall weekend trip to Vancouver Island, the weekend they fell in love. Her eyes lit up like a child's on the ferry ride from Tsawwassen to Vancouver Island; for her the place was a dream island of *peace, love and understanding*. The pace of life was island in spirit, Noah thought. Development is at least slowed by the surrounding sea, just as the rain-forest's canopy there slows the drops of falling rain.

An advertisement for Salt Spring Island Estates was posted all along the stairs leading onto the ferry. The tagline, *Come Home to a Place of Untouched Wilderness* is a see-through, a lie, except for the people who've grown tired of thinking. Noah takes in the view of monster homes with decks and windows perfectly designed to overlook the bay from every possible angle, like fortresses with turrets. How different from the old salt-box houses up along the Southern Shore. Those houses faced away from the slapping sea, from wind and work and tragedy. As they sped away in a rented blue Toyota, this sea of thought rocking in his mind from storm to calm breaks the spell of the lush hills around them. But he needs to keep his thoughts about their new life in B.C. in check. Be here now, that was what she would say. He smiles and looks her in the eye. *We've got to get ourselves back to the garden*, he remembered. That was the quote she used on her email signature.

Maybe you arrive to all islands the same, he pondered, with the promise of another chance: you or your small tribe move to a garden, surrounded and protected by the sea, where you can start over. He realizes they have never really arrived back at the island they were born on; they only know it by the *leaving* of it. Anyway, no man lives on *one* island anymore.

"You did well there, she's great, Noah," Sonny says.

"Yeah b'y, she's a free spirit," Cher adds.

"We're so glad you guys moved back, we need some old friends from away to shake things up, ya know."

"Yeah, we both liked it out West, but it's not home," Noah says.

Anne breaks into the conversations of the people gathered in the kitchen around Sonny and Cher: "I think Noah here, my creator, has a crush on you, Cher!" Uncomfortable with the remark, Cher says, "I like being the talented one for a change, poor Sonny Bono might have been an okay mayor but he wasn't much of a singer, or, come to think of it, a skier!"

Anne's face suddenly looks serious, *so* un-sunflower. Sonny Bono died and there is nothing funny about that. Noah used to tease her that her sense of humor was like her mother's, French; he said she didn't appreciate sarcasm. Cher changes the conversation back to places they might live in the city, house prices, the latest gossip about people who

aren't at the party. Sonny and Cher and most of the other people at the party, all in disguises, are friends of Noah. Anne grew up in Placentia, then moved to town in high school, her friends scattered everywhere. The hard crust of why they are back here in St. John's -- the fact to be presented -- is work. Noah landed a job as a copywriter for an ad agency, and Anne a job in graphic design. Cher jokes that the entire party is "an exercise in branding. It's everywhere now."

The truth is Noah is interested in mining stories for his other, truer, life as a writer, the inside, soft, messy part, that these guys, these old friends, don't fuss with. When he'd crossed his parents' front lawn, his mother said "You're the last person I 'xpected to see here." He's the prodigal son returned, but in this story he's brought home a wife. No, that wasn't even his story, he thought. His story was that he wanted to know what happened when one willfully turned against the tides, what happened when one dismissed the old saying -- *no sir, you can't go home again* -- and went back, back home.

They've been together for three years, he and Anne; both have lived away from home for six. They met in a history night course at UBC and quickly connected. His last move, before they came home, was to her rent-controlled apartment with a view of Stanley Park, but they left it all behind to "put down some roots" -- Anne's phrase, muttered to a complete stranger on the plane home. With all the tourist trade, they couldn't get seats together. She normally didn't talk to strangers, but in this case she'd broken the ice in an attempt to calm herself after they'd all been jolted into communal alertness by unexpected turbulence. It might have been the memory of all the 9/11 coverage, but when the plane dropped suddenly he'd said the *Our Father* under his

breath, feeling emotional for doing so when everything smoothes out. Looking out the window at endless stands of fir dotted with ponds, he realizes that violence isn't the great threat in this country; no, it was the same threat his ancestors had known: the distance you had to cover to get back home in a gale.

They leave the party after Cher, already loaded drunk, sings *I got you babe*, one too many times. Only a block down the road towards home, Noah notices that he has left Van Gogh's easel behind. He stops and thinks about going back for it, calculates how far it would be to walk, then turns and sees Anne is already slipping away from him. She always walks like there is a fire somewhere that she has to put out.

When he catches up, she says: "I heard you're going to a Super Bowl party with Jim and the guys?"

"Yeah, it's a fundraiser, you can come."

"You hate football, don't you? Who *are* you?"

"They're just friends from high school, it's only a few hours."

"Yeah, well the girls were saying the guys didn't even want to be in the room when they had their babies. It's like they're in some kind of time warp! These are your friends?"

"They're just *people*," Noah says, his face revealing what a poor defense the statement is. "I hardly know them anymore, what can I say?"

Anne moves at such a pace that Noah has to jog to try and catch up, he calls her name, but she's too far ahead to hear him. Along the road he sees the garbage left behind by the Halloween Marti Gras party-goers on their way to George Street: a part of a smashed plastic pumpkin, an eye patch, a fake hand. The fall rain is creating small rivers pushing leaves and trash along into thirsty culverts that flow directly into the harbor, a dirty sink that is never emptied. He crosses Churchill Square. Taxis are coming from every direction, unimaginative ghosts and goblins. Anne disappears into the dark streets that border the other side of the Square. The rain is coming down almost horizontally as he passes the bust of Winston and his impenetrable grin.

Noah stands in the porch kicking off his boots. The strange porch that is neither inside nor outside. The floor is still a gray decaying concrete but the walls are freshly painted a bright yellow. He suspects the porch's history: it must have been outside the house in the beginning. All the houses in the area were built from the inventory of house plans existing in the early fifties, when beautiful family communities were going up all along the outskirts of larger, warmer, more hospitable, North American cities. In *this* house it was clear to Noah that the owner, a family man with bills to pay, decided that he'd save on heat and have a decompression chamber to move through, a place to make the transition from the wilds of work and weather to the sanctuary of home and hearth. The add-on porch was a chamber to shake off snow and rain, yes, but also a chamber to shake off your woes and news of the outside world before the youngsters would come around the corner and pull on your suit jacket, asking you to spell words or change a light bulb for mommy. Yet, Noah thinks, the man knew his home, knew its annoying creaks

and small pleasures, and he grew to love it by having to work to keep it going. Back then you moved twice or three times in a lifetime, that was all. Now it's just two people living here, temporarily, two people with too-many pairs of shoes and an oversized bag of Hershey's treats ready for the *real* Halloween night.

About to enter the house proper, Noah looks in the mirror, sees the fake blood has smeared, branched out along the age lines of his neck like small tributaries from the fake torn ear. She isn't home. Maybe she forgot her key, he thinks. He leaves the inside door open, lies down on the couch, crooked, and waits for her to come in through the porch.

Noah lifts himself enough to drop the cigarette butt into the toilet.

"Don't you want to know where I have been?"

"I do, but not if it means a fight," he says.

"Oh, here we go, it's not always about us, you know. I went by the house, Dad wasn't home and Mom was just sitting there in the dark, I could see her through the window. I wanted to go in but I just couldn't, so I walked to Timmy Ho's, not exactly a wild time, was it?"

She lifts the plug out to let some water escape then turns on the water so that steam fills the room.

"We'll go see her play at church tomorrow," Noah says, not sure what else to say.

“She’s a brave soldier. Dad is never home. She just...I don’t know... needs company.” Anne gets out of the bath and wraps the worn beach towel around her body. She likes that towel, it reminds her of the big beach towels they used to lie on around the bay on those rare sunny days. Back when the sun wasn’t a threat to her pale white skin. *This* beach towel is just another foreign object belonging to the owner of this rented house. Noah glares down at the black and white checkered tiles still holding their place since the early fifties. Anne wipes away the steam in the mirror. She wipes away the yellow marks on her face to reveal her freckles again. “One time, when I was little, when we first moved into town, I heard her get up and go into the garage and start the car, I went out and she was just sitting there, smoking. The cat was in there with her. She’d thrown up and the cat was eating it.”

“Jesus, oh Anne, I’m so sorry,” he says, standing up from the toilet, slowly, like a sunflower in the wind-- unable to stand erect, his stem barely able to hold the weight of his flowery head. He rests his head on her neck and puts his arms around her waist. She unclasps his hands, then turns and kisses him, once. “Everything is what it is,” she says, “nothing more.”

“Don’t forget your pill,” he calls after her as she moves down the narrow hall.

Noah looks at himself in the ancient vanity. Whatever Van Gogh gave the world, it wasn’t worth the pain, and nobody takes a knife to himself without a bucketful of suffering. He thinks how shameful of him to dress like that. Anyway, the truth is he’s more like brother and manager Theo than artist Vincent; *she* should have worn the ear.

Tomorrow, in the cold light of day, sober and seeing clearly, he'll drive up to her mother's house and offer to help out. Maybe he can drive her to church and thank her after for her lovely organ playing. Maybe clean the leaves out of the gutters before the snow comes. That would be doing something.

"That is what men do, they act," Anne had said, back in Vancouver when he stupidly brought her flowers to make up for something he'd done. Noah looks himself straight in the mirror and repeats to himself something she had said, a prayer that it will be enough to sustain them: everything is what it is.

Badlands

The trip always begins this way: we eat the heart of last year's moose. I freeze it as soon as I gets home. I take a marker and write the details on the freezer bag, who shot it, the size and the sex. We have licenses for both but we prefer the male. It gives more meat to share, and it falls more dramatically. We expect it to fight more. And it makes a better trophy. The best of all to eat is a young male, tender, but still muscled. We always feels worse for a female. When we get to the cabin out on The Downs again the next fall I make sure the heart is thawed and ready to eat. I cooks it well, then slice off a piece for everyone, topped with gravy.

"Randy never could eat the heart, b'y could he?" the Old Man says before we dig in. The rest of us couldn't see the difference. Meat is meat.

"No and he never went near a gun neither," I say, "but he's as good as gold."

We'd go hunting most days until it'd be getting near dark. Randy stayed at the cabin and chopped wood or minded things for us. When we got back we'd play cards all night and drink. The worst part of playing 120s with Randy was he wouldn't take any joy in winning, not the way most fellas do. If I get the jack or the five of trump I jumps up and then slam it down. Depends how drunk I get. Randy could have had the jack of hearts and be trumped and he still laid every card the same. Buck says to me "Fox, is he your brother or wha'?"

Dad tried to put a nickname on Randy. He used to call him "Head" when we were in school. It had nothing to do with his scar. One side of his face is perfectly normal, the other looks like he's been burned or branded with a poker like a cow. Dad told us he called him Head cause he was always thinking about something. Every day going to and from school he had his head down, as if he was pondering the ground for its meaning. He came thirty seconds before me, head first, a breeched baby who made room for me. He didn't cry. The doctors said they didn't know what was wrong. After a few years the tests said he had a mild form of autism.

He would wander. One time he was out for a walk somewhere on the barren near the cove checking some rabbit snares and he found a body. He comes up, *same face as always not a hint of a t'ing*, as I told de by's, just as if he was coming from the store on an errand for Mom, or a pack of smokes for the Ol' Man. Told me he'd found Joe Murphy from Horse Chops, a derelict, dead out near Triangle Pond. I always heard that Joe was like he was because he got the umbilical chord tied around his neck when he was born. *Poor old skeet*, Mom said, *the luck of it*. We gathered a small crew and went out. And sure enough, it was the Ol' Joe from Horse Chops, he must of tried to walk across the barren to our cove and just gave out. Maybe he was full of beer, though he didn't smell of it. Maybe he was just unlucky and had a heart attack up there. Unless he did it to himself? It was early in the spring when the weather might have turned on him, so he was a fool to make his way across. I must have told the story a hundred times out on The Downs or out in the shed, sometimes with Randy there, trying to get him to join in, but as usual he

stayed quiet; “too late is all,” he said when I pressed him. Uncle Buck said, “Randy knows b’y, you got to be careful out of The Downs.”

The cabin is exactly the same as it was back when we were young. Dad likes it like that. It’s only two miles from the house, but it’s a whole other world out on the bog of The Downs, like going back in time, Dad says. He hangs onto all the old stuff around the house too, like we were living in a museum. He plays records on the hi-fi, says it sounds better. The workers constructing the hydroelectric pipe built the place, I was telling a guy who’d come from town to buy a cord of wood; “it’s all about wind power now,” he says.

“Oh, b’y, we got lots of that!” I joke with him. He smiles and watches Randy go into the house without a word of recognition to either of us.

“He don’t say much, is all, he’s not all there.”

“He’s good to have around I guess.”

“Except when he gets upset by somethin’.”

He wanted to know more. So like a fish I play him, showing him I could cut off the conversation cold or keep him hooked on hearing more of the story until I was tired of it. Show him there’s tons going on up on the shore, a lot happens even up here in a place as small as Ferryland, even for a handyman like me.

I call out to Katherine for a couple of cups of tea and offer him a chair inside the woodshed.

When we was younger Randy and I were watching *Star Trek*. Mr. Spock tells Kirk about Hopkins's law of parallel planet development. Everything exists in a parallel universe. There were two brothers fighting on the show, one was black on the left and white on the right, the other was the opposite. "They're like us," I said. Then I ran around the table chasing him with a fly swatter, "you dirty Klingon." The Old Man and his crowd were playing cards, the table covered in of Irving-bought tumblers full of rum and coke. Uncle Brian stood up, shouting, "Jesus Christ a card laid is a card played," then his chair fell over and Randy went flying: his hands going into the hot stove until his head hit the iron like a log that was being shoved in that was just too big for the open door. He didn't cry. The burn was not too bad on his hands, but was a terrible dark purple on his forearms. We got him back to Gran's house where Mom was and she smothered it with turpentine and covered it with a bandage, a cure Gran got from Pop who had worked in the lumber camps. Randy just asked for ice cream. He didn't cry even when Mom and Gran went on about how bad it was.

"Tough as nails," the Old Man said.

I can read a person's face like no one else – that is why I'm such a good card player – and this guy from town is not impressed with the story. Soon he slips in that he best be getting back to town and to his wife. I watch him leave with a cord of wood that he paid

too much for, and then I think the next time a stranger comes I'll show a different side of the story.

I've tried to help Randy most of the time, but I could get fed up just as easily. I get crooked especially when the migraines come on. They come on when I'm out in the light for too long. In school when I got a headache I went to the nurse's office in the portables and lied down. I got to miss a lot of school, cause of it. Randy was there at the crack of dawn, he'd sit out on the steps until the janitor or someone came along and let him in. I'm the lucky one though; when they did tests on me they showed I had none of his condition. When I get a headache it reminds me that I got the long end of the stick. Even when the pain is piercing me I know what to do to fix it, lie down in the dark with some aspirin and let Katherine take care of me. You couldn't help Randy, but you could love him like the way you would a dog, always there somewhere in the back of your mind, not good for much talk. Mom used to scream at the rest of us "children should be seen and not heard" but never at Randy.

The odd time he surprised me. Like once we were up at Tors Cove dam, perched high up on the breakwater, standing on the huge boulders, skimming rocks. The wind was howling down the pond, waves crashing against the grate of the dam. The sky was threatening rain. A duck was being pushed towards the space that led to the turbines.

"It's going to get sucked in," Randy said, "let's go get the Old Man."

"Screw that, it's too late." I said.

"Can't we help it?"

It was near suppertime and I suppose I knew there was no hope. It must have had a broken wing. The Old Man knew about such things, but we didn't at the time.

"Let's get a stick," he said.

He came back with a stick and thrust it out into the water. The duck didn't take to it. It was still struggling, fighting the current with its legs.

"Why won't it fly?"

"Stupid bird," I said.

I picked up a rock and threw it, hoping it would move away from the grate. It was losing the battle, swimming against those waves.

"Let's go Randy, it's okay, it won't get caught."

"No," he said.

I shouted across to him: "I'm going, who cares, it's just a stupid bird, no different than a gull." I started across the breakwater, jumping from rock to rock, solid under my feet, it was like a game, and that made it easier for me to leave him behind, and to leave the duck to its fate. I looked back and saw the duck finally surrender to the flowing water into the turbines waiting. Randy just sat there, still as a stone. When he didn't come home with me, Mom asked. I said, "What are ya asking me for?"

"Gary, you knows better than that, you knows what 'e's like. Go and bring him home, you're supposed to look after 'im. "

I walked half an hour, all the way back to where he was sitting. My head started to pound. I shoved him down to the ground. "You fuckin' little sooky baby." I dug my fists into his chest and told him if he told the Old Man or Mom about the duck I'd kick the livin' shit out of him. He threw me off him and then put his foot on my throat. He was a lot stronger than me even though we was the same size. After he let me up he soon forgot about the bird, and I grabbed him by the collar of his jean jacket and made him march ahead of me to the house. Just like I did when always did when he got into trouble, pressing my free hand to my temple to ease the pain.

In bed that night I told him I was sorry. But I could see that I couldn't clean this mess up with hockey cards, not even for both Mahovolich brothers.

Everything happens for a reason. There's a logical explanation, that's what Mr. Spock would have said. When we were teenagers, I used to tell Randy what I'd been up to all day when we went to bed. I used Hopkins's law to excuse some of the things I'd done. If me and the by's had used slugs to steal a few Cokes from a vending machine at school, in another dimension, a parallel universe, a pair of twins was giving Pepsi back. It didn't always make sense. When Dad and Mom split up I'd initially suggested there's a pair of twins whose parents are getting back together. Dad was living a separate life from us. He'd had another woman out in Alberta, where he'd go to work six weeks on, six weeks off, after the fishery shut down. The Old Man always told us about how tall the trees were out there. How he'd been praised for his way with a chain saw. He never talked about the people he must have met. I remember how pissed I got; I swore I'd never talk to him again. Randy's face said he knew all along, somehow. Randy could tell you

details about conversations you had years ago that meant nothing to you. He had a good memory, maybe not like *Rain Man* or anything really special I s'pose, though.

We couldn't keep watch over him anymore. As he grew older he'd wander off in the middle of the night. With the money left for him in Nan's will, we'd arranged to send him to a special place for people like himself. We thought it was close to where Dad was; they said it was the best in the country. But it turned out he was five hundred miles away from the Old Man. The mainland always seemed too big for us in the cove. Like with most things Randy just went with the flow. When I took him to the airport I had the last word, "good luck," I don't know if he heard me or not. I hoped he hadn't. Sometimes we says the thing that seems right for the situation but isn't right at all for the person. I went out to visit him, once, after I went out to see the Old Man when he split with his other woman and begged me to come. When I caught up with the Old Man he just joked about it, how you couldn't love a woman like you could a new set of tools or a new motorcycle. Couldn't leave his job and come see Randy with me right then, he said. But as soon as he got his new bike on the road he'd love to do the drive.

I found Randy at a small pond near the special needs place he lived in, feeding the pigeons like some lonely old man. There was a soccer game going on at the home, the nurse and I tried to get him playing.

"Remember when we used to play?"

He was the same. But at least surrounded by people like himself. The nurse said he was keeping busy, good as it gets, they gave him a job as a night watchman at the place, and he helped around the place doing whatever needed doing.

Back home, we were talking about him at the kitchen table with Mom. My youngster Stephanie said: "Daddy, does he watch the night?"

I'm looking down at myself and I'm dead and gone.

I was the one who got there first. Dad was deep in the woods and I couldn't get a hold of him. Officer Kews from the RCMP says it's pretty clear what happened. He meandered off the highway in the middle of the badlands, just gotten off a night shift, must have been dog-tired. He wasn't supposed to take the van without supervision. It was miles from where he was staying; maybe he got an urge to do something? There was ice on the road, it was like a sheet of glass, they said. The witness said the van spun like a topsy-turvy and then over the bank into the canyon. Bodies in motion stay in motion. A press release has been issued, no one else was hurt and there was no alcohol involved.

The officer guides me through an endless number of forms, and then he says, "The head of the group home called. He wants to meet you. You his family?"

"Yes."

"And you are his brother, correct?"

"Yes, I'm his twin."

I realize that with Randy's scar and the blood gone out of his face he couldn't tell.

"It must be extra hard for a twin."

"Yes, it is."

"I work with a lot of Newfies, best kind of people, hard working," he says.

But I'm not in the mood for talking.

"It's a dangerous stretch of road," the officer says, "mesmerizing, nothing to see."

"Yes, nothing to see," I repeat. "If you'll just tell me what happens next then."

I wake up when it's still dark but dawn is coming on in the distance. The sky is as wide as the ocean and filled with the kind of puffy clouds that make you dream while you're awake.

Tomorrow we will take care of all of the details and arrange to bring him back and plant him in the cove. The Ol' Man and me will split the cost and we'll fight with Air Canada and anyone else in his way. Mom will put on a jig's dinner and cry into it when we're out of the room. *Blessed are the meek*, that is the sermon she'll want for him. Dad will want to go to the cabin with the by's again and listen to the old songs and talk of the coming hunt. He'll play the old Irish Balladeers, *Barry McCormick Sings Drinking Songs* when it gets late, when the night gets sodden with his thinking about what might have been. He'll want things to be the same as they were before the fishery shut down, before he went out west and tried to replace Mom, before Randy was diagnosed, back to some

time that never existed for Randy and I. A time before scars. He thinks you can tinker with broken people like a blocked carburetor and make them good as new.

Today, I ask the lady at the Motel 6 for directions to that lone stretch of road. The place the van was towed out of. I understand how any time of year this road could mesmerize. I worry that all this light from the miles of open space will pierce into me and I'll have to close my eyes to it. I pull over underneath a truck-sized billboard says Drumheller: *Come Roam with the Dinosaurs*. I punch the dash "Randy what ya got done to yourself?" It's an hour or more before I can move back into the flow of the highway. The snow falls so quickly I have to keep the wipers on full speed just to see.

The Archipelago

It's only a few days after the new century has arrived and I'm flying all the way across the country, glancing out the window at the vastness of the great Canadian Shield. In my lap is an indigo-blue pot I made to hold George for this trip. I'd trade this bowl right now for his sweater or some of the old records we all used to listen to, something belonging to him that we shared.

I wake up in turbulence. An Asian boy in front of me smiles and then reaches out, as if welcoming me to the Far East. In the East/oh less is more/amongst the rooted/ classless poor, Finn had written me in the P.S., a song he's working on. Michelle had brought the mail into the pottery shop in the Battery that day and watched me disappear into it. I was swallowed into the words like a dory into the great big sea. Michelle smacked me when I said it was a relief *not to* get a letter from him, saying: "Sheila, what are you waiting for?"

I could count the reasons for a while: I was waiting for Mom to fully heal so I could break the news to her about me and Finn, and about Japan. I was waiting to count up all the fundraising money I'd collected in various pots and put it to good use in the AIDS awareness community, I was waiting to be really ready to leave his gravesite, where I'd go with carnations everyday. So many people are *not talking* about what it was that killed him that part of me wants to scream it. People don't change and all of sudden become filled with grace. George said that.

There's a video screen Finn's watching of another exit gate, he's expecting me to come out another way, I come up behind him, sitting in a line of orange plastic chairs, put my hands over his eyes.

-Guess who? I say.

-Sight for sore eyes, Jesus, you're down to skin and bones, he says.

- Here I am.

And then there is a big void of silence as we wait for the bags to make their way around to us on the carousel.

As we load the bags onto the train it feels too functional, too orderly, too clean. I thought everything would be messier somehow, more chaotic. When I tell him how austere it feels he tells me that it's because the epicenter was not far from where we are and everything is rebuilt over the ruins. Japan is an archipelago, a number of large and small islands formed from the same origin, the same eruption of lava. The buildings are safer now. Lightning doesn't strike twice.

He's eating cookies I brought him from home as the train moves in and out of tubular tunnels, advertisements on every bit of available space zooming by in this futuristic underground world. The commuters have their heads down, fingering their cell phones. I'm shocked by all the young people in Gap sweatshirts and Converse sneakers. I tell Finn I'd read that Japanese women were now getting their eyes adjusted by surgery to look more Western. I am as culture-shocked by how Western it is as how Eastern it

clearly used to be. Finn tells me that he's long over his culture shock; the kids have embraced him like nobody ever has.

We stop into a convenience store for wine and food. Everything is individually wrapped in cellophane, like a present. I'm still so exhausted, nothing seems real, this place is like a video game. We emerge from a tunnel going through a mountain, then dodge pedestrians until we're finally in his shed-sized apartment on top of Kobe's fault lines. I fall asleep.

-I've made you an onsen, he says, it heals all.

After, we eat some prepackaged noodles. Clean as you go I said, throwing the wrappers out. My days at McDonald's have made an indelible impression on me. I remember when George scoffed at me for working there.

A week later and I still can't sleep. Who knew love could be so exhausting, I joke.

The lady says "Arigatou gozaimasu" excitedly when we walk into the tourist area, full of onsens, a few miles from Kobe. The water is from the bubbling earth's centre, and there are emergency sirens everywhere in case the thing blows. The host gives me the instructions on a piece of pretty origami paper:

After soaking in the rinsing pool, scrub your body with soap. Cleanse away all impurities. Once you are finished cleaning and have rinsed all the soap off your body, enter the onsen for a soaking.

I sit on a stool in a room separated by a wall from him. I imitate the other women and children, scrubbing with a brush before getting in. They look like they are preparing for some great rite of passage, a baptism or a sacrifice for a volcanic god. Older, hardened women stare at me, reminding me of women 'round the bay. After soaking until I'm ready to faint, I head outside. There is a hint of spring that makes breathing feel unfamiliar, sweet. Sacred.

We fight over little things, first. We are not cleaning as we go. We have no space or friends; we are each other's whole world. It's the physical tension, a kind of slow -- but sometimes pleasurable -- suffocation we feel up in the 6 x 8 space of the crow's nest. To get a break he says we should go to a Love Hotel. We'll be just like other Japanese couples, they go there to re-ignite the passion, when they need to get away from the kids for an hour. The place he picks is called *Hotel Utopia*. He picks the room from a vending machine, inserts a credit card and out comes a key and a flashing light directing us to our room. The room is Star Trek themed, with campy decorations and a ceiling of stars bordered by the words *to boldly go where no man has gone before*. There's a bar and we pour up sake. We light a smoke. The karaoke machine in the corner is too much for him to resist:

He starts singing a Neil Young song, *Oh to live on/sugar mountain/with the barkers and the colored balloons.*

-Fuck, you're a nutbar, Finn.

I break down; I'm so fucking tired. I tell him everything: I'm not a good tourist. I've got to get working, get my hands dirty. I need to be of use, to feel clay in my hands. I purge it all, everything, until I fall asleep.

We both wake up when the machine starts playing the Star Trek theme. We roll over and up and laugh. "How did we end up here, at all?" I say. We get ready to leave but the door's locked. He can't make out the Japanese instructions, so we joke we will send out a message, maybe drop something out the window: *help, we are Western gaijin, trapped on the bridge of the USS Enterprise in the Hotel Utopia with a mini mini-bar and a karaoke machine!* All we can do is laugh and finish all the mini bottles. Eventually, Finn calls the front desk and they come and rescue us (for more yen than he wants to tell me about). Arigatou gozaimasu! the man with the keys exclaims, as we make our way out.

After three weeks I've made one friend, Debbie, a yoga instructor. She always tells me if I'm feeling down, ungrounded, just do a happy-baby pose, and rock back and forth until you laugh. When I tell her I'm feeling lost she suggests I go to meet a monk at the nearby temple.

The air is thick, syrupy with exhaust fumes as I wait outside the monastery, right in the heart of the city. I assume it must have survived the earthquake somehow; maybe it is the flexible texture of the clay. I bow to the monk and say:

-Mushi Mushi!

-Nice to meet you.

Nervous, I go on about Newfoundland and where I've come from.

- Very cold in Canada, need whiskey, he says.

The monk tells me when I'm truly used to being here, I'll know. By then the trip that I took to get here will seem like crossing a rock path across a small stream. But I wonder if he realizes just how much water there is between here and home. He tells me to join in some activities, to learn of this place.

A week after I see a sign posted in the apartment building for gaijin: learn how to make kites. I learn that in Japan vertical space is used in ways that Westerners don't understand. They don't move across latitudes like I have done, they move up into the mountains and into the sky; their prints and ceramics all have story lines that are read from the bottom up.

When I come back from my first class, elated, with my dragon-kite trailing me, he's gone. He's been rifling in my bags for some reason. I take off; ride the train to the outskirts of town, to come full circle to the realization that I've nowhere to go. By the

time I get back to the apartment I decide to tell him. Tell him I don't know what I am doing in this place anymore.

He says he'd been looking for my passport for the landlord, some kind of emergency preparedness census thing in case of another earthquake.

- I'm sorry, I overreacted, I....

- I'm sorry too, It must have looked bad, Lie down, relax.

- I don't want to, don't you ever get angry? Sometimes I could kill you, I'm just so sick of you, it's so exhausting. Get mad!

- Had enough of that growing up.

- You never change, does it make any difference me being here, at all?

- I just don't want to upset you right now.

I've stopped listening. In the corner of my eye I see it. Always there. The blue bowl, the one I made to hold George in. It watches me from the corner of the room, à la little shop of horrors, I can't breathe in this space.

By my fifth week in Japan, I'm constantly at his throat and I don't know why. I tell him I'm ready to branch out on my own.

Finn gives me more maps than I know how to use. He's written the address in English and Japanese. He tells me to try and remember the way home from the East Kobe station if I can; it's easy to get lost. But I can't see how that is so, being always

surrounded by so many people to help you along. Even if they don't speak English they can point on a map. I see now how those Japanese tourists wander off from Grouse Mountain or Cape Spear, never to be seen again. They disappear off those bright, gauche, tourist maps into the wilderness, thinking they'd never get far enough away from calling distance of other human beings.

At Hiroshima Station an aging woman comes up asking if I want to buy origami. We have an awkward exchange; then she leaves with my yen. I'm wondering how old she would have been when the bomb dropped from *Enola Gay*. Some twenty-something guys are joking around; they have T-shirts that say *I am Canadian*. I want one that says *I have lost my brother. I am lost*.

Origami kites float above the park dragged behind by Japanese school kids. They take pictures of each other holding up fingers in a V for peace. Finn's run out of lesson plans and maps to show to the kids, so he's resorted to his knowledge of pop culture for English lessons. *All we are saying/is give peace a chance*. They love John Lennon. Maybe because of Yoko.

One night he'd sung to me in bed: *Love is real, real is love*.

At the epicenter of the Hiroshima peace museum there's a stone found ten yards from the bomb's target: a bridge over the slow moving Ota river. The experts think a little girl must have been sitting by her bike on the steps of the local temple. All that remains of her is the imprint of where she was sitting, the black outline of her bum imprinted in the stone like the mark of a child on a car seat after a day at the pool.

But what is to be done about this now; I'm just another spoiled North American here on some mission that I haven't figured out yet. This was her home. She was probably getting ready to ride her bike after gathering cherry blossom sprigs for her mother's hair. Maybe a frog had jumped in her basket and she was stopping to watch it return to the banks of the Ota. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down. A dentist, Dad had seen the spread of it coming I think. He was so worried about George being out and about back then, when it started, but he couldn't say anything. I remember the night George told Mom and Dad and suddenly every moment with him was precious. No matter how thin or sick he got he dressed like he was still on his way to a party: always a bright shirt. He used to tease me about my clothes, did I have any clothes that didn't make me look like a bag lady, he'd joked.

There's a McDonald's not a hundred yards away and Japanese kids are all crowded outside, a plastic bridge connecting the playroom to the main complex. There's a sign: *May this be the Mcbridge Between our Smiles!* I start throwing up. An old lady helps me get to a bench and gets me some water.

The next weekend Finn and I get up at 6 am to take in the sunrise on Mount Fuji. It's a tradition, he says, for the Japanese to return here when they've been away for a long time. As we climb up the wide trail the little bit of snow on the top becomes less and less of a vision, until finally we see the grimy edges of it. At the top we're processed through a metal detector and through a museum. We find all kinds of *Japanese English* to make fun of. One sign says *keep moving for the others of respect*. Finn goes to get a drink from the vending machine, so ridiculously out of place on top of this mountain. Pocari Sweat,

it's called. He takes a swig, putting it on his head like a teenager, hanging outside with the b'ys at a party back home. "Nothing like this stuff" he says.

It's only been two months but I know that the test is right. It's not like I planned it. I've rehearsed this and when I speak it I watch his face for a reaction. He gives me a hug and says he's happy and George would be too. As we sit on top of Mount Fuji watching the flow of tourists, all in their own small grouped islands of fragile unity, I know Finn is still trying to process this, to make it real. There's a long silence that I finally have to stain with "We'll just see what happens."

Ancient History

Three angels were suspended above them. They were at the Tate in London on a short stopover en route to Cairo. The sign underneath said: Faith was represented by flight, charity with her hands extended, and hope carrying a baby.

"It's beautiful," he said.

"It's a cliché," she said.

It had been his idea to go to Egypt. He was a history major, he said "and it might make for good material for a novel, some day, and besides she could take some amazing photos."

Hadley jumped out of the cab and ran. Michael left holding the bag, literally, paid the taxi driver with the fresh-minted Egyptian pounds he'd brought from home. Without counting it, he put the change back in his money belt. One note had a picture of the pyramids with an eye staring out, as if history was looking at you. When she ran like this, when she moved fast away from the people she was with, when she took chances like this, he wondered whether she was trying to outrun the secret thing that had happened to her, happened long ago.

She'd rushed across the sand and camel shit to stand behind a tour group. A German tour guide explained in broken English the Sphinx's history to a tribe of American tourists. The midday heat was choking, especially when combined with the

heady odor of diesel fuel from a nearby parking lot, the armada of tour buses left running to the keep the air conditioning humming.

He walked through the mixture of tourists and urchins selling guidebooks with clearly outdated covers, stopping a few steps away from Hadley. There wasn't much he could glean from the tour guide, the origin of his accent indecipherable, so he moved towards a display of photographs of the pyramids throughout the 20th century, placed there by the tourist authority to celebrate the millennium. When Hadley came to stand next to him he pointed to a photo of an SS guard in front of the sphinx.

"That's so like you," she whispered from behind him.

"What is?"

"To focus on the war angle."

"The Nazis certainly got around."

"Yeah, so did the Romans, it's not a good thing."

As soon as they were a few yards away from the tour group, they were surrounded by thin men whose faces were wrinkled with fatigue, from the exhaustion of years of hassling, he imagined. Nearby boys, probably the offspring of this older tribe of hagglers seemed more joyful; perhaps for them the hounding of tourists was still a game: "You want camel? You want horse? You want go inside, private tour?" He and Hadley were driven back into a crowd that was moving up the walkway towards the sphinx. A man grabbed at Hadley's camera strap. "I take picture for baksheesh."

"Sure, let's get a picture together," Michael said.

They posed with the head of the Sphinx and the pyramids behind them. In every direction there were souvenir stalls and men, women and children calling out the prices for their papyrus and miniature pyramids. A reckless boy on a scooter dodged potholes in front of them. It looked like he was going to hit them both until at the last second he turned into a store which sold every imaginable size and colour of buckets ("for the horses and camels," he had joked, but she didn't get it).

"Michael, I've got a headache."

"Me too," he said and immediately wished he hadn't. With a glance he knew what she was thinking: that he was trivializing her pain, as if to say, "Who wouldn't, given everything?"

As Michael bent over to get change out from his bag, Hadley screamed. When he looked up the man was gone, disappearing into a sea of turbans, stealing the happy memories of the first few days of the trip. Michael instantly apologized to her, not really sure why he had done so.

There were statues scattered around the grounds outside the train station in Cairo. Fearful of being approached by beggars, they moved quickly inside where they huddled together on a strip of dirty plastic chairs, close to a security guard who looked like he might be a threat himself. Michael reached out his hand and held hers for a minute in an

act of reassurance. They were safe, this was all part of the journey, he implied with the gesture. He dug out his guidebook and read that the statues were of *Ramses the Great*.

“Not so great now,” he joked.

Why the ruins were there wasn't clear. Had they been placed there by some government agency to make the place more interesting, maybe to distract tourists from the dilapidated, crumbling, infrastructure? As soon as Hadley stepped away from the camouflage provided by a horde of tourists in line for tickets for the Nile Express, the touts were on top of them, asking if they could take a picture, get them water, carry their bags.

“Baksheesh, baksheesh!” they said with their hands out.

When the train pulled up a crowd of locals massed at the doors. Hadley, pushed away from Michael, was scared. They were reaching into her bag and hauling out her journal and hat, either looking for money, or, as it appeared to Michael, simply to punish her for not giving them money.

Michael threw some change on the ground and watched them scatter like pigeons to a handful of crumbs. On the train, he said, “I'm so sorry.” Her glance communicated that she knew he'd just said he was sorry out of reflex, as he said it often, even when he'd missed an easy return in tennis and she had to chase the ball.

“No one is to blame,” she said. “It's just this heat.”

After about an hour they moved to the last seats of the train, a place where their bags weren't blocking the aisles. And they didn't have to constantly move aside for

people coming through the aisles, especially the tea man, who came too often, carrying a giant cauldron of boiling water on his back, from which he poured tea from a nozzle that looked like the intake on a hookah pipe. As the train travelled along the Nile they could see a small fertile area on both sides of the water for about half a kilometer; the rest was all desert and sky. It was an inhospitable place, where "people clung to the shoreline, much like home," Michael said. Many of the small clay houses' doors were open and he saw most families huddled around a fire, cooking. Almost every house had a rug or clothes laid out on a line, and often a woman banging the dust and sand out with a stick as if trying to wipe out evil spirits. Every so often there was a tribe of men squatting around a pipe. The roles seemed clear; the women worked in the house, the men must have worked somewhere (though he had no idea where, maybe they were all farmers?), and at night they talked. The train stopped. A bunch of men were pushing a casket on a cart along the river down toward a small mosque in the distance. The women, all dressed in black and veiled, bent over and wept.

"Whoever it was he must have meant a lot," Hadley said.

"Poor as dirt."

Just as they were nodding off, a drunken, tanned, hairy man came and sat next to them, looking at Hadley and then pointing at his crotch. Michael sat between them and sneered back but he was scared for the two of them now. "You want have babies?" the man said. In a state of pure rage Michael stood up. Hadley, fearful Michael would do something that would put them into deeper trouble, grabbed his arm.

"Let's move, come on," she said.

"No, there's no where else to sit."

"We can sit on our bags by the door."

As they moved away, the man said, "This Egyptian train, no English train." They sat down on top of their knapsacks. Michael said, "I think they have a stereotype that Western girls are easy."

"Don't leave me alone, ever." Hadley grabbed his hand.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, except we need to get tougher."

Michael's indignation turned to anger as he got off the train. He took her bag in one hand and her hand in the other, pushing his way through the crowds with the posture of a middle linebacker, their valuables stuffed inside their pants.

In their room they lay on the bed, exhausted. She pointed out two towels on a night table. A snake and a swan intertwined. They laughed.

"I'm sorry about all that," he said.

"It's the poverty, they wouldn't have to do that in Canada."

"Do what?"

“Be pests, I guess, you know, beg?” He’d thought she was talking about the man on the train but he realized she meant the kids and the touts that hung around the platforms.

“It shows how spoiled we are.”

“What?”

“Baksheesh, it means share wealth,” he said.

“I’ll remind you of that the next time we’re surrounded and they’re grabbing at my bag or my breasts? You’re okay with this somehow, you think it’s culture clash. Maybe it’s just ignorance. Maybe it’s just the way men are here. I haven’t even seen a woman driving a car!”

He didn’t know what he could say.

That night she said: “You know this is hard for me, I’ve never been much for romantic love.”

“I know.” He’d heard her say this before. He wondered what kind of love had she had, the un-romantic kind? The passing kind? The practical kind? What kind of love between a man and a woman should have been anything other than romantic?

Then again, it was that very quality of hers, the quality of not needing, which had attracted him in the first place.

She'd had wings on the night he met her. It was at Bar None, late at night, when the mood of the downtown bar-goers turned surly. She'd been moving around the bar -- almost literally flying with the hand-made wings -- from acquaintance to acquaintance, catching up. She'd been back in St. John's for six months and was still elated to run into old friends from high school or the university newspaper or from her job at Planned Parenthood.

Three months later she moved into his walk-up apartment (his suggestion, as a way -- only temporary-- of getting her free of the tyranny of squatting in her parents' basement). Hauling her stuff up the three flights of stairs to his place he'd said "It 's worth it for the view," repeating what the landlady had said to him when he moved his stuff in a year before. His landlady was a short, daft, mumbling English ex-nurse who seemed sanguine in her demeanor but spewed her bitter history -- that she had immigrated to Newfoundland for love that failed her -- if you tried to move at all past small talk. Over a bottle of wine he and Hadley looked out at the harbour and its refuge from danger as she told him the story: years ago she had fallen for someone, a guy from home -- "fallen like a tree itself," she said -- while tree planting in the B.C. wilderness. Though she left out the details, it was one of those crib deaths that had no explanation. It was as simple as that. She had referred to him as "the little guy" when she confessed it, and about the *other* guy, she said: "He left me hanging."

In Aswan they hired a cab as suggested by their hotelier.

"Meter?" Michael said.

The driver said: "I am called George. I am Christian." "That is why I will charge you little. Be your guide."

He was dressed like all middle-eastern men they'd seen, respectable, with a long sleeve shirt, pressed pants and a masculine belt. But his face was more rounded, softer than the dark men they had seen in the streets. His eyes were lighter and more tender, so that he conveyed the look of someone who had once known a more abundant life in some other place. He appealed to their curiosity. After some discussion they agreed to let George take them to the ruins of Luxor. After the tour he took them to the roof of his house, with its view of the mausoleum of Aga Khan, which sat alone in the desert, safe from secular tourist crusaders. He left the two of them for a moment and returned with a case of Sakara.

"Now we're talking," Michael said.

"You're like Saint George, you've saved us from being nagged to death," Hadley said.

George talked of his family and the various desert tribes, the Nubians, the Bedouins. Hadley was enjoying this, talking to an authentic local, though they both held a reserve of suspicion -- they exchanged furtive glances which revealed each other's fear-- that George might just be being friendly now so he could empty their pockets later. By the third beer, the sun had lost its intensity, casting off a pink hue over the few clay houses, and he felt that all the trials of the trip had been worth it, just to be here, now, in

this oasis. The beige sand stretched away in the distance, occasional wisps of it whipped up by a passing wind.

As she talked he saw a thousand nuances in her white round face and strong features: she might have just come down from Mount Sinai with Moses. He had only ever learned to recite one poem and Yeats's line reminded him of her: *he loved the pilgrim soul in her*. But he also knew that he had stayed still most of his life, and the laws of inertia meant that bodies in motion stayed in motion, those like him that weren't, well, they stayed home. All through the previous Christmas, the first one she had spent home since she had moved away years ago, he felt she was experiencing the season as an observer – an observer not just of local customs and all the traditions (why she was not nostalgic for them he didn't know, for had she not lived this growing up and wasn't everyone nostalgic for childhood things?), but also an observer of Michael's friends, Michael's family, Michael's habits.

One night, in a kitchen party at Mike Haggerty's, Hadley finally got in the spirit of things, telling stories about her life on student council (but he felt it was told as some kind of mythology, as if it was just a role she had played earlier in life, and had now recalled it at a distance, forgetting the pacing and remembering only the punch lines). Soon they were all going out mummering; they insisted that he and Hadley come since it was *his* idea. After visits to several downtown houses, they landed at Noel Finn's. They all had to do some silly thing in the kitchen in order to get a drink. Michael did a funny dance; they loved it. A Newfoundland party loves a fool. Then he realized she'd left the party without a word. He noticed there was a sign over the sink: "One day at a time." AA

had all kinds of clichéd sayings like that. His favorite was “Fake it ‘til you make it,” which seemed like the only way to build a life with someone, he thought, as he looked out over the desert stretching away into the horizon.

The next day they were sitting on a barge in the bay of Aswan, within sight of the hotel where Agatha Christie had written *Death on the Nile*. They’d ordered a couple of beers, shared a cigarette from a pack of Cleopatras (they’d laughed over and over at the package).

“Look, there’s at least two other couples with *The Lonely Planet*!”

“You’ve made your point, we’re on the package tour for those who don’t like package tours,” Michael said.

A steady stream of feluccas wearily crossed back and forth across the bay, most ferrying tourists from Aswan, from the dock below the Grand Hotel where Christie had stayed, to the ruins of the great ancient city of Luxor.

“It really is an oasis,” Hadley said.

“Egypt?”

“Ha, no, dummy. I meant this restaurant, it’s such a break from the hassling.”

The barge-cum-restaurant was now rocking ever so gently from waves spawned by a large cruiser packed with American tourists. Several bikini-clad women lay across the bow.

"Gross," Michael said.

"Yeah, all that pleasure."

Hadley got up and asked to borrow the hot sauce from the identically attired couple with the identical Lonely Planet guidebook. Michael guessed they were either Australian or Canadian. Something about their dress and gentle posture exposed them as colonials; maybe it was the way that they had to work hard, here in a foreign place, not to look uptight. There was some kind of uniformity in their liberal dress even though that was exactly the opposite impression they were seeking to convey to the world: he had the inevitable *Teva* sandals, a t-shirt with a decidedly alternative print, faded to show nonchalance, but not raggedy enough to show any sort of real poverty. She had a sarong tied over her pants; a print he figured was from South East Asia. The message they were sending out was: they were liberals, just like he and Hadley, who had travelled and were culture-conscious. Michael imagined the couple had \$600 backpacks back at their modest hotel and yet they probably haggled over a \$5 kebob.

Hadley talked excitedly about her years in Toronto, the neighborhoods she had lived in, the theatres and parks she loved. She invited them to sit. When she lobbed the conversational ball to Michael he rose to strike it but it ended up hitting the net and coming back to him.

"You ever been to Newfoundland?" Michael asked.

"No, some day, lots of other places to see first before Newfie!" the Canadian said, laughing.

"Have you been to Abu Simbel yet?"

"No," he said, "It's been moved because of the Hydro Electric project, what a shame."

"Yes, it's terrible," Hadley said.

"Well at least they saved it, and...look around, they needed the money." Michael said.

Hadley inserted into the lull in the conversation that the constant barrage of touts at every turn exhausted them.

"Us too," the Canadian's girlfriend exclaimed. She said she wouldn't have been surprised if the Americans they had seen being led down the street with promises of a good hotel a few minutes ago were now being held as captives. They all laughed. Ten minutes later the Torontonians were off to fight their way, as they said, back to the hotel.

"What was wrong with them?"

"What?"

"You could have offered to make plans or something?"

"I guess I didn't come to meet more Canadians."

"That's it isn't it; you're one of those self-hating Canadians."

"You mean Newfoundlander."

“Is there anything that you can’t relate to Newfoundland? That’s what you think about all the time, I know it is. Fuck you’re obsessed.”

“But that’s why I wanted to come here, just to get away from all that. Anyway he did use the N word.”

“Newfie? But they didn’t mean anything by it. You’re insufferable! Those people are my kind of peeps. So they’re earnest, what’s wrong with that? Ya know, they’re not caught up in all that shit, you keep reading all those books about Newfoundland history, who cares? Look around you, this is history! You want to be another artist obsessed with Newfoundland? Why? ”

“Fuck you” he said. And instantly wished he hadn’t.

She looked at him, knowing that she had opened up a wound that he picked at. It was as if being away from home had given them a looking glass. He was glad that she had raised the topic that was wedged between them; maybe it was letting some of the water out of the tub, the drip-drip-drip of his anxieties piling up until everything overflowed.

And what spilled over the sides was the truth about how they felt about their futures. He recalled the day they first met. In an Honours English seminar they had been discussing *Franny and Zooey*; she boldly announced that God was dead, and it was a waste of time to think about devoting yourself to anything else except freeing your mind from all ideologies. He followed her out in the fog and drizzle to bum a smoke. He already knew he had fallen for her, then, before she disappeared for six or seven years

into buildings, into the lives of others, and away to Toronto. He'd pretty much forgotten about her, stayed home and worked quietly at a dead end job and his writing, until he'd seen her wings across the bar two years ago.

"You'll never be happy back home, will you?"

"I could ask you the same fucking thing, *b'y*," she replied. "You really don't know what It's like."

"What?"

"To be me," she said, and she got up and left. He chased after her and just as she was about to be offered a ride across the bay on a felucca he grabbed her by the arm. "I'm sorry, let's just forget about it."

They made it back to their table on the barge and sat quietly.

"Can we talk about it?"

"It won't do any good. It's just I need more, I don't know, space."

When the food came Michael steered the conversation back to how much they had seen: *The City of The Dead*. *The Valley of The Kings*. He talked of the quest for eternal life that Queen Nefertiti and King Tut had sacrificed so much of their kingdom for.

"What a waste of life to use it all to prepare for death," she said. He recited Shelley's line: "Look on ye mighty and despair." She talked of how the American archeologist Carter had found King Tut's tomb in the last place he was supposed to look, and breaking into the tomb that night, alone, he must have taken a little something for himself.

"Bastard," Michael said, to her approving look.

"King Tut had much more of an afterlife than a life," she said.

"That's a neat trick, kind of a work of art in itself."

"Jesus you really are a catholic."

"Yeah, but in a Graham Greene way..."

"What? He's long dead."

"I just mean I couldn't sleep at night if I thought there was nothing else after."

Later in the afternoon they climbed up a bank to look out over the bay of Aswan, and in the darkness, with fewer touts around, they were feeling peaceful and contented. He laid his hand across her body. She put her head on his shoulder. "Let's just be friends again, for now, okay?"

"Okay," Michael said. He knew that the earlier skirmish was not yet behind them. There were children running around in the playground below; he and Hadley were like children too; they became too close too quickly and then began testing the limits of each other's capacity for love. They had not *faked it 'til they made it*.

He barely slept. At dawn, the call to prayer caused him to bolt upright. When they had first heard the muezzin's call in the middle of the night after arriving in Cairo, a blast many times the volume of the foghorn in the harbor back home, they woke up and made love.

On this night in Aswan he awoke and pattered around the room restless. He decided he would go out for a smoke. The stairway rambled down through the 1940's colonial hotel, which, as he had said to Hadley earlier that day looked "like an abandoned film set from *Casablanca*. Spies, spies everywhere," he said, doing a Peter Lorre impression.

At first they had used the elevator, but subsequently each time took the eight flights of stairs, fearful of being stuck in it like prey, years of dust and debris coating the elevator cage like a spider's web. When they got to their room the second time, tired from the climb, he'd said: "Well, you wanted a view, right?" It reminded him of the first night that she had come back to his place on Gower Street; she had marveled at the view as he removed her hand-made wings.

The taxi drivers casually put out their cigarettes and hauled out their mats for kneeling. He wanted to know how they felt, to be one of them: to know pure faith: to know what he and Hadley and their ilk always intellectualized. But his mind could see it was "all foolishness." He recalled Hadley's father had used that phrase at dinner once, referring to the idea of anyone (he was clearly directing this at her) running off to go tree planting in B.C.

Finally down the stairs and in the lobby he said "Assalaamu alaikum" -- he loved saying it -- to the night watchman, a teenager who wore a long blue shirt, the kind of uniform shirt he had worn in grade school. It wasn't tucked in; slouched over, he looked rather sad and incapable of protecting much.

Michael held up his cigarette so the night watchman could see it and pointed to the outside. The boy gave him a lazy nod back. Out in the street the muezzin's call was deafening -- a recorded voice pushed out through crackling speakers -- finally went quiet. Gulls circled the minarets, returning after escaping the racket, he figured. A bird may have come down a walk for old Emily Dickinson, but gulls are gulls are gulls. He was brought back to home; he never ever really got two steps from it, from the plight of his own tribe. He loved home for the same reason he loved her, because she had fallen, she had struggled, she had a story, she had history.

Some of the feluccas were starting to veer across the bay, like reflections of the stars that glimmered in the sky, and he imagined the scene had remained like this for centuries. Out here where the stars peered over the desert and were reflected in the Nile, he could see why the great rulers took a boat with them to the underworld; they must have imagined they would sail safely across the stars in that great ocean of sky.

Michael's only sailing experience had been when Hadley's father, John, an executive at a mining company, had taken them out to Brigus. John was keeping a careful eye on Michael, knowing how Hadley needed protection, or care. Michael's own mother had said to him, when he had told her about Hadley's little secret: "She's going to need truckloads of love."

Halfway to Brigus, John reminded them that there was some anniversary the town was celebrating, adding they "were always celebrating something, while most of the people had long gone." Michael found himself nodding in agreement, for it seemed to

Michael that the important thing was as long as it had happened in the distant past it should be celebrated; it should be held onto, even if it was the tale of the misery of some English Lord who came and left again for greener pastures. John was setting sail and boring the two of them: "The people working for me are like crabs," he said, "always an eye on the past, moving backwards instead of forward." Michael looked at Hadley and muttered "like in Hamlet."

"Here, Hamlet," John said to Michael with a laugh, "mind the tiller, this over here is starboard and this is port. Port, four letters, left, four letters, easy."

As they tried to tack into the bay John shouted out orders "to port, more...stop...starboard," but it required a delicate touch. As Michael pushed the rudder and veered the boat too much into the wind, the sails would flap, and then if he leaned the tiller too far away, the boom would come across and the boat would tip and frighten him into jerking it back. Hadley emerged from below deck just as John called back from adjusting the jib and said "Hard, starboard!" But Michael wasn't thinking about what he said, he was thinking about Hadley, about *not* hitting her, and so he moved his hand impulsively away from her, exactly in the wrong direction. The boom came across and clocked her in the head, knocking her into the cold North Atlantic. Maybe if he had said that day "poet," four letters, left, four letters, port, four letters, maybe he would have not whacked Hadley in the head and stayed on good terms with the Old Man; maybe that would have helped him stand a better chance now that Hadley was sailing away from him. Anyway, why had he brought her here for a holiday? Poet, four letters, fool, four letters, love, four letters.

Up off their prayer mats on the pavement and now smoking cigarettes, the taxi drivers had lost any hint of spiritual aura. Soon they were having a heated argument about something; he knew only a few words of Egyptian, enough to know that Allah was involved. The two men grabbed each other by the scruff of the neck and landed on the ground, wrestling around as if this was a regularly scheduled sporting event. The frail security guard came out and tried to get between them. They pulled apart and began shouting at each other. This encounter stuck in his mind six months later when 9/11 happened. He called in sick for a week just to watch the drama unfold (the first person he called that morning was Hadley, back in Toronto working as an office assistant in a high rise for some environmental company-- but she wasn't as affected as he was by these events; she had her mind on other things; "too busy for all that," she said).

The men eventually separated. One of them had blood running down his forehead. The night watchman pulled Michael towards the door. He glanced back and the men had their arms around each other but now it seemed like it was a warm embrace.

"These men always fight like brothers," he said. "Go to bed, sir."

Michael climbed the dusty stairs, crept into the room sat on the edge of the bed.

"What's wrong honey?" Hadley said. "Can't sleep?"

"There was a fight."

"Did you win?" She laughed. "You look fine."

"It wasn't me, it was two men in the streets. Brothers, I think. Nobody won. I think it was about God. Who knows?"

"Why were you up? Is everything okay with you?"

"Fine, just thinking about everything..."

"I had a dream about *him* again."

"Oh," he said, not sure what to do but to hold her closer, and not even sure which *him* she was referring to.

"You know I almost died," she said.

"We're safe for now. That's all that matters. Go back to sleep."

He kissed her on the forehead, and then lay looking at the ceiling, unchanged since the place had been built when the British Empire was in full swing. If the past was rigid and limiting, why was he so drawn to exploring everything that happened back home, years ago? While no man was an island every man from his island seemed to be alone and pondering the past, ceaselessly. Maybe they had been taught to love adversity so deeply that when it was gone they missed it.

He thought about how little he knew about anything close up, for he was always outside looking in, drawn to that distanced view of life which hadn't the repellent odor of living in it, had not the work of having to practice on that most important thing of all, the thing that, at that moment, with Hadley sleeping quietly next to him, seemed clear.

Digging

Angel heads down Gower Street on an unusually sunny Sunday in March. At the top of a small hill, he can see Mike in the distance. He has no doubt that his suspicions will be confirmed: Mike's drinking again, probably off his meds, and in between bars.

The Rites of Spring is the name of the multi-artist show at the Della Stone gallery where Mike's newest work is showing. It's the kind of decaying structure that is charming to some precisely because they see the old stone walls as the romantic ideal for hanging art. There's a lacquered plaque near the doorway, proudly proclaiming that the place was erected quickly after the fire of 1892 wiped out most of the city, making it exactly 100 years old.

"The, ahm, way the light shows Judas's face," Angel mumbles to Madeline, as they both stand in front of one of her pieces in the show called *The Betrayal of Jesus*, "you kind of pity him."

"Do you want a drink? Is Mike around?"

"He's not likely to show his face." As she walks across the shiny refinished hardwood floors of the gallery, Angel has a full view of her tattoo, a flower down her left shoulder blade, erupting from a small green stem into a bright yellow blossom. She got it ten or more years ago -- when it was still a little shocking -- and he remembered how she used to troll around the rabble of down town, back before it was gentrified, in her Doc Martens and punkish clothes. He has always seen her as a force to be reckoned with.

Indomitable. Angry. Though she dressed tough, her smile and her long, straight, black Holy Heart hair (as he and Mike called it) softened her attempts at rebelliousness.

Angel tries to mix into the conversations around the gallery, all people who he knew of, but hadn't had a conversation with. After a few minutes he realizes he has nothing to say to these people, especially without Mike there.

Madeline's installation for the show is a series of large-scale photos of the Stations of the Cross, called the *Via Crucis*, the way of the cross. Her models were a mixture of well-known citizens, more infamous than famous, a convicted murderer for Christ, a streetwalker for Mary, all draped in seaweed. Her cross was made in the likeness of the Danger Tree, the lone thorn tree that had stayed alive in the trenches of Beaumont Hamel where Newfoundlanders had been slaughtered during the First War. For *Veronica wipes Jesus' face with her veil*, and *Jesus falls the second time*, Madeline used her self as the model. She holds the cloth used to wipe Jesus' head and the shroud she shows is in *her* image, not Jesus'. In all the images Jesus face is pained and sees no relief. It's clear to angel that *these* Stations of the Cross are so menacing, so painful, that these sacrifices were not worth making. As if to say that though Jesus might have been a boat builder he hadn't known storms in the North Atlantic or the trenches or panning for seals; crucified *here* his crown of thorns was made of tangly, gnarly, weeds and rough blood-red brush. This is Jesus hungry in the desert for forty days, not Jesus with the smiling fisherman of Galilee or Bonavista.

This is the land Angel knows, a place where Jesus' representatives on earth were put here to make you suffer. He'd gotten strapped by the Christian brothers so many times (mostly for not paying attention in class) that he began to carry seal-hair in his pocket (his Old Man showed him this trick, with hair from the pelts of seals he'd clubbed himself). Nine or ten years old, back in grade school on Bell Island, he placed the hair on his palms, and after five or so whacks his hands would bleed from the center. Brother Slaney or Brother Mercer would have no choice but to stop. As an adult, he wondered whether all the reported cases of stigmata were simply boys like him who had learned the hair-trick.

His head fully muddled with wine, Angel goes to check out Mike's piece, having waited until the coast is clear. The pair of bronzed work gloves on a copper clothesline smeared with blood-red paint is sardonically entitled "won'nerful work." This is the same old stuff from Mike, he thinks. He's hung up the Old Man's work gloves; a private message to Angel. *Lest we forget*, the piece whispers to him: Lest we forget the old goat choking for the last time on that last day, five years ago, after laying down these gloves.

On a miserable Sunday in April Angel drives across town to find his mother sitting on the couch, drawing heavily on a cigarette. The house is dark and musty.

"I hope it doesn't last this time, 'es been so good," she says.

The hallways at the Waterford psychiatric hospital smell of Clorox.

“Look, Angel and mudder. I’m alright b’y, just need to sober up s’all...we’ll have good times again Angel, just you wait...I’m so thirsty, they wouldn’t even give ye a fuckin’ drink of water round here.”

Angel shuffles down the corridor, glancing away when other visitors look at him. Mike was full of charm, most of the time. Especially when he was drinking. But the days after, when he worked himself into these states, he picked at the scabs and he barked. You had to take these outbursts as part of his disease, the doctor said. A nursing attendant directs Angel to the kitchen, where he fills up a glass of water. It comes out all cloudy at first. As he stood there waiting he thought about Bell Island. Mike had put his GI Joe down a culvert and they ran to the other end to wait for it. It never came out. Angel took his and said he’d send his G.I. to the rescue. Mike knew what would happen but he went along with the plan anyway; he wanted to give him a chance to help out.

The following Sunday, when Madeline unexpectedly comes by their apartment in the Battery looking for Mike, Angel’s caught off guard. She tells Angel she has loose plans with Mike to go to Bell Island for the day to take some pictures of the old mine.

“It’s not a good time for Mike, he’s up and down.”

“Up and down, yeah, I wondered. I haven’t seen him in ages.”

“Yeah, he’s not been well for a while, it might have been the stress of the opening, you know, he’s usually got stage fright.”

"What did you think?"

"Of the opening? I liked your stuff, it scared me a little."

"That's good I guess, it's a reaction. Se ya around."

She moves at such a pace down the Old Battery Road that he has to run to catch up. "I'll go if you want," he says as she turns to him.

He talks nervously with her on the drive about how much he admires her work.

"Sometimes it takes too much out of me, but I couldn't do without it."

"Mike thinks the world of you," he says.

"And half the women in town."

The ferry ride to Bell Island is only fifteen minutes long, but it releases a lifetime of memories for Angel. The house where they grew up burned to the ground soon after they left Bell Island, the new owners destroying it in one of those chip-fat fires. He tells Madeline the whole story on the ferry ride. The family had moved from Bell Island at his mother's insistence ten years after the mine closed. Social Services finally made it easy for her to tip the scales; the Ol' Man could no longer use as an excuse: "Where in de Jesus are we getting the money?"

"The trip wasn't exactly long, it was only a fuckin' half an hour, but it took the Ol' Man fifteen years," Mike had said to Angel at the wake, out in the truck with Uncle

Stephen. Angel used to listen to the Old Man, talking at the kitchen table at night, while Mike has gone to sleep or had escaped out the window to go partying. Angel learned by listening that by moving from town to Bell Island to work in the mine, the Old Man had escaped the only life he'd known with *his* father: a poor-as-dirt good for nothing drunk, whose last days were spent begging for change in front of the liquor store in downtown St. John's.

"Was it sad, losing your Dad?"

"Sad? Mike kicked the truck after the wake, as if the truck was the ol' fucker. Before he died the Old Man never shut up about that truck, the truck this, the truck that. I gave it a kick too... but you know what, I broke my toe. So it ended up being more funny, me and Mike and Uncle Stephen explaining what happened at the hospital, and telling the story outside the church to the b'ys from the Southside at the funeral."

"Does it still hurt?"

"No, but I cringe every time I see the fucking truck still parked in Mom's lane."

On the Southside of St. John's they lived like goats, high on a hill surrounded by trees and the occasional car wreck. His mother got them all into good Catholic schools in town: St. Bon's for the boys -- where Uncle Stephen, their Mother's brother, taught English, and Marcia in with the nuns at Holy Heart. It was their mother's love that made the boys break free of the Southside and the bitter Ol' Man and find in their uncle Stephen a teacher who would be their guide, their Virgil through the inferno of growing up. Stephen had taken it pretty hard when their oldest brother Danny had died at an early

age, she had told them. She was much younger and didn't remember it. *Danny wasn't right for this world*, was all she had said. Maybe it was because of all that pain that Stephen gave Angel and Mike a place of refuge, even if it meant just letting them getting stoned or drunk in his basement with their friends. He got Angel interested in books, and brought Mike into his first painting classes.

The showdown, the final straw, had come when the Old Man met him at the door at six in the morning.

"What are ya at fa'der, just got off a double shift, b'y," Mike said.

"The hospital laundry called last night, you didn't show up for work, ya little liar, You're fucking lazy as hell."

"Leave me alone."

"I don't give a fuck what ye does just get out and pay your way or ye'll end up like the rest of them."

"Better be like them than like you."

The Old Man backhanded him across the face. It was too late for their mother to save the situation. She couldn't keep him from throwing Mike out on his arse. Angel brought him sandwiches and clothes in Victoria Park, meeting him under the WW1 cannon memorial. Mike told Angel he was going to be an artist no matter the cost. From then on, Mike stayed at Uncle Stephen's, or in the basements of friends' parents for

months on end; he stayed with those who were on the other side of the tracks and didn't mind shielding him from the Ol' Man and the grime of the Southside.

A tour guide with a thick bay accent explains with a strange self-satisfied knowledge of local lore that the horses had gone blind, travelling up and down the diagonal shaft until their eyes could no longer function in daylight. Madeline is taking pictures of the rotting tools, all rusting -- not with a sense of romantic decay, Angel thinks, but beyond all recognition. He's terrified by the place, can't help but imagining what the Old Man's days must have been like. He can picture his blackened face, how it lit up going to and from the mine. A daily ritual without which he wouldn't be happy. If the Old Man loved anyone it was Joe and Richard Ryan; he loved the men he went underground with six days a week, the men he drank with, smoked with, cursed with. Never mind that the mine eventually filled up his lungs with emphysema; it wasn't the mine itself that was at fault. Near the end he spent four hours a day on a respirator, where he watched the news and railed at it all. The crooked old fucker had been quick to tell you that whatever it was it had been *their* fault: the Old Man was always railing at the *thems*: anyone, everyone, all people, until he railed no more and was put back in the ground not far from where he toiled every day. He scrawled his last wishes to be buried on Bell Island on the back of a garage receipt and left it on Mom's dresser. The boys got called home from their summer jobs planting trees on the West Coast. He and Mike stepped outside uncle Stephen's house to catch their breath after he told them the news. Mike said

"It must have been just like another day at the mine, going in that dark garage and then breathing in."

Angel overheard people talking at the wake about how hard the old coot worked, "He had a good last day," someone said to their mother. She took it, as she took everything, in stiff-upper-lip stride; she was focused now on making *the best of it*. She always said to the boys that they were *all making the best of it* (it was never clear who the *all* was; that the Old Man was part of that effort seemed unlikely). She said that is how her parents had coped around the bay. Food was her comfort until she got so big she couldn't get up more than a flight of stairs without a rest. At Carnell's, she sat eating a plate of cake supplied by her circle of women friends. They gathered snug round her, comforting her with eyes that communicated that the silver lining of his death was the end to his suffering. She told them he had been sorry, for why else had he spent that last morning digging in the garden, planting the turnips and potatoes she'd asked him to?

As they make their way down into the shaft via the light of their miner's helmets, they slowly get used to the lack of light. Madeline stays behind to take a picture of a mineshaft where the walls had collapsed, the weight of the ore breaking the man-made pillars like twigs. Angel tells the guide he'll go back to get her, but then he makes a wrong turn and is suddenly lost. He finds it hard to breathe, and he can't move, for fear he'll go the wrong way. He starts to asphyxiate. Panicking, he trips, his helmet light going out as he hits the ground. Madeline gets to him first and sits down next to him.

"You look pale," she says.

"I can't breathe."

The tour guide comes around the corner with a first aid kit and a flashlight. They're brought back to the waiting room, the area where they'd been given helmets and coveralls on the way in, the place where the Old Man had eaten his lunch every day. The tour guide jokes to the man in the Red Cross outfit that "the men today aren't like they used to be."

As they walk across the field towards their van, Madeline comforts him with her arm laid over his shoulder for a second. And there on the small barren island just off the large and mostly barren one they were living on, he is able to tell her -- without his usual mumbling -- that since he'd seen her show he couldn't stop thinking about her.

On the 24th of May, the highway is littered with stands selling bake apples and hand-woven throws. Abbey, Mike's dog, is in between them, her nose touching off the windshield every time they slow down for an old pickup or haul-behind trailer. Madeline has that glow of the promise of new love around her so much that when she runs into people they want to know, "Okay, darling, who is he?"

Their faces cringe with a look of shock when she tells them it's Mike Fitzpatrick's brother. She tells them how they, she and Angel, are slowly helping Mike to get back on his feet and onto an open ward and, they hope, soon out altogether from the Waterford.

"Sweetheart?" he says.

"Yes I'll take one. *Be mine*, they all say that."

"Mine says *keep trying*," he said.

"Ha. Dad used to give them to me; the boys got ice cream, not me. He said I was getting too big. "

"Big?"

"Like a brick shithouse, he said to me."

"Jesus. Nice. What a fucker."

The first image of the bay in Happy Cove is something out of an Irish fairy tale. There's a small stream running from the hills down through the valley into a pond and then out to the sea. Half a dozen cabins surround the horseshoe bay; it surprises Angel how vacant such a beautiful place can be. Two miles down the road is Placentia, a community of five or six thousand living in suburban homes built for the American base in the Second World War. That town is flat and dull and the houses are laid out in a grid: "As if you're in Ohio or something," Angel comments.

But as they get close to the cabin they see the place is wrecked, garbage is strewn everywhere, some kids must have broken in over the winter. The place is only half finished; built in "A- frame" fashion by her father. For Angel it stands as a symbol of the work of those with imagination and optimism, who then learned the harsh realities of the island and gave up half way. Her father must have realized that the house plans, ideal for Kent or Ontario, were not fit for here (that was a favorite family expression: not fit). The

huge unfinished cabin sitting there -- as a monument to plans for family summer holiday togetherness that never get beyond the A-frame and the wallboard fill -- is comforting to him. It reminds him of the portables he'd gone to grade school in, always in a temporary state of construction and never moved beyond that for lack of money, most of it going to keep the place warm and the roofs free of leaks and clear of snow. There was "no money for nuttin'", "that was what the Old Man said to them over and over, and Angel hated that he was mostly right. It didn't need to be said that her family had come from money. But then all the chain stores swallowed up their grocery business. Everyone knows everything about everybody, that was home, he thought.

"Fuck what a bunch of assholes," she says.

"It's just kids, having fun. It could be worse."

"You're not upset? Angel, do you even listen? Where are you? "

"Thinking about Mike."

"Mike. He'll be all right, I think. You know Mike fucked around on my friend Veronica?"

"I'm not surprised. I'm not my brother."

"Just your brother's keeper."

"Mike said you were trouble."

"Oh I am," she says, laughing.

"We can tape up the windows with a garbage bag, it'll be fine."

They decide to have a little walk on the small swath of pebble beach along the shore before they unpack the van. Javex bottles and empty gun shells litter the cove, out of place from what Angel pictured when they turned the corner. At nine o'clock a woman from Patrick's Cove, surprised to see anyone near the old White place, comes to invite them to a dance up the shore; they'd only have to drive ten minutes to get there, she says.

He reluctantly agrees they'll go to *the time* for an hour. They put Abbey in the cabin. At the dance they quickly meet a lot of the locals, some of them surprised to see strangers, though mostly they have no time for chatting, for the accordion player keeps them up on the floor, and there is a soft light in the room that makes it almost mystical, even though Angel knows that in the cold light of day it is really not much more than a wall-board shack. After an hour of polite no's to Madeline's request that they dance to at least one jig, they head home.

"You're drunk," she says.

"You okay?"

"Just don't make a habit of it."

He sings along to the radio: *I'm looking for a hardheaded woman*. He puts his head on her shoulder. When they get inside the tent she pins him to the ground.

"You like this, don't you" she says, "You like to feel pain."

Angel wakes up in the early light as he always does. He usually wakes up in the night and checks around the apartment he and Mike share to see that everything is all right. It gives him comfort to touch things and know that outside there is a world that keeps going. Abbey's gone, she's escaped through a partially boarded up hole at the back of the cabin and is nowhere to be seen.

"Don't panic, Angel, we'll find her," Madeline says.

As he heads up into the hills Angel feels the landscape become frightening. The brush around the cove is made up of thick, dead white trees about four feet high sticking out of a carpet of blood-red moss. After three hours of looking, she suggests getting some help from someone in town.

"I'm gonna keep looking, no sense getting anyone else involved," he says.

"Why, you don't know the area."

"Mike will lose it. You could have told me about the hole at the back of the cabin?"

"You're blaming me for this?"

"Never mind"

"No I do mind when you're ridiculous. Jesus, you can't handle anything. I'd hate to see if it was something serious."

"Just leave me alone."

As Angel climbs back out of the brush hours later, Abbey comes running, dragging a trap behind her. The blood is everywhere, dripping like a spring runoff from what is left of her paw. He sees Madeline on the deck of the neighbors' cabin, a phone to her ear. As he gets closer, he knows by looking at her that nothing needs to be said right now. They ask at a gas station for directions to the vet. The young attendant says he doesn't know, he'll go and get his father. "Should know better den to bring a dog up from town and let it run wild," he says, going into the house next door. Angel holds the dog in his arms, crying, "Abbey, you'll be fine. "But it's too late. The vet had to cut off the whole paw.

When they tell Mike the news, he says: "You can keep the fucking three-legged dog."

Angel stands under the nine planets, imposing plaster-of-paris versions complete with rings and moons, hanging over the dance floor at the Geo Centre. Madeline is the "official unofficial" wedding photographer, she jokes. Madeline takes him by the arm and leads him into an elevator that brings them two stories up, to a special viewing room looking down upon the planets. He inhales deeply, exhales and then smiles at Madeline; it is one of those moments he knows that he will hold on to. They press their faces to the glass like children on a school bus and watch the dancers as Ewan and the Brats take over the stage from the house band and do a blistering version of *Should I Stay or Should I Go*.

"Great song," Angel says.

"Ewan likes to be the center of attention."

"A drama queen like yourself."

Angel takes her by the arm and they dance close. It reminds him of his first dance with his sister Marcia in the seventies, dancing to *Let it Be*, his arms around her in a Frankenstein-like reaching awkwardness, his head resting tenderly on her bosom. When he and Mike had gone to their first parish dance alone, and finally, near the end of the night Angel got up the nerve to ask a girl to dance, he'd rested his head there again. He'd gotten slapped. Soon everything had changed anyway, and a year later in high school slow dances were out and he and Mike donned extra high-heels and powder blue shirts with big collars under their jean jackets to do the bump or the hustle. For Angel, every dance feels like the first one.

"There's Margot again, fucking around with the wrong guy."

"Yeah, I hate weddings," he says.

"It's not exactly my style, but I love people. They're my friends, don't get crooked tonight."

When they get back downstairs the guys are all so drunk they can barely stand. Guys Angel knew from around town, now men in their thirties, standing around and talking of other times they got drunk and how foolish they were, and will be later tonight. It reminds Angel of Bell Island. A party for Angel is a shutter opening up on an ugly part

of the past. Every Saturday night, he had listened to the Old Man and the Ryan brothers throwing down cards and banging their fists on the table, spilling rum that smelled up the house. He remembered the men jokingly refer to him as Angela when he was thirteen or so and he had refused a drink. They were up all night shouting about the mine and how things weren't as good as they used to be. Unable to sleep for days after, he couldn't concentrate and the Brothers came down on him, until he was in a near constant state of paralysis.

When the garter lands on his shoulder Angel is nervous. Veronica catches the bouquet. He does his best to appease the cheering crowd. Madeline eases his stage fright. She's laughing and taking pictures. He's surprised that she is egging him on, to go further, joining the crowd who chant more, more, which means move the garter further up Veronica's leg with his teeth.

Tradition says now he's got to slow dance with Veronica.

"You're taking it all in stride?" Veronica asks.

"What?"

"You know Ewan and Mad used to be an item?"

"Ewan and I went to Rice together, but no, I didn't know that."

"Yeah, it was that summer they were roommates in Montreal, art school. "

"Oh, well, I'm sure it's over," Angel says, wanting to change the subject.

"It's never over. I hope you're not going to break any hearts, 'cause Mike broke a lot of hearts around here."

Angel shrugs it off, finds Madeline, and gets her up dancing. He looks around and notices Veronica and Margot are dancing together. He feels for them, a dearth of men around since the cod moratorium, and the ones still not gone away all down on hope, filling themselves up with drink. Angel and Madeline open their arms to embrace her two friends into a circle. And this is where Angel would have liked this midsummer evening to end, arms interlocked, old friends and new lovers all bound together in a ritual dance.

Soon the four of them have commandeered the small observatory room above the planets. They hand around the dregs of the champagne and a joint as they pass judgment on various guests' faux pas and what each of these old friends have done with their lives. Veronica announces they have just decided to swear a blood oath to never get married. She hauls out the wedding knife from her purse, grinning.

"I'll see you back at my place" Angel says, moving out of the observatory room.

Veronica calls out: "Angel, we're only joking with ya, come here and swear you'll never take our Mad away."

Angel starts to walk away.

"Are you in this for the long haul or what? Or are you just like Mike? Out for a good time?" Veronica bawls: "Mad's had enough assholes."

Madeline catches up to him "I'm sorry about the girls."

"I thought you were different?"

"What do you mean?" "You're just like them."

"Them? Who the fuck are them?"

"Them, this fucking city, let's just get out of here."

"And go where? The mainland? Been there. Done that. Look you're drunk. You're not making sense."

"Sense. There's no sense in this place."

"Okay suit yourself. Sayonara."

She moves like a gazelle until she's quickly out of his sight. As he walks down over the Battery Road, tired and drunk, the sun's coming up behind Signal Hill, illuminating an ad for the Geo Centre. An arrow pointing to planet earth says: "You are here."

Angel wakes up in a sweat, Abbey is yelping. He goes to see what's wrong but the dog has just been dreaming and has fallen back to sleep. When he wakes up, there's a postcard slipped under the front door. It's a photo of Madeline's, her lying along the shore as a wave crashes over her, done as a fundraiser for the photography co-op initiative. On the back it says: "I'm sorry. Gone Swimming. Pippy".

Angel crosses the field where there was once a Boy Scout camp, now sans camp, sans scouts, sans anything. The grass has become lumpy and hard, unfit for pegging in a tent. Where are all those boys now? Are they reeling in the years or do they stone away the time? Some of them may be already dead as a stone. All of them, youth gone, have taken unique paths through the woods to get to wherever they are. The "be prepared" slogan was only useful for the future; It didn't help you if you spent all your time traipsing through the past looking for answers. For as much as he wants to live in the future with her, he fears that the whole thing will come crashing down, a flood rushing through the shafts of his mind where he worked everyday to dig away at the iron ore of his history. And he felt like they were all at it, he and Mike and all of the children of the men who'd grown up there, on the island.

He walks a mile, literally, in Madeline's footsteps: he can see the tracks from her sandals at muddy intervals. Along the path lupines are in full bloom. The closest things to seaweed on dry land, they belong to the colour palette of the ocean's depths: wild, feminine, stringy, saucy, fragile in texture but strong enough to withstand the undertow. Men are earth and women are ocean. Their unions would always be waxing and waning to the tune of the moon's cycles.

When he gets to the pond Madeline's lying out on the dock. He sits to take off his sandals and then lies back to feel the warmth. When he opens his eyes she is standing over him, shading the sun, as if he is one of the poor humans surprised by the Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman.

"Okay, it's just us now," she says, looking around.

"Listen, I, last night, I'm just not sure about anything, especially with Mike and..."

"People talk. Fuck, so what? Take it with a grain of salt. Anyway, everybody was just drunk."

"They're always drunk."

"You're no slouch at that."

"Okay, it's more than that, it's... it's just when we were growing up..."

"I know, I know, I can't imagine how that felt, but what about now? Nobody's perfect. If you could only see what I see."

"I'm just done."

"With what?"

"Everything, this place, I guess. It's all too hard."

"Is that you or Mike talking? Things could be a lot worse."

"The Old Man used to say that to us."

"Angel, just come in the water, you'll feel better."

She swims out to the dock in the middle of the pond. After a few minutes she dives off. Angel swims out under the water, holding his breath until he's underneath her.

It's a moment like one of Madeline's black and white photos. He surrenders to the moment, ignoring the desire to come up for air.

Vortex: A Critical Essay

What do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?

- CLR James

All writers are, to some extent, writers of place, as Elizabeth Bowen asserted: "Nothing can happen nowhere. The locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it" (39). In most of these stories the locale has a large impact on shaping both the psyche of the characters and what happens to them. I would describe myself as a writer whose preoccupation with place is obsessive; it is not just *what* I write about but *why* I write. Yet, to be a writer occupied primarily with place doesn't necessarily mean one romanticizes the place, nor does it mean that the people of the place portrayed will love what the writer says about it. In an essay entitled *Why I Write* Graham Greene rhetorically asks: "Isn't disloyalty as much the writer's virtue...as loyalty is the soldier's?" (32). Like Greene, I feel the writer's role is *not to* romanticize the place, but instead to show how cultural and physical aspects of the locale create or exacerbate conflicts for the character.

I feel that has been my job in many of these stories: to lay the country I know bare for the reader. I use the word "country" here, since, although Newfoundland is no longer a country by definition, the richness and diversity of its culture make it a country. It is a place whose borders exist in the mind as much as they do politically or geographically. Perhaps, it is "a country of no country" as Wayne Johnston suggests in his memoir *Baltimore's Mansion* (228). If, like families, all countries are unique, to convey an

understanding of what I was expressing in these stories, I first need to discuss some of the contemporary writing about this unique place and show how my own work wrestles with some of the same themes.

In the introduction to the special Newfoundland issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (2004), Larry Mathews updates and expands upon Patrick O'Flaherty's *The Rock Observed* (1979), a survey of Newfoundland writing. The introduction and the essays in the journal discuss a literature that has exploded in both quality and quantity since the publication O'Flaherty's comprehensive review of Newfoundland literature.

Terry Whalen, in a 1980 review of *The Rock Observed*, says that O'Flaherty labels much of Newfoundland writing as romantic, as represented in books such as Harold Horwood's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, which O'Flaherty describes as "disarmingly innocent and uncritical" (167). And, says Whalen, O'Flaherty is *also* quick to dismiss the writing that sought to be a rebellion against those romantic portraits, such as Percy Janes's *House of Hate*. Whalen writes that this romantic/rebellious dichotomy is "evoked" by O'Flaherty, "only for quick dismissal" (35).

As Mathews says, O'Flaherty prefers the writing found in Percy Janes's *House of Hate*, in particular "its grim honesty," but rejects what he sees as Janes's attempt to "make the microcosm of his characters' lives representative of something in Newfoundland society" (7). Not as quick to dismiss Janes's work as O'Flaherty was, Whalen finds in *House of Hate*'s Saul Stone "a character who has a clear sighted analysis of the limitations of the stoicism that O'Flaherty praises" (7). I agree with Whalen's

interpretation of Janes's work, and I think that Janes is the forerunner -- in terms of a thematic approach to describing the Newfoundland psyche with more "clear sighted analysis" than had existed before - to the contemporary writers who have influenced me in the writing of these stories.

Mathews brings the debate about Newfoundland writing and the provincial psyche into recent times by looking at some contemporary works, in particular *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. He concludes that Wayne Johnston's Smallwood is a "quantum artistic leap" as a representative of the Newfoundland character and psyche as compared to Janes's Saul Stone or any of Horwood's protagonists. Mathews maintains Johnston's Smallwood, though still suffering from the "island-wide inferiority complex" that the narrator Saul Stone in *House Of Hate* perceives, becomes the vessel in which Johnson reveals a much more complex and conflicted relationship between this place and its inhabitants. (8). When I started to write I was influenced greatly by Johnston and this more complex reading of the Newfoundland psyche. Two other contemporary writers who have subsequently had a great influence on my writing are Frank Barry and Edward Riche. I think that they and I share a desire for a rich, complex, aesthetic engagement with *this place* that challenges cultural mono typing, whether it be of the romantic, rebellious, or stoic vein. Particularly in the work of these writers, a new kind of Newfoundland character surfaces, one who is unwilling to suffer fools (both from here and away) who support a blind romantic view of this place, but are willing to see clearly the dangers of the stoic position, the position that has the danger of -- in Whalen's words

describing Janes's protagonist Saul Stone -- becoming a "form of impotence" (Whalen 54).

These new Newfoundland writers take into consideration the double-mindedness that arises from having an understanding both of Newfoundland and also of the larger world. I set out to write stories set outside Newfoundland (and/or characters whose thinking was influenced from traveling outside Newfoundland) to show that much of the growing interest in Newfoundland culture is the result of the loss of that site-specific culture in a sea of globalizing cultural change combined with the out-migration of many of the province's people. A local literary example helps to capture this idea of how site-specific culture is magnified when seen from outside. Newfoundland writer Tom Dawe states in his poem "Vortex" that "a true homecoming is a going away" (42). The poem tells the story of a visit to an abandoned outpost, the place where the author learns that you can only truly recognize your cultural identity after you have left it behind. For me the idea of an abandoned outpost becoming home only when it is abandoned (resettled, in this case) is also true for post-confederation Newfoundland. The increasing focus on what might be called Newfoundland cultural identity has grown since the country of Newfoundland has been "colonized" within Canada and more recently has become known for its cultural uniqueness in an increasingly globalized world. The screenwriter, playwright, and poet Des Walsh had a poem featured in the Special Confederation 50 Issue of *Tickleace* (then the journal of Newfoundland literature) entitled "March 3, 1999: Notes on an Upcoming Anniversary." The romanticism is clear: "We are North Americans now/the same as those Pablo Neruda wearied of,/lulled into the same crimes,/the same culture-starved

wanderings.” (85). My feeling is that it is precisely because of the growing knowledge of the “other” culture, in this case North American “mainstream” culture, that Newfoundland culture is stronger and more vibrant than ever. As more people oscillate between places and cultures they lose some aspects of their cultural identity and reaffirm others.

Many current writers are aware of how Newfoundland’s site-specific culture is influenced by outside cultures. In an interview for *The Antigonish Review*, Lisa Moore says “That is part of the site-specificity, the fact that we aren't site-specific, that everybody goes and comes back. For many, many Newfoundlanders, that is really what it means to be a Newfoundlander. So if I am to write about being a Newfoundlander in the book that I'm working on, travel, movement is a big part of that”(113). Similarly, in my work many main characters are living, or have lived, outside the enclosed geographic and cultural boundaries of Newfoundland; these characters find themselves magnifying and questioning their own ideas about Newfoundland.

For me, the most poignant piece of literature challenging simplified views of Newfoundland -- whether those views come from home or away -- is Frank Barry’s *Wreckhouse*. This play gets to the crux of issues in contemporary portrayals of Newfoundland culture and society. One of the main characters, Larky, says he wonders about the “grimacing mask of hospitality covering a cringing clock of desperation” (70). Larky, a Newfoundlander who lives in a culvert and feeds off tourists, literally and figuratively, is just as critical of his fellow Newfoundlanders, who continue to spin these *folksy-happy* images, as he is of the tourists who come for “a bit of culture”(12). Barry

seems to be commenting that the idea of celebration and dressing up -- in what is near blackface -- for the tourists, is killing any sense of a real culture, a living, changing place, one with a future.

Like Jaques, the cynic in *As You Like It* who is "for other than for dancing measures," Angel in the story "Digging" is much like Barry's Larky: he is unable to participate in revelry at a celebration, in this case a wedding, without thinking about the hard reality of the place he has experienced(v,iv):

A party for Angel is a shutter opening up on an ugly part of the past. Every Saturday night, he had listened to the Old Man and the Ryan brothers throwing down cards and banging their fists on the table, spilling rum that smelled up the house. He remembered the men jokingly refer to him as Angela when he was thirteen or so and refused a drink... he was in a near constant state of paralysis. (72)

This paralysis, caused by Angel's refusal to accept the culture of drinking, masculinity and the stoicism of these hard-working men, is similar to the "impotence" that Whalen finds in Janes's Stone. Angel's stoicism prevents him from engaging with those around him in the story. Even while out in a pastoral scene, where the associations of family are far away, Angel cannot accept a romantic view of place and chooses to perceive things stoically:

At the dance they quickly meet a lot of the locals, some of them surprised to see strangers, though mostly they have no time for chatting, for the accordion player keeps them up dancing, and there is a soft light in the room that makes it semi- mystical, even though Angel knows that in the cold light of day it is really not much more than a wall-board shack. (68)

Angel, like Barry's Larky, recognizes how easy it is to get lost in the romanticism of this "semi-mystical" place and its culture of "down-home" celebration, when he knows all too well the hard reality. He sees what Larky sees: "a mask of hospitality covering a cringing clock of desperation"(43). Angel is grappling with the possibilities for viewing this place, Newfoundland, given a bleak family history; he is hoping to escape both the naïveté of romanticism that he sees around him, and the only other alternative he knows: the grim life that a stoic view will mean (a view that he sees manifested in his father's and brother's attitude). At the end of the story it isn't clear whether he will find what I might call a third way of perceiving, but I hope the story illuminates, as Janes's and Barry's work have the possibility of illuminating, the limitations of stoicism:

For as much as he wants to live in the future with her, he fears that the whole thing will come crashing down, a flood of water rushing through the shafts of his mind where he worked everyday to dig away at the iron ore of his history. And he felt like they were all at it, him and Mike and all of the children of the men who'd grown up there, on the island. (75)

At the conclusion of *Wreckhouse*, it is up to the viewer to come to a new understanding, to move beyond the limits of the characters' limited perspectives. At the end of the play the character Doctor -- who represents a visitor and interloper in the fictional rural Newfoundland town -- asks "if there will be a new beginning? (104). " The local character Sydney, who serves as chorus for rural Newfoundland in the play, answers simply: "It's the end" (104). For Barry, this isn't some existential end to the play, à la Beckett, this is the end of a people and a culture. Full stop. In "Digging," I think the conclusion is a little more open ended. Angel has the potential to recognize that he cannot live with an angry or stoic perspective, as his brother does; he must live one day at a time,

accepting his life on the island moment by moment: "It's a moment like one of Madeline's sublime black and white photos. He surrenders to the moment, knowing that he'll soon be coming back to the surface for air" (77).

In its thematic intentions and melodramatic, hyper-real style "Digging" is close to *Wreckhouse* on some theoretical spectrum between romanticism and high-realism. Both are playing with ideas about what the choices are for some kind of intellectual rebelliousness against an over-romanticized, static, view of place. Edward Riche's *The Nine Planets* expresses a similar satirical intellectual rebelliousness as an antidote to the romantic naïveté in this place, but his subtle humor provides an escape for the reader from the sometimes grim, didactic approach found in Barry's work and some of my own work (and arguably found much earlier in Janes's work as well).

In *The Nine Planets*, Riche portrays the psyche of characters in everyday middle class existence in Newfoundland in the twenty-first century, people who live in a globalized, complex, changing place, full of complexity and ambiguity, far from either a folksy pastoral past or some grim contrasting reality. Many Newfoundland books to have come out in the last twenty years have covers with images of houses towed across rural bays, ships, hardy men on the waterfront, or seal hunters. Riche intentionally breaks with that tradition with *The Nine Planets*, putting a tattooed young girl on the cover. I assume she represents one of the main characters, Cathy. She dreads her parents' generation's obsessions with place:

The class was made even more unbearable these days by the collection of Newfoundland stuff they were supposed to be reading. A flimsy volume entitled Diddle Dum this One. In this book was a scene from a play written

by her father, something boring to do with Joey Smallwood and Confederation – like, get over it! (270)

Cathy represents a prosperous and open-to-multiple-possibilities future that isn't obsessed with the past. The protagonist, Marty, has a much more closed-to-possibility experience as a forty-something living in St. John's. He endures a forced involvement in what he sees as foolish biased-toward-romanticism initiatives meant to satisfy the growing appetite for all things old and historical about Newfoundland. Riche satirizes the nonsense of branding grade schools and building blocks of "neo-Victorian" houses to make them *look* old (which paradoxically, is occurring in a time of new prosperity in St. John's). Riche's Marty -- like Barry's local characters, and several of my own characters -- isn't afraid to meditate on Newfoundland culture:

He needed out.... From Newfoundland's twinned fatalism and frivolity, from its colonial inferiority complex (they actually crowed about the British empire starting here!), from its village cronyism and envy. His poor countrymen were auto-mesmerized, put half to sleep by their retarding nostalgia for the bad old days. The place's very name was rolling over in his head, impossible to turn off, a snot-nosed corner boys; imbecilic refrain...Sink, island! He thought. Drown Newfies!...to live in the oldest part of the New World was to miss the point. (252)

Marty's satirical rant against those around him, his fellow Newfoundlanders, hints at the same perspective that Barry's character Larky has, but in this case Riche provides a way out for him. As illustrated in the above passage, one solution might be to leave, something the main character in Riche's earlier work *Rare Birds* decides to do. In the end Marty chooses to play a larger role in his niece Cathy's life, which suggests that he has hope the old thinking patterns will disappear in the next generation.

One question I am asking in my writing is what happens when a character like Marty does move away, what about the Newfoundland diaspora and its psyche? How do their feelings and perceptions of home change once they have left? Far from the lived reality of this place do their feelings of home become a boiled down simulacrum, a romantic ideal, based on what they must project to those who expect them to be “good old Newfoundlanders?” Or do they adopt a stoic view and reject outright all platitudes about “home?” In several of these stories I deliberately move the characters from their rooted place into spaces and places in which they became alienated, so they are able to clearly articulate their views of “home,” often recognizing in themselves the polarizing views they hold about where they have come from. As suggested by the epigraph for this essay: “What do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?” I believe that identity can be seen more clearly when contrasted against some other. For example, in “Everything Is What It Is,” the two main characters move away and then find their perspective of home has changed(xx). They experience alien lands and start to see their own countrymen differently, from a distanced, contrasted perspective:

Undeterred, the men start ordering red wine. Noah, slightly drunk himself, tells Anne that the scene reminds him of a Brueghel painting, the strange and lively inhabitants of the village at the carnival, their teeth stained red in the joy of harvest; “Like foreign devils,” Anne jokes, the phrase learned during her ESL stint in Japan. Noah *is* as happy as the devil himself, just like these men; for him it’s a reunification with a tribe he knows: good and bad, it’s what he knows. This is a celebration of somewhere they are not, some kind of purgatorial plea. This feeling at the festival is the spark that ignites their return home. (5)

By living away they become like Gulliver, seeing their own people through the long lens of perspective that comes from travelling in a foreign land. For Noah, being away reinforces his homesickness and love of home, it reinforces *his* predisposition towards a romantic view of home. But this romantic love of home is not fulfilled when they move back home, as Anne has family problems and feels a sense of alienation from people at home, not unlike Noah's alienation when he is away

Similarly, in "Digging," emigration from home, even when the move is a small one, has the potential to reinforce stoicism, instead of curing it, even when the home left behind was not a place of happiness. If the movement from Bell Island to St. John's, as the character Mike says, "was only half a fucking hour" why does it affect his father's character and reinforce his self-defeating stoicism? Revisiting the mine years later, "[Angel] can picture his blackened face, how it lit up going to and from the mine; as if were some kind of daily ritual without which he wouldn't be happy"(63). In other words, does the suffering experienced at the mine become so conditioned in Angel's father's mind that he misses it when it is gone?

Angel's father can be compared to the stoic Saul Stone in Percy Janes' *House of Hate*. As Saul gets away from the Mill Town of Corner Brook, he discovers that "every town is a mill town" (38). As Mathews points out, there are parallels between Johnston's Smallwood and Janes's Stone, yet Smallwood is a more advanced character in that he has the insight to understand himself and still succeed in the world, even though his psyche will be forever damaged(7). In "Digging" and to an extent in "Everything Is What It Is," like Janes, I wanted to have characters

who see home through the lens of the away place (even when the away place in "Digging" is "only a fuckin' half an hour")(60). I wanted to play with the idea that the perspective of "away"-- which Saul had, as did Johnston's Smallwood in his New York period -- has the potential to reinforce, instead of diminish, the character's inferiority complex about home or their romantic ideal of it. (It is interesting to note, anecdotally, that Janes lived and Johnston has lived off the island for long periods, and Horwood, the Newfoundland romantic, retired in Nova Scotia to an idyllic country home!)

Re-reading my work, I saw that I was often struggling with this question, one that is an important one in today's global world: does clinging to a static idea of "home" identity culture support the individual who has left the home-place behind or does it become an unhealthy obsession with an old set of mythologies?

I think it also became clear that there are gender differences between how a person reacts to emigration or travels far from home. For example, in "Ancient History," Michael becomes more ardent in his Newfoundland identity the further he gets away from home, while Hadley is more open to new identities. So, a secondary question is raised about identity culture: if the stoic and romantic positions taken towards one's cultural identity are more likely to be held more tightly depending on the gender (in my reading of Newfoundland literature, this idea surfaces often), what creates these gender differences?

“Everything Is What It Is,” is the strongest story for illustrating these thematic concerns. For Noah, the pull towards home is strong, and both he and his partner Anne aspire to a homecoming as a cure for the alienation they feel:

Flashes of blue-skied homesickness back there had made them come to love the traditional music they hated growing up. When The Irish Descendants played at Deer Lake Park in Burnaby, Anne spun like a whirling dervish amongst the crowd of mostly men. They both knew it’s wasn’t the real thing. It wasn’t the screeching intensity of Emile Benoit singing *the land we’re walking on, it all belongs to you*. It was a taste of home, like condensed milk, maybe too sweet but familiar. Noah knew from the faces and clothes of most of these men that they are from small towns and bays; likely they have come from working all over the Lower Mainland for this night of revelry, this circus act under artificial lights. (4)

Noah’s identity as a Newfoundlander is made stronger by being away. Anne’s is reinforced too in this previous passage, but her homesickness doesn’t prevent her from being in the here and now, in this case, on Vancouver Island: “But he needs to keep his thoughts about their new life in B.C. in check. Be here now, was what she would say. He smiles and looks her in the eye. *We’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden*, he remembered, that was the quote she used on her email signature” (6). Both characters reinforce their own predisposition towards their respective set of cultural mythologies when they find themselves in an alien environment (later in the story the “new/unfamiliar” place that alienates Anne is Newfoundland; she is, like Riche’s character Cathy, as much a product of North American pop culture as Noah is a product of his Newfoundland roots). Noah ponders the nature of emigration in current times:

Maybe you arrive to all islands the same, he pondered, with the promise of another chance: you or your small tribe move to a garden, surrounded and protected by the sea, where you can start over. He realizes they have never

really arrived back at the island they were born on; they only know it by the *leaving* of it. Anyway, no man lives on *one* island anymore. (7)

This central question I was wrestling with here is: How do we redefine place and culture when we move around so much and when the culture of our place is constantly changing via technology and the ease of movement? This is a question that became pertinent after the industrial revolution. The opening sentence of *Sons and Lovers*, a novel that influenced me in the creation of the story "Digging," reveals this idea of industrial relocation: "The Bottoms succeeded to Hell Row"(3). The place is changed and the people have to change.

One way to redefine ourselves as our place changes is through creating art. Noah aspires to be an artist, to start over and create new mythologies that reflect his new experience, but instead he relies on clichéd images of what an artist is (for example, by wearing Van Gogh's ear). Anne is the true artist: she is the one wanting to reinvent herself in the present, and this becomes Noah's epiphany in the story:

Whatever Van Gogh gave the world, it wasn't worth the pain, and nobody takes a knife to himself without a bucketful of suffering. He thinks how shameful of him to dress like that. Anyway, the truth is, he's more like brother and manager Theo than artist Vincent; she should have worn the ear. (13)

Of course, creating art is not always healing. In "Digging," Angel's brother Mike tries to express his experience in art but ends up just repeating and (re)presenting his father's experience in the mines of Bell Island:

The pair of bronzed work gloves on a copper clothesline smeared with blood-red paint was sardonically entitled "won'nerful work." This was the same old stuff from Mike. He'd hung up the Old Man's work gloves almost as a private message to him. Lest we forget, the piece whispered to him: Lest we forget the old goat choking for the last time on that last day, five years ago, after laying down these gloves. (58)

While the authority of the family, church, school and company mine loom large over these two brothers, their reactions to it are different. Mike attempts to rebel against authority in his art. Instead of his art freeing him, he recycles his own story, and remains a victim of the past struggles he has had with the authority of the church, the mine, and his father. The question raised here is whether art that focuses on the past is healing if it doesn't help you reinterpret the present and future.

A secondary thematic thread, one that many of these stories investigate, is the nature of family: how it is changing, particularly in light of the ease of movement across geographic and mental conceptions of place, of home. In "Everything Is What It Is," it is the suburbs, a kind of no place (neither city nor country) and in the porch (a place which in between inside and outside) where Noah contemplates his place:

Noah stands in the porch kicking off his boots... He suspects the porch's history: it must have been outside the house in the beginning, all the houses in the area were built from the inventory of house plans existing in the early fifties, when beautiful family communities were going up. All along the outskirts of larger, warmer, more hospitable, Midwestern American cities...Back then you moved twice or three times in a lifetime, that was all. Now it's just two people living here, temporarily, two people with too many pairs of shoes and an oversized bag of Hershey's treats ready for the *real* Halloween night. (10)

The story asks questions about how old familial roles and new ones intersect when people move around from place to place. What kind of challenges will this childless, mobile, urban couple face when they are placed in a suburban and traditional environment? Noah wants to provide emotional support in this transition from one place to another, the place where Anne has family issues to deal with, but his tools for dealing with this new challenge are the traditional masculine tools of action that he has inherited. At the end of the story he can think only about actions, not words or thoughts:

Tomorrow, in the cold light of day, sober and seeing clearly, he'll drive up to her mother's house and offer to help out. Maybe he can drive her to church and thank her after for her lovely organ playing. Maybe clean the leaves out of the gutters before the snow comes. That would be doing something. (13)

Another story that deals with the nature of families and the impact of geography and culture upon them is "Badlands." On the surface, the story is about being the twin of a mildly autistic brother, but thematically I was wrestling with the idea of how traditional families and groups (in this case men on a hunting trip) deal with individual difference (Randy, primarily) and outsiders. The narrator tells the story of how his brother is remembered: " 'Randy never could eat the heart, b'y could he?' the Old Man says before we dig in. The rest of us couldn't see the difference. Meat is meat" (14). Since neither parent of the autistic child is fully equipped to deal with Randy, it is his brother who finally has to find him a place where he can be cared for properly. By having Randy removed from his circumstances, out to the badlands, I wanted to raise some questions about what happens when people are separated from family members, from the place they

come from. I think I am drawn to creating characters who are twins or siblings because they are our nearest approximation of ourselves, the closest “other” we know; through the “other” that we know we help clarify our own identities.

Randy is emotionally lost because of his autism, but the other characters in the story are also lost; estranged as they are from each other, they too are lost in the badlands. There’s a sense that though Randy is the outsider, he is the one who is in tune with his immediate surroundings, as opposed to his father, who wants to recreate a world for himself, the world he feels he has lost:

He’ll want things to be the same as they were before the fishery shut down, before he went out west and tried to replace Mom, before Randy was diagnosed, back to some time that never existed for Randy and I. A time before he was scarred. He thinks you can tinker with broken people like a blocked carburetor and make them good as new. (24)

I wanted to create an almost allegorical story of a place—the badlands are everywhere for this person with autism, but they exist for the other characters who become estranged, whether physically or mentally, from “home.” I situated the death scene purposely in the badlands of Alberta where the dinosaurs roamed, to try and reproduce a Hardy-esque landscape in which the ephemeral nature of this life becomes apparent:

I understand how any time of year this road could mesmerize. I worry that all this light from the miles of open space will pierce into me and I’ll have to close my eyes to it. I pull over underneath a truck-sized billboard says Drumheller: Come Roam with the Dinosaurs. (24)

Returning to Greene's question about the "writer's need for disloyalty," I wanted to write about nature in this place and how the reality is much different from the portrayal of nature in cultural tourism (one web advertisement from the government of Newfoundland claims "Around every bend you will find a piece of heaven, a delightful sight, a playful breeze!"). The kind of sublime landscape I aimed to portray in these stories, being influenced by writers such as Thomas Hardy, was something much more sinister, not a playful breeze but a blinding gale. As Angel looks at a painting in the story "Digging," he thinks about the natural hardships he has come to know:

As if [her art had] to say that though Jesus might have been a boat builder but he hadn't known storms in the North Atlantic or the trenches or panning for seals; crucified *here* his crown of thorns was made of tangly, gnarly, weeds and rough blood-red brush. This was Jesus hungry in the desert for forty days, not Jesus with the smiling fisherman of Galilee or Bonavista. (57)

In Angel's eyes, nature is a place for suffering.

Ultimately, the greatest truth of the nature around us is found in our mortality. If there is an obsession with place in these stories, death is also an obsession, something that many characters are made more keenly aware of when they are alienated from those they know and love. In these stories the randomness of that great leveler is apparent. From the preparations for death in ancient Egypt, the Earthquakes in Japan, AIDS and 9/11, death is a looming figure. In the story "The Archipelago," Sheila, the narrator, is running from this experience of the death of a sibling. She clings to love, to her physical home, to the physical piece of pottery in an attempt to come to terms with death. Travelling to Japan, she comes to recognize the impermanence of things; living in a place has been destroyed

by an earthquake, visiting Hiroshima, and being alienated from her environment all awaken her to the need to let go of the hard physical reality of the world and face up to the loss of her brother. I also wanted to portray some of the banal physical limitations that can have an impact on us: for example, the fatigue Sheila feels after the flight, the constraint of living in a small Japanese apartment, getting trapped in a hotel room, getting sick because of her pregnancy. The physical miniaturized world of Japan restricts her; she also clings to the physical memories of her brother and her identity. She is always holding onto things: the bottle she won't throw, the pot for George's ashes, the kite. In the end, she must learn to accept the transience of life. I was thinking about some of the differences between Western and Eastern thinking when I developed the symbol of the kite, as in the following passage: "I learn that in Japan [kites] move across latitudes like I have done, they move up into the mountains and into the sky, their prints and ceramics all have story lines that are read from the bottom up"(30). The narrator comes to a Zen understanding of her circumstances and accepts that everything outside the present experience of the physical world is a temporary construction.

I tried to emphasize the idea in these stories that history is read differently in different places and reflects the character's relationship to the moment as much as anything; if the author of the text is dead, the author of any single constructed history is a fiction. This is a theme of "Ancient History." In a place so full of history, Michael comes to recognize the nature of his relationship to history and place: "If the past was rigid and limiting, why was he so drawn to exploring everything that happened back home, years ago? While no man was an island every man from his island seemed to be alone and pondering the past,

ceaselessly" (55). His journey away from home to a remote place filled with history forces him to do a personal inventory of what's important. Alienated from home cultures and homelands, many of my characters are trying to find permanence in an impermanent world, and some kind of greater meaning in a life that ends in death. To borrow a line from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, there is a sense that when "you are where you are not" you have a chance to see yourself and your place more clearly (12).

Regardless of place, we are all "born into this," in the words of Charles Bukowski, but every person's story is different and everyone belongs to his/her own set of islands of identity (319). On an existential level, all writers are writers of place, since place is often defined by the stories they tell.

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