

Island Within

by

Nico Rogers

A Creative Writing Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Department of English

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Thesis Abstract

In this Creative Writing Thesis, the author returns to the Great Depression period in Newfoundland in search of a voice to speak for the community he imagines his ancestors belonged to. Through research in the Folklore Archives at Memorial University (MUNFLA) and by means of countless interviews with community elders, the author has written nearly thirty original narratives told by as many narrators. The genre and style change from entry to entry, but the overall cultural question remains. Though the dialect is rarely imitative of Newfoundland English, the narratives are rich with regional vocabulary and idioms. The stories are attentive to the many of the rituals and customs of a Newfoundland fishing community but can most specifically be situated in the Fair Islands of Bonavista Bay. As artistic representations, these narratives have been written in devotion to a people and time the author has only ever known through stories.

Acknowledgements

Without the intelligent and steady advice of my thesis advisor, Dr. Warren Cariou, many of these stories would have remained unpolished, unremarkable stones. I am greatly indebted to his sensitive eye and encouraging words.

While doing research in Newfoundland, numerous of my 'cultural informants' not only guided me toward becoming better versed in the island's linguistic and artistic sensibilities, but also kept me well fed on their regional delicacies. Among many others, I am endlessly grateful to Mabel and Alan Rogers, Sam and Beth Gibbons, Daisy Rogers, and to Stew and Esther Rogers, whose generosity will never be measurable. I would also like to thank staff at MUNFLA (Folklore Archives, Memorial University). Financially, I was the fortunate and grateful recipient of the J.G. Fletcher Award (University of Manitoba) and a one year recipient of SSHRC (Government of Canada).

At the level of the everyday, I could never have completed this project without two people in particular. My dearly loved wife, H       Fournier, has been with me through the thick and thin of the creative writing process, sharing equally in the triumphs and failures of the long adventure. Finally, without my father, very little of this would have been possible. He has always given me reason to believe and the support required to act on those dreams. To him, I can only try to say something that is beyond gratitude.

This work is dedicated to my father

Donald Rex Rogers

The one who has always believed

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Landing Within: an introduction

I am not Newfoundlander. I was born near Ottawa and raised in Northern Ontario, along the Quebec border. Although I grew up bilingual, in recent years I have identified myself more closely with the English language. I am not comfortable, however, with being considered a member of the cultural entity known as “English Canada.” The most apparent reason for this is that my father is a Newfoundlander. I have always understood that Newfoundland is a distinct cultural nation, has its own language, not merely dialect.

It is important for me to elaborate to what degree I have had to imagine Newfoundland in order to achieve a personal understanding of the island and its people. If I look to the map, I hardly see the island as a strict geographical formation. Because I have never lived there but have always seen myself as a living extension of it, I have perceived it as a place I could go to in dream, like having a personal bedroom in a stranger’s home. The truth is that in the twenty-seven years of my life, I have spent no more than a few months on the island itself. Yet I do not hesitate to identify with it. During my entire upbringing, Newfoundland has been a land of stories. It has become a state of mind, a harbour of the imagination, also a place of the *heart*, a word that is profound and not sentimental when used to express how Newfoundlanders feel for their home on a hard land amid an even harder sea. I feel a great deal for the word itself, *Newfoundland*..

The stories told around our kitchen table were predominantly about Newfoundland. The table could have indeed been shaped like the island itself. If that had been the case, my father would have sat on the most northern point, the postmaster of St. Anthony, always narrating the news. My mother would have been the saint of the west coast, seated in French speaking Grand Jardin on Port au Port Peninsula. Joey, the oldest brother and the one who became an accountant, would have sat as a merchant in St John’s. The middle brother of three, Eric, and myself, the

youngest of the rascals, would have alternated between Bonavista Bay and Notre Dame Bay, each of us having never shaken our somewhat nomadic tendencies: happy to visit, reluctant to stay. Although the table was rectangular, the dining area of our kitchen was thematically Newfoundland. On the wall next to the table, hanging directly behind me while I ate dinner as a child, hung a ship's wheel from a schooner, carved in maple, and at its center was the wooden face of an aged sea captain with a pipe, tight toque, and a hard squint in his eyes. At the end of that wall, the entrance to the kitchen, there was a heavy brass bell adorned with a decorative anchor for its mounting. It was rung when dinner was ready, sounded come "mug-up", as my father sometimes yelled out to us. Extending beyond the kitchen into the adjacent washroom, hanging above the toilet, was the painting of an elderly sailor looking out to sea, his arm around a young boy and a small dog next to him sniffing the ground. It was inside this setting that my brothers and I were raised on countless stories of my father's childhood in Round Harbour, Pork Island, Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland, and depending on the nature of the story, Canada. With the visit of any of my father's family, my uncle Roy and aunt Mary in particular, there would be hours spent sitting at the table, listening, being part of a place and time that couldn't have been more different from the lives we were living. Nostalgia was always served fresh and steaming at the table. This is how I learned to yearn for a far away home. I seem to have been trained into believing that Newfoundland was a land where fiction was ultimately real.

There was a significant complication regarding the origins of the Newfoundland decorations in our home. None had actually come from Newfoundland. The captain's wheel was carved in Gaspesie, Quebec. The bell had been bought in Halifax. The painting was a Norman Rockwell, purchased from the clearance section of the local Zellers. All of it was strictly emblematic: none was the 'real thing'. Except, that is, for one. In the basement was a model of a

schooner, carved by a great-uncle of my father's, Uncle Gar Rogers, dead near the year of my birth, 1979. The hull was painted black. The gunwale and bulwarks in orange and the deck in white, the spars and masts interchanged with these two colours. It was rigged with twine but had no sails. The elaborate and miniscule blocking and tackle, with tiny deadeyes too, were painted bright green, as was the windlass, the main-hatch, and the ship's wheel. These colours would have been bright; the delicate craft was meant to glow. But it had been neglected. And now it was mostly covered in dust and double-rigged with spider webs. The boat was broken into pieces long before either of us brothers could comprehend its value, its rarity, its intensity. It stayed broken in the basement for ten years, its bowsprit and two masts dangling from taut twine.

By the time I had become a teenager, my parents divorced, the house was sold, and the Uncle Gar's schooner was tragically thrown into the trash, along with the carved captain's wheel and the Norman Rockwell painting. I don't know what happened to the brass bell. Nobody wanted any of the symbols to matter anymore. The walls had been stripped of their themes. Once the symbols that brought my father's heart-felt home into my family's house had all gone to the curb, all that remained were the many narratives associated with those images. I can tell the stories today, re-call them, with the same capacity I once had to touch those artifacts and physically remember my paternal heritage and re-mind myself that where I was then—a modern home in rural northern Ontario—was only partially the place where I belonged.

When I think of my last name, I cannot help but feel as though I am half-rooted to the particular place where the stories of my family name have come from—the space and ground where the memories of my paternal ancestors have been told repeatedly, plaited together by generations, woven into the fabric of a community. I say “Rogers” and immediately associate my name with a place where I have come from, the land in which my family is rooted. If you will

forgive the terrible amount of omission that comes with the story, I will tell it to you. Richard Rogers sails from Sheffield, England, arrives in Fair Island, Bonavista Bay some time in the early 1800s. In 1902 his great-great-great-grandson is born, Mark Annuel Rogers, my grandfather. From him my father is created, Donald Rex Rogers, born 1950. From the turn of the early Nineteenth Century until the early 1960s, the name Rogers lived and thrived in a series of islands known as the Fair Island that covers no more than a few square kilometers. They are called Fair Island, Paul's Island, and Pork Island. As the graveyards on the island will attest, a name becomes a territory in Newfoundland. On small islands in particular, the land becomes the people who are buried in it, those who lived from it. It is no wonder that Newfoundlanders have traditionally determined where somebody comes from as the place where they "belong", and not merely where they are "from". From Donald Rex Rogers and Eva Marie Bordeleau, I was born, 1979. Within a single generation, the name Rogers traveled nearly two thousand kilometers and had learned to speak French. Inevitably, a chunk of the Fair Islands showed up on our kitchen table.

One of the main difficulties in discussing one's own creative writing is addressing where the 'voice' has come from, who it is based on, how much of it is the writer. I don't know how to answer these questions. I would, however, like to shed light on the process of creating these narratives, as well as the setting in which they were written. Let me begin with *right now*. I am sitting in our home in Northern Alberta writing an introduction to my creative writing thesis and I hardly know how to approach it honestly. I see this as having to peel back the skin of the onion that is my cultural connection to Newfoundland. In front of me is the lake, a prairie lake. Five meters deep at the center, two kilometers across, seven kilometers in length. A measurable body of water that fluctuates in quantity with the cycles of drought and rain. When the sun rises and the sky lifts its sheet of myriad colour over the lake, I squint my eyes and listen to the gulls. The

world I am looking at becomes blurred. For fragmented moments, like beads on a necklace, I am transported to Round Harbour, Pork Island, Bonavista Bay. I am sitting on the wharf and the water is clear, too cold to be dirty. Behind me, at the foot of the wharf, is the store. Inside it is a museum's worth of fishing paraphernalia. Nets, both nylon and the old cotton type that were mended by hand. Lobster pots. Hand lines and jiggers. A dismantled Acadia engine, its parts filling the puncheon tub in which it is placed. Grapnel. Gaff. Prong. Dipnet. A small wooden box filled with lead sinkers, varying weights. Another box with cork floaters, one hemp rope passed through each of them. Block and tackle. Deadeyes. The smell of oil in the plank flooring, remnants of fish gut in the dust. All of it more than fifty years old. Some of it older than a century. None of it touched for twenty years or more.

The sun has fully risen over the horizon and now shines clearly over this prairie lake. I cannot see the bottom through the murky water, which is not more than a few inches deep at an arm's length from the shoreline. I turn around, walk through the tall weeds and enter my home. Boil water for tea, sit at my desk. I look out to the water; try to write something honest about Newfoundland, one island in a vast ocean.

It is necessary for you to know that I have imagined the community from which these stories have been inspired. Photos have been central in helping me envision a setting within which these many stories could have occurred. Seated at my desk to write, I have often imagined myself an actor left alone in a theatre, the stage fully set as a Newfoundland outpost of the 1930s. The reason for this is that within two feet of my right ear is a mosaic of photographs, all authentically Newfoundland. As most of the photographs are dated between 1920 and 1950, the images are black and white, some in sepia. They have been duplicated from the family albums of numerous 'elders' whom I interviewed while doing research on the island last summer (2005). There are

nearly a hundred images in a mosaic as wide as my arms will spread, each pasted on the wall with no more order than can be found in a stack of cards thrown to the ground. Permit me to describe only a few of the images that have inspired and informed many of the narratives in this collection:

Five fishermen pronging cod from the skiff to the schooner, trailers of light following the fish as they are lifted through the air. A gleaming white punt mounted on a slip; it appears like a cloud floating in dark sky. A boy of two years in overalls with the leg bottoms rolled twice, maybe three times over. In his hands he holds a container the size of his own face, the blurred letters LT to one side and S to the other presumably signify SALT. Above that, the rickety stage where two children bark nets in a puncheon tub, a time-honoured method of preserving the cotton twine. A crew of fishermen preparing to leave for the Labrador coast, all in wool garnseys; some men in overalls, one man in raingear: an old fella with a pipe and squinty eyes, next to him a young burly type with his arm around a beautiful young lady whose white shoes are luminescent in contrast with the men's rubber boots. At the exact center of my photo-based community is an elderly woman in dark cardigan and white apron descending a path and carrying two tin buckets filled with water; there is a hoop around her that rests on the buckets and keeps them balanced. I see the veins in her wrists and she has small ankles. Two seals laid opened in the snow, slit from mouth to anus, thick fat glowing nearly as white as the ground. A funeral procession, all men in dark suits following a coffin on wagon wheels, tall white church filling the backdrop. Five men in worn-out fishing gear picking bakeapples in a bog along the Labrador coast. One has a dented pot, another a wooden bucket, another a kettle, another a paintcan. The fifth fills a hat. The old man in the worst clothes, no teeth, has the biggest smile.

Each of these photos has its own voice. Each of the narratives in this collection also has its own voice. Possibly, the stories are an attempt to capture the movement of life that passes through

this mosaic of images. I am not certain what has made the voices possible. I have never intended to speak for any of the people in these photographs. Rather, I only wanted to find a voice that would speak justly for what Newfoundland means to me. Apparently, this has not been easy to do. There are 29 voices in this collection.

As a writer, I cannot allow myself to attribute the reason for my work purely to the emotional attachment I have to the subject. It is possible that my passion for Newfoundland has been harnessed through my love of literature. I can say without hesitation that Newfoundland has made me write. The style of my stories in this collection has been influenced by many writers from the island. I am mainly thinking of Ted Russell's writing as compiled in *The Chronicles of Uncle Mose*, Tom Dawe's *The Yarns of Ishmael Drake*, and the inimitable rants of Ray Guy. These are all writers who endeavored to capture the Newfoundland of their own lives. They are also the voices that largely defined the beginning of a literature unique to Newfoundland. With each of these writers, the role of the raconteur performing to a public is central to the way the text is laid upon the page, often reading much more like an oral record than a textual one, which for my interests does not diminish its literary value.

Beyond works specific to Newfoundland, which to begin elaborating would require an entirely separate discussion, I have kept three literary works close-at-hand. In the order of their significance to this project, these three works are Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and Michael Crummey's *Hard Light*. All of these authors have written works that can be placed under the heading of "regionalism" if there is a need to classify them. I am more inclined to discuss how these works have permitted me to create a text of my own, one that potentially adds an interesting dynamic to the tradition of "regionalism". For, unlike the

mentioned writers, I was not born nor have I ever lived in the region where I am situating my writing.

Thomas' play is set in a fishing village, and it is written in Welsh dialect, but not in such a way that the reader could confuse the creativity of the writer with the language of the people treated by the artist. The benefit I gained as a writer from reading *Under Milk Wood* is appreciating that a literary work can be representational of a particular region, capturing details that are unique to its human geography, while also making it difficult for the reader and the audience to believe that they are anywhere but inside the realm of fiction, floating inside the bubble of artistic representation. With Faulkner, much the same can be said regarding the artistry of the work. *As I Lay Dying* is mostly composed of a series of isolated voices, most of which express themselves through what might be considered monologues. When reading this text, I am hyper-aware of being inside a narrative that is limited by the psychological nature of the voice delivering the words into the page. Faulkner begins each chapter with the name of the narrator. Under that name, each word is to be connected to the unique psychology of that character, which means that the story is determined not solely by the writer but by the position within which the narrator has been defined. The beauty of this is that each narrative creates its own psychology, permitting the reader to be more intensely exposed to the unique nature of each voice. This method of writing, which Faulkner employs in numerous other novels, is at the core of the reason why he is often considered the quintessential regionalist. It is not simply because he has mapped through numerous stories the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, but because he has given life to the Mississippi setting by creating an entry point in the character that allows the reader to interiorize the setting. Maybe a more exact way of expressing this is that I am always looking at my feet to see whose shoes I am wearing when reading *As I Lay Dying*. It has been my aspiration to transfer this position of the

reader *vis a vis* the page into my own writing. In so doing, I have had to undo my own “I” in order to interpret and relate a narrative from within the narrator’s distinct centrality. The number of instances in this collection where the narrator comes upon his own body or is searching for contact with an unattainable “other” is likely a result of the engagement I have had with the voices of the many narrators.

Everything I have noted regarding *Under Milk Wood* and *As I Lay Dying* extends to the section “32 Little Stories” in Michael Crummey’s *Hard Light*. Beyond that, I believe what Crummey’s *Hard Light* has done for me is given me access to an aesthetic form—a collection of highly polished short narratives—through which I have believed it possible to represent a specific moment in the past.. In his “32 Little Stories” the narratives are singular events narrowed precisely to a value at the core of the situation as it is defined through the narrator/protagonist’s own psychology. Because the story, and by turn the narrator/protagonist, is contained within itself, complete without necessitating the expansion of setting, surrounding characters, and an overarching plot, it becomes its own centre of focus not defined by nor dependent on its accompanying narratives. The strength I find in such a structure for a collection of stories is that the narrative device determining the limits of inclusion and exclusion for the overall subject explored by the writer is determined within each individual entry, as opposed to a work orchestrated by a singular narrator limiting an entire exploration of a subject according to his own psychological parameters. The result of such an approach is that the collection of individual voices becomes a community of its own. With such a dynamic, the gravity that holds each of the voices to a single centre becomes the reader, as it is through the reader’s will to map his way through the fragments that one will find the entrances and the exits to the multitudinous passageways connecting each of the stories to one another. I say this without implying that each of

the narratives is absolutely connected to one another. Rather, within the reader the text is interiorized, experienced, imagined, and as such, cross-referencing the separate entities has the impact of contextualizing, which in turn creates a potentially comprehensive whole within which to situate the otherwise disembodied voices. In this sense, reading such works as the “32 Little Stories” section in *Hard Light*, *Under Milk Wood*, and *As I Lay Dying*—though this latter one to a lesser degree because it is contained within an overarching plot—is comparable to looking skyward on a starry night and outlining the bodies of constellations. In saying such a thing, I am thinking of Walter Benjamin’s work regarding the thetic form: the monad, the text as constellation. In this process of ascribing a limited entity to a collection of disconnected moments (stars, pulsing lights) each star (narrative fragment) gains its individual belonging, its voice, within the whole of a particular form—a designated community of stars. Of course, the voice of the individual star with regard to its role within the grand form, is not to be found in the sky but within the onlooker’s capacity to connect disparities, to contain the disconnected, *en fin*, to read, to locate narrative, to believe in one’s own belonging to that which is unattainable, the completion of the space you locate yourself within. To discuss how this is relevant to Crummey’s collection of little stories, I am best to quote the author himself in *Hard Light*. When introducing the impact that the diary of Captain John Froude, *On the High Seas*, had toward developing his own writing in the second section of the book, as well enabling him to locate himself within the writing of another person, Crummey offers:

The book connected to you suddenly, the life recorded there a part of the world you claim as your own, the man’s face a part of the darkness you come from. And when you begin reading it is partly your own story you find there. (65)

Captain Froude’s diary became especially important to Michael when his grandmother indicated that she had known the author. I suspect that through this association, the author was able to see

more profoundly into the world that Grandmother Crummey had past on to her grandson Michael through many stories. I permit myself to make such an assumption because this has been the role that Crummey's work has played in aiding me to locate a place to which my own family stories (and family of stories) of Newfoundland can belong, a constellation of pulsing voices alongside of which I have been able to retrieve my own imagined entity, a recognizable form that allows me to assert my own belonging beneath a sky of otherwise disembodied moments (stars, voices, burning memories).

Of course, admiring and analyzing the works of other writers isn't enough to make one write. The 'imagined community' I have mentioned did not become accessible simply through images and musings. Research is what allowed me to feel as though I could move through this fragmented setting while not feeling as though I were in a strange land. I recall attempting to write about Newfoundland numerous times in the past and feeling as though there was nothing but fog under the words. I have not felt that way in producing the works in this collection. Beyond reading numerous works about Newfoundland, my research consisted of interviewing elders from outport communities near Fair Island, Bonavista Bay, and foraging through the Folklore Archives (MUNFLA) at Memorial University, Newfoundland.

I am indebted to many elders whom I interviewed while in Newfoundland for most of the summer of 2005. I spent much of my time in Centreville, where many of the members of the former community of Fair Island currently reside. When there, I stayed with Stuart and Esther Rogers, who also transported me by motorboat to Pork Island and allowed me to do a lot of reading and pondering while in their cabin in Round Harbour, where I stayed entirely alone for two separate periods of one week.

Mabel Rogers, who was born in Round Harbour in the early 1940s, told me the story of the two-headed man, which is here narrated by Dorcas Pritches with only minor alterations from the original, which Mabel performs much better than I have managed to capture in writing. I recall Mabel telling me that this story has been put into writing for school projects by many of her own children, nieces and nephews. Also, I spent a great deal of time at a home for the elderly in Glovertown interviewing Skipper Albert Morgan, born in the early 1920s. Skipper Morgan told me countless narratives about fishing along the Labrador coast, as well as about life in the outport of Flat Island, Bonavista Bay. The final story in this collection is based on a very touching detail that Mr. Morgan shared with me. I offer it in homage to one fisherman among thousands who has known more hardship than I could ever hope to relate from within the shelter of my words.

Beyond doing interviews, I foraged through the Folklore Archives at Memorial University (MUNFLA) in St John's. From the materials in this archive I filled nearly an entire notebook, copying and paraphrasing portions of transcripts of interviews with outport elders that had been performed in the 1970s and 80s, mostly by students of the folklore department. Although only two of the central ideas for stories in this collection are directly inspired from records in the archives, those two being "Praying to boulders for berries" and "They've called it an omen", I am under the impression that handwriting page after page of Newfoundland voices of the past permitted me to interiorize certain characteristics of speech patterns and narrative structures. It is important for me to emphasize that I have not tried to reproduce a Newfoundland dialect in telling these stories. I do not consider myself well enough versed in proper Newfoundland English to make such a daring statement as "these are true Newfoundland voices" Rather, I consider these narratives as results of a personal journey into questions of cultural belonging.

There are readers who might consider some of the writing I have to done to be an appropriation, a form of thieving. I suppose in certain ways they are correct in their criticism. That is, so long as they understand culture to be a stagnant thing. On this front, I would entirely disagree. Culture is in constant flux. I have written these stories with a desire to contribute to the contemporary dialogue regarding Newfoundland culture and identity, which can certainly not be limited to within the shoreline that defines the shape of the island. In the past forty years, there are more Newfoundlanders who have left the island than have stayed. Besides, what has motivated me to find a voice through which I could express what Newfoundland means to me is a deeply rooted longing. This is a story about absence, a lack at the core of my identity as a Newfoundland-descendent that I have wanted to fill. I believe I have done so with this collection of stories.

I never truly got to know my grandfather. I've known him only in stories. I knew I needed to understand a little of who he was and the world in which he lived as a Labrador fisherman when I saw my father cry for the first time on that afternoon in 1985. I was six years old. My father gently hung up the phone. I don't know who delivered the news to him. He walked calmly across the kitchen, sat down at the table. He looked at us three boys, my mother at his side with her arm rubbing his shoulder. "Your grandfather has died," he said to us. One by one, we gave him a hug, told him that we loved him. My mother led my brothers and me to the basement. For the rest of the day, we did not hear my father walking on the floor above. He sat in that chair and wept until nightfall.

My brothers and I watched television until bedtime and talked of how much it must have hurt my father for him to break down the way he had. My brothers both had tears in their eyes, but I cannot know if they felt a real sense of loss. I had tried truly hard to cry, but all I could do was imagine how it must feel to lose somebody you love. I love my grandfather. I have never known

him. But I will never forget hearing my father through the ceiling: the jolt of his chair, his feet hitting the floor, his hand coming down hard on the table. His voice trying so hard to release the pain that pulled at his heart.

My grandfather, Mark-Annuel Rogers, was forty-eight years old when my father was born. He was seventy-seven by the time I came into the world. I met him only once. He had come to visit, or rather was brought to our home, not long after suffering a stroke. "He wasn't who he was," my father still reminds me. Grandfather wanted to play knuckles. I can't recall if I hit his knuckles, but I'll never forget the pain when he hit mine. I cried and was terrified of him. He had a blank look on his face and couldn't understand what he had done to his youngest of grandchildren. My mother led me to the washroom. I am grateful for the way he hit my knuckles, though he couldn't have known what impression he had made on my life. I cherish the pain of it. Physically, I can remember him on my knuckles when I tighten my hand into a fist.

I couldn't cry on the day he died. There was no loss for me. I knew all the stories would still be told. Grandfather would always be present in my life in the same way he had always been, alive in the voices of his family. To a degree, through these stories I am mourning the loss of those ancestors I never got to know, my grandfather in particular. At the same time, I am wishing to celebrate the impression their absence has made in my life. It is not only out of homage to the dead that I have wanted to write. I have been driven to create these narratives for my family. Like almost every Newfoundlander I have ever met, they are people who cherish sharing stories, not merely telling them. For reasons that are unclear to me, none of the stories in this collection has been told to me by my father or his immediate family. I do know for certain, however, that every story in this collection has been written because of my family's love of sharing stories, sharing Newfoundland.

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The Dirt

Rooted

The turnip gets inside you. Indeed, it turns inside you, turns you up—but it's not merely that simple. It's the strength of the vegetable, its bitter, pungent bite. Potatoes are capable of subtlety, but they blandly move through Newfoundland's culinary society like a crowd of complacent proletariat in line at the intestinal factory, standing in a long line of nameless existence. Cabbage, to complete the trio of staple vegetables on the island, is a remarkable tool that not only soaks up pork fat like a muscular sponge, never becoming entirely lost to soggianness, but is also capable of transforming itself into artillery: a gassy bomb dropped in Auntie Addie's territory of kitchen will protect a fresh loaf of bread from the parasitical fingers of offspring and the thieving thumb of the old man, Uncle Henry. But the turnip can speak for itself. It always remains what it is, there's no persuading it into disguise. Even a single cube of turnip in a potato soup will turn the flavour to its favour: there's no hiding a turnip, they always turn up. In its essence is time, a capsule of the Old World. A root reaching into a period when to survive a vegetable needed to create its own defense apparatus: a hard head, tough skin, and an inner character solid and sour. Utterly genuine to the core. Turnip can make children cry. There have been many underfed teeth defeated when biting too ambitiously into its firm, unforgiving muscularity. But once you've earned the respect of the vegetable, you begin to understand the complexity of its nature. In the turnip, there is sweetness. In a winter's life, when having split and stacked wood from the sun's up to its down, old man Uncle Henry, today aged 87 (so it is believed), can sit down at the table before a bowl of moose stew and squish a soggy cube of turnip between his toothless gums, close his eyes and become as unaware of his body, of his age, of his arched and aching back, as he must have been when in his mother's arms, a soup of musky milk pouring deep beyond his lips, coating the cavity of existence.

Barking Down a Tree

First, cut into the bark, straight line down the trunk of the tree. Use your axe, starting at about six feet from the ground. Straight line. Soft cut. Not like opening the gut of a fish. Cut only the skin of the tree. After this, cut full rings around the tree at the top and bottom of the vertical incision.

Once that's done, put your axe to the side and work the bark open with your hands, like unsnapping a great number of buttons down the backside of a gown. Work your fingers under the bark, against the wet wood, into the cool and milky sap. In no time, you'll have all your fingers slid inside the tree. Push your palms flat against the fragrant wood, fresh like wet skin. And the rest is easy. Slide your hands farther in until your finger tips are touching each other on the backside of the trunk. The rare tree is tant and thick enough that you'll be hugging the whole thing, your chest and neck and face flat against the running sweat of spruce or pine, more fragrant than fruit. You'll be holding the tree, you'll be inside its flesh. And this is when you strip her bare.

Work your arms down her full length, the six feet of incision. Remove the gown. Step away from the body, holding a full bodice of bark in your hands, like a cassock of hard skin tall as you are, taller. Stack the rinds in bundles of ten, stock them in your punt. Haul home with a full load.

These rinds will roof stores and tilts, even homes, insulate walls too. They will be used mostly to cover cod from rain, lengths of rind folded over piles of drying fish, held to the ground under wood or stone. The flesh coloured tree, stripped of its cloth, will dry up over summer. In late fall, cut down your dead timbers. Haul them home and axe them into splits. In winter, feed your stoves.

Stay warm inside your homes like hollowed trees.

A Good Beating

It seemed to work under some form of consensus, they all agreed to it but I cannot explain how. The rhythm of it would wash in sound waves over the harbour, echoing over the hill into the next cove, Sydney Cove. The thump of each strike would ricochet hard off the stone cliff in the bottom of our harbour and return to us who busied about with Saturday morning chatter, grandfather's time for whistling old jigs. The pattern of the drumming did not lend itself to dancing. If it had any cadence at all, it was one akin to slow hail on the rooftop. The memory of it is engraved in me, like the letters of lovers in a tree. Must be the combination of accidental harmony with the sight of all the women on the porches, two hands hard on the broom handle, their eyes squinting in the whirling dust and sunlight. The dust and the rhythm and the wind. The violent movement of their arms, the tremendous satisfaction of the thumping, the whacking, the release of another week's long duration. It must be the ritual that can't be forgotten. Every Saturday morning, the pleasant beating of the mats.

Ode to Her Dark Tea

It's not easy to explain to people who don't know, but what I call a slut is not quite the same as a kettle. Spend a full winter in the forest cutting timber to no end, long days with labour so hard on the body it can make your ears hurt. Do that only once, and you'll understand quicker than you can think of your mother's name. The slut that gets me through the winter doesn't have the same shape as the kettle that boils my water for tea after dinner. And that's why when I think of her, my lovely round and dirty slut, my mouth waters the way it does. My chest feels the warmth of her, just by the thought alone, the image. Picturing her in my mind keeps me going, hard at my labour, pushing and heaving the bucksaw in and out of the countless trees, the soft bodies of black spruce. It's true I love the smell of working in the bush, the day-long fragrant release of the forest's freshness, even when she's frozen in the dead of winter. I can work the daylight into darkness, dried salt from the sweat of my brow like chalk over my face and into the hairs of my body, and when I come into the bunkhouse at the end of the day, I smell cleaner than solvent, fresher than bread, gleaming with sweat as though I've been buttered. But a love for the forest's secret scent isn't quite enough to satisfy a nose like mine, to keep me hard at my work. When I figure I've had enough of the lonely labour of working down the trees, and all I want is to get back home and be near the bed, near the wife I've loved for what ought to be counted as my whole of my life, I can't help but focus on my dearly beloved slut with her big handle, I see her with steam rising out her mouth as she lays near the fire. I imagine I hear her faintly whistling as she pants for me, blowing my name with steam into the air. I'm driven mad just to be near her glowing body, wanting nothing but to get my hands over the heat below that makes her boil. It's

the smell of her that drives me the most, the bodily scent that steams up through her open orifice. I imagine that as I walk towards her, get close to her fire, she invites me to sit near her, hold what she has to offer cupped tenderly in my hands. You'll never understand how a man like me can love and long for it. How dearly I want to wet my lips with her pungency, her sweetness, and then suck in her dark fluid like morbid fruit. Oh the love I have for my hot slut on a cold day. All winter long, it is her alone that keeps me hard at my labour.

Consider it like this

Consider it like this: a dog is never more alert, never more in-tune with the earth and his sense of belonging to it than when he has to crap. I look at any dog now, bent like an accordion pushing out the single extended note that brings his bowels into harmony with the grand chorus, and I can see how it was once the same for myself, a long time ago. Used to be I had a sense of the whole damn universe, its grand movement, its coming and going cycle, its flux. The way the stars are really just sand pebbles along some infinite shoreline. Now that I'm old, I only have the words to say what it was like, and I only keep the words because I want the memories of it. I've lost how it truly was, the feeling of it, of knowing you belong to the stars and the sand, to the ocean and the rock, and all of that because of the simple necessity of having to go outside to relieve yourself, of having no choice but being strictly simple among the elements of the earth. I can only begin to say how aware of all that I was as I sat in the outhouse that was perched above the sea and watched a steaming turd fall to the wet breathing sand and be washed away with the tide. Used to be my eyes were filled with the stillness of a clear night sky, the way the dog's eyes are—glistening, focused and empty, opened to infinity really. Used to be like that when I crouched over and flexed my belly, my two buttocks hard as wooden bowls.

I loved watching it happen. Witnessing the power and folly of it. I'd send my turds like little ships on an adventure toward ultimate decomposition. I'd watch them float like rotten stars in the night current. I presumed that the turds came apart with the waves and by sunrise would move through the water the way dust stirs in the air. And that's the cycle of it, how all dust becomes life. How all the dead life floats in our water,

becomes our blood. And I refuse to see the stars in any different way. They too are merely warm things that go cold and become dust. And that's why I say the ocean is an entire galaxy, a complete universe of its own. Both the ocean and world above eat up the dust and crap out the life. And I always knew this, long before I could say it. Used to be I simply imagined that God had a stomach like an orbit, a complete galaxy, a whole monstrous and endless stomach. Full of gases and explosions. A veritable belly indeed.

Used to be in our backyard—not that it was considered a 'yard' back then, it was more like a country and an ocean too—there was an outhouse, equipped with a flushing system elaborate as the stomach of God, as the galaxy itself really. Between two boulders, at a height of twenty or so feet above the shore, my father laid a number of planks to form a bridge upon which our outhouse was built, standard sewage design for all us outporters. Simply, it was a toilet suspended over the water. A few minutes before bed, the tide would call out to my bowels, the way the moon does to the water. I'd run barefoot over the wet cool grass and onto the even cooler and wetter boulders; the cool and the wet at my feet lit my whole body, electrified me, and like the elements of earth do, it made me want to grow downward, embed myself beneath the surface, give back to the earth what I had taken from it—it was like this that the ocean called to me. As my feet ran over the warm timbers completing the last few steps over the bridge toward the outhouse, I'd undo the buttons and pull down the trap door of my long underwear, then reach into the black air for the short rope that was the door handle to the outhouse. Swift as a dog, I'd step my right leg up onto the floor of the john and without canceling the momentum, I'd swing my left leg in a rising motion while holding the trapdoor between my legs with my left hand; up and over the height of the bench I went, landing with my

arse centered over the porthole of the seat— plunked down in place the way a pebble must settle at the bottom of the ocean.

When the tide was high, there was a distance no more than the height of a tall man between my perfectly balanced buttock and the salt water. At low tide, I could stare between my legs at the wet and breathing sand that laid flat like a valley floor between two stone mountains—and I'd sit on my floating throne playing the impostor of God. When the tide was low, I'd imagine a train track ran through the miniature valley, over the sand—I'd laugh, and watch my little pecker jiggle under a convulsing abdomen (which never failed to double my laughter, triple the jiggling in turn). I'd laugh at the thought of the train having to stop because of a steaming mass that inexplicably laid over the tracks looking like two pine trees that had fallen out of a dark hole in the sky. There were other times, when I was particularly angry at mankind I suppose—like the time in grade school when the teacher, one Miss Rita Pritchett, had a talk with my parents about the family portrait I had drawn in which the crowd of us were naked as treetrunks, the grandparents too—at times like these I imagined the valley filled with a little village: children playing cowboys and Indians running through the trees and weeds, mothers hanging sheets and socks on the line, fathers in the fields cutting down the hay, and suddenly the whole happy valley buried under the muck of an inexplicably soft meteorite.

My favorite though wasn't playing God, my imagination ruling over the ignorant valley below. It was a great deal more intimate. A lesson in love. I'd go to the outhouse on a calm night wanting nothing more than to have my whole sensual existence molested by the cold hands of the sea. When the tide was high I went to the outhouse slowly, willingly submitted, as though in a trance with my arms hung heavy to my side, my mind

orbiting above its skull. I went to the high tide like she was the Mother of Mother Mary and I was her lone and loved pilgrim. It was here that I met Oedipus before I had ever learned his name, and he could have talked to me in Greek, I would have understood. It was never his mother, not in the physical way of her flesh, that he wanted. Simply, it was to be touched by her wet fingers, to be held by the hands of life's original source, to be touched by and to touch the womb, that is—and it wasn't sexual he told me, not at all. And I understood this because I went to her pre-pubescent and I go to her in my impotent old age—and nothing has changed. I suppose I go to her because we are both salt—I remember the first time I tasted my own blood, licking a minor cut on my finger, and I was impressed by its salt-water taste. I'd walk slowly to the outhouse, taking time, letting my whole body be captured and controlled like a sail in the cold wind. The salt spray of waves crashing off the boulders, the water rushing in, convulsing, breathing, heaving over the valley below the outhouse. And sure it was splendorous; sitting, suspended rather, over the porthole of the john, looking down through the gap in my legs, into the hole of the seat, watching the ocean like a lung breathing, like a heart beating, like a stomach contracting: rhythmical as the entire muscular system of every living body. The best of it all though, what truly made me appreciate the hands of the sea and believe that she was my eternal mother, was having a sudden wave rush in. A hard heave against the stone walls below would send a fountain spray of salt water up the porthole, leaving me no reason to wipe. Make it no wonder I considered her my mother. The ocean, the generous.

Considering it like this is how I've come to appreciate the moment of dying. Whenever it will happen, it will happen without me knowing it. Just like passing through

the porthole of the outhouse. Just like being born out of my mother. Without a beginning or an end. Simply pushed out by the stomach that took me in. We die like we live, dust floating in and out, following the tide.

The Toylers

For the Love of Lassie

There was no cow milk and that of the goat always called the summer-scent of his grandma's sweat to young Stuart Toyler's mind. Honey was to be found in no greater a quantity than a tall glass of fresh milk. Without such riches, a lad's craving for the heavenly land of promise, *milk and honey* as is offered in church, was satisfied by hiding in the store, every Sunday after church service. Pouring one half can of Carnation evaporated milk into an emptied tin of the same brand, the young Stuwty would pull the plug at the bottom of the puncheon and wait patiently for the molasses to fill the tin to the rib marking three-quarters of the can. In winter, his fingers were long frozen by the time the amount of molasses met his fancy, but patience became this child's virtue, along with a steady, desirous hand.

In the church they spoke of the land of plenty, but a boy like this one, one more reasonable than the common learned preacher, had promised himself—seated in the pew only a few months before his eighth birthday—to only dream, to simply want, whatever life he could mould and manipulate with his own two hands, hairless but steady as they were: Carnation milk and thick sweet lassie, plenty good when stirred by his little finger to a smooth, dark consistency.

At fifteen, when his chest covered more full of hair than any of the other Pork Island men, he suspected the weekly Sunday drink, the years of jolting his body with protein and sugar, had a role to play in his sudden blossoming of manhood. Before he was thirty, it was often said that from a distance you could never tell if Stoo Toyler had “nar a stitch of cloth on his back”. And for this same reason his beloved wife Hamutal,

Ma Moo as she was known, had given her husband the nickname of Moose Stoo, which she once explained by saying "on account of the thick pelt that hangs over his hide, of course". Even into his fifties, Stoo's head of hair was so thick and wiry that Ma Moo could still be heard, as it had been for more than thirty years, inviting her husband to join her at the arduous task of pot-scrubbing. "Come here and let me use your head now ma love" she would say, "I've got this pan won't scut clean and I could use that wire brush you got for a mop." On the 14th day of November, in the year of Our Confederate Lord 1949, when the grandchild Charlie entered the store, he could hardly comprehend why his grandfather Pap Stoo had emptied the molasses of the puncheon tub over the floor and laid himself down, at age 68, face buried in the thick of the black sweet. "Ma Moo! Help me!" Young Charlie yelled from within the store. "Pappy's sleeping in the molasses. I can't wake him and now my boots are stuck to the floor!"

Touched

Old Uncle Hump's rightful name is Henry Toyler. He is arched over so steep these days he hardly bends his knees to enter the root cellar. It's always been a queer thing to see, him and that cat. Whenever the weather is shifting and the clouds don't know what to do with themselves, he gets some awful pain in his neck and shoulders, the grimace of his face, his toothless and blackened mouth, speaks only the surface of how it must feel, inside, at the level of the bone. The only cure that works, he says, is to keep his wee cat Tilt balanced over his hump. He'll walk around most of the day like that, in the garden pulling weeds or at the wharf barking nets with the children and the women. He'll split and stack junks too, and all the while, the cat will be perched atop his hump like an egg in a nest. She too has gotten old, so feeble she hardly ever jumps down from his back.

The story of the cat is like this. First named Smurr and I can't tell you why. One summer, 20 years ago, she somehow jumps the wharf in Sin John's and slips aboard the Ruby Plowman, unknowingly sailing to a new home in Round Harbour, Bonavista Bay. On the schooner, no more than an hour out of harbour, Old Hump hears her first, a muffled meow under the turned over skiff. With the light of the lantern he finds a kitten tangled and almost strangled in a webbing of infested fishing nets that are packed loosely under the boat. The kitten isn't a little frantic either when Hump and his big hand persuades her wiry limbs out of the netting, nearly cutting her soft white paw with the pocket knife. He called her Smurr. Ma Moo, who was cook on board the Plowman that summer, kept the little thing with her in the galley for the three days it took to sail home, feeding her whatever scrap of hard tack and porridge and dumpling and salt pork she'd

eat, pouring her small saucers of tea too. That cat did love her hot tea, and would she get perked! Wired just like the light bulb neither Tilt nor Hump would live to know. This, the good life, wouldn't last long. Little Smurr would soon be terribly ill.

Tilt was a stray mess of hair, an orphan patterned with colours like a rotting pile of leaves and pine cones, dying lichen and putrid flowers, a few hidden whispers of a devil's paintbrush thrown into the stack; her fur was colourful as all that and with remnant patches of sharp white snow never to melt in spots over her paws, on her tail and all through her underbelly, where her hair was soft and thick as a saintly beard. Colourful and chaotic, and with eyes the blue of the calmest and rarest ocean. But she wasn't going to live long if her ear didn't stop pussing out frothy green and yellow like rotten lemon.

When the Ruby Plowman landed home in Round Harbour, poor Smurr may as well have been covered in ice, shivering all over. She had gotten so frail from inside her head, and this only in the matter of one day. It's a quick slide down a hill in the mud, and poor Smurr didn't have strength enough to stand on her legs without looking like she was stranded at the edge of a cliff, a gale threatening through her quivering colours. Inside Hump's tight but tidy home, Edna told poor Hump what she needed and by the time the kettle rumbled over the stoked cookstove, sounding like a train full-steaming down weary tracks, Hump was at her side with a Matchless paintcan full of spruce needles, glistening sap and bark. A handful of glowing yellow lichen and leaves from a blueberry bush. Tiny purple flowers, the little feeble type that only grow at the top of the hill, inside the cemetery dell that is always open to the sun.

Edna rinsed the total mass of patterned greenery in water and then in vinegar and packed them tight inside a small pot, pouring steaming white water from the kettle to the

boiling brim of the pot. Smurr, curled inside a quilt, stared out the small kitchen window rocking in Old Hump's lap, his heavy and warm hand over her head, gently covering her swollen and infected ear with a thick thumb. The two of them would not move from the magnetic motion of that chair for the entire time it would take for her kitten eyes to glow again with the immense look that all small life has for the world.

With the mass boiled to half its fresh volume, Edna added molasses and kerosene and then vinegar to the pot. "Lassie and karseen," she said to Hump as though through him she would reassure the ailing kitten, "that ought to do bring the little one up again." On the fourth day of holding glistening sludge that smelled of sweet and bitter and hot gasoline into her ear with his warm and unerring thumb, steaming tea served too to no end over Hump's kneecap, the stray kitten had found her legs again. Her head perked. The thing stoop up straight on Hump's lap, erect and then curled her back like a bended bough on the verge of breaking. And with this, at the height of her mighty stretch, she drove each nail sharp into the man's thighs. Smurr barely landed on all four paws, the way only cats strangely can, when Hump jumped screaming from the rocking chair, cursing the creature for its heartlessness.

Sometimes Edna still calls the cat Smurr, but the name Tilt is the one the animal turns her crooked head towards, the sound she responds to by occasionally walking towards the voice that calls her. Lopsided, the scar of infection weighing her head down on the left side, pulling forever heavy on her memory. Henry is the one who named her that. "If they call me Old Hump" he said to his cat, "I'm gonna call you little Tilt." And as though to acknowledge that she understood how it felt to be cured by a warm and steady hand, she taught him something too. He learned he could be healed by letting Tilt

sleep on his arched and aching shoulders, as she offered to do one day, climbing over the side of him while he napped in his rocking chair, snuggling herself into the valley of his neck. Little Tilt purring like a small engine, nestled between his hump and the back of his head. And that's how he awoke, soothed, healed by the touch.

The Day Rosebud Bloomed

You've got to get in there. Hook your finger around the back of its little head, give it a nudge with the crook of your finger. Just like you're telling it to come towards you, coaxing it into to life. At first, you feel like you're trying to sell it something it doesn't need. But you can never give up. You've got to talk to it with your touch, let it know it's not going to be alone in the world. "Come here you little goat, time to get out of there. Leave your poor mother alone." It's queer how it works, really. Being born. The most awkward thing we do in our lives. For goats and people alike, it's as if there's a need to hide away from the beginning. We come into the world already knowing we don't want to die. Any way, don't matter. Rosebud was some big that year.

By the time that goat was ready to break open she was toddling about lopsided, looking like a boat with all its ballast to one side. For the first one, it took poor Rosebud some terrible time pushing her child's plain carcass out of her. I was trying to hook the back of its head with my finger, but all I was finding was its hoof in the place where its head needed to be. In the end, I had to pull that one out, dropped her in the hay. The next one was white as an angel and didn't live long after her first drink from the teat. Some terrible mystery to that one. A solid little creature, strong as Rosebud herself. Didn't live more than hour. I never even got the chance to name her.

The third one is what broke our hearts. Rosebud's too. Even got me afraid that our favourite goat would never give life again, her body would lock up and she'd become a sad old maid, still ripe with youth. This little buck was black as night across the face and over the arse end and everywhere in between he was a quilt work of brown and white—queerest looking creature, but cute to crack your eye. We called him Swirly,

partially because of his senseless quilt of hair patches, but mainly because of his deformity. In the middle of his back, his spine made a sharp curve, like a root to get around a stone. Within the hour of being into life, the buck was milking at Rosebud's swollen teats and she had finished licking him clean. After his feed, up he went to find his feet. Found the front ones and he tumbled over. Up he tried again. It seemed his hind end believed it was still inside his mother's harbour, not willing to go to sea just yet. Rosebud got up on all fours and left the tilt, looking only to the ground, her only interest being the grass along the fence. Swirly called out to her. Rosebud wouldn't look back.

Esther and I couldn't leave poor Swirly like that, not when we saw the little buck try so hard. She picked him up, all four pounds and brought him inside the house. Needed to keep him warm. I got Rosebud in collar and brought her into the house too, tied her to the Waterloo so she could only wander so far from her unwanted son. And then we coaxed her, the mother. At first she'd have nothing to do with Swirly. We'd put his pink little nose to her teat and she'd crack her hind leg, jar his nose away. Rosebud wouldn't allow it. So I held her hooves to the floor and Esther got Swirly's lips into the fat of his mother's milk. We fed him a full day like this. He seemed to be coming along. Strong in the eyes, wet on the nose. He never found his hind legs though. Just kept falling over. By nightfall, he had given up. Dim in the eyes.

Esther touched my shoulder and went to bed. I wasn't gonna give up. Couldn't allow it to happen, not with knowing the way I had come into the world, terrified of living. Midwife put me in the breadpan, kept me in the warmer. Three days it took for me to cry, the sound a baby makes when it decides it has given up on dying. The least I could do was give wee Swirly one more night, one good chance. I worked an old baby

bottle full of Rosebud's milk and so long as the moon would witness it, I kept coaxing crooked little Swirly to drink from it. I'd get the nipple in past his lips but he had no will to suck. No more look in his eyes either. That's when I came to my senses, took the knife to Swirly's throat and covered his neck with a rag before the blood spilled to the floor. Laid his carcass into the dirt while the sun rose, buried him with his two sisters. Don't know why some lives have to be born without getting to live. It's like having to die twice with only one life.

For the whole summer Rosebud wouldn't go near any of the young goats on the island. If any came near her, she'd steer clear. Never push one or bully it, she'd just lug away from them. When we saw that she was pregnant with another one, Esther and I were more than rejoiced, we were a little worried. On the morning that she'd been laying in the straw, hidden away in the corner of the tilt, I knew I needed to stay close by. Come mid afternoon, she was breathing heavy and fast and had gotten up on all fours. I could see by the valleys at either side of her spine that the young had dropped low and were ready to come out. I got in behind and saw that her passage was swollen and before I was ready for it, a little black hoof was pointing out of her. I got my finger in there to find the other hoof and pulled it forward too, both hooves side by side. And then I waited. Poor Rosebud was breathing hard and pushing the best she could. No sign of the kid's nose, no reason to believe that this one was going to come out any better than her last three. So I got my finger in there and felt around for its face. Found it. It was contorted to the left, almost so far that I feared its neck was broken. Wasn't gonna give up. You can never give up. Worked its little head towards me with my finger and lined it up so that its little pink nose was smelling the air, resting on the two hooves. Rosebud pushed some hard.

Its little face peered out of its mother, almost to the eyes. Then it stopped moving.

Looked like a dead weight.

I got my finger in behind its head and softly nudged it toward me. It wouldn't come out. I knew I couldn't coax too hard, fearing its neck was so close to broken. I tried something I've never done before. Got my finger in behind the top of its head and circled down its face and neck and under its hooves, up along the other side of its head, and by the time I got back to where I had started, all the pressure that Rosebud had built up inside burst through and in my lap landed to biggest little doe I never imagined possible. Fired out of its mother as if she were a cannon. The shock of it knocked me over. I fell to my back in the hay. Poor Rosebud dropped to the straw, her hind legs quivering, black blood down her thighs. I scrubbed the doe down with handfuls of straw, the three of us laying in the hay, exhausted. That doe weighed for two, almost three. Twelve pounds. Once she got up, poor mother Rosebud couldn't eat enough straw for the weeks to come. She was eating to feed for her young, the baby who would suck the milk out faster than Rosebud could turn it. So now you know why we named the biggest goat Rosebloom.

Olive Oil

She told me that when you came into the world you weren't fit to live a day. In fact, I remember the midwife saying she figured you'd come into the world quiet as a morning's frost, and just as still. That's not what you did. What she saw, what we all saw on that spring morning, was that you had come out a little red fighter, hardly enough skin on you to keep the blood in; all you seemed to be was the tiniest thing, hardly the size of the midwife's hand, just a patchwork of blue and red and purple lines woven all over your helpless little pink body. That midwife, she was some miracle worker. I remember she told me, when you were just about to become a man, when you had grown to be nearly twice as big as your mother was, that she knows she's not the one who saved your life. It was your mother who had done it. Her young soul is your heart.

What the midwife had done to keep you from freezing and drying up, none of us had ever seen or heard of before. She got you wrapped right quick all around with warm wet rags and then she put you in the stewing pot and closed the lid. She got my sister Edna to put the pot in the warmer of the stove and told her keep the coals burning as low as she could, and she told all of us not to touch the stewing pot, never to open the lid. Right fast, she was gone out the door to chase down your grandfather Stoo and Skipper Ron, who would have to row her to Greenspond in some terrible hurry. When she came through the door in the middle of that night, we had yet to cease praying for her safe return, for your mother who was lost in deep unawares, and for your feeble little bones. The midwife came through the door with a gallon of olive oil and a half-yard of new white linen. You had been in the stewing pot already for over sixteen hours when we pulled you out of the warmer. We put that stewing pot on the table and there was myself,

Aunt Neddie and Aunt Edna all leaned over the pot, our ears turned to its lid wanting to hear at least a little life: your small beating heart, your gasping tiny nostrils, a faint whisper from your muffled mouth. We listened for what felt like a fast eternity. Probably no more than a minute. The midwife was quick to wrap the stewing pot in a blanket and got me and Edna to build up the fire in the stove while she soaked the linen with half the gallon of olive and told Aunt Neddie to scrub the bird pan and two bread pans as clean as silver. She put the linen in the bird pan and slipped it into the hot oven, telling us we had gotten the fire too hot and now we had to choke it. The midwife told your Aunt Neddie to scrub down the table with boiling water and to set the two bread pans on it. She took the bird pan from the oven, carried it to the table and opened the lid: there was a moment of smoke that rose to the ceiling and the linen was now lightly brown in the hot oil. She spread the linen over the table using two forks and waited for the cloth to cool. There was silence. And when she reached for the lid of the stewing pot, we all gathered round and the midwife told us to move away. She lifted you out of the stewing pot, uncoiled you from the warm rags and laid your little red body at the center of the linen and then wrapped you up all over again in such a way that your head was easily accessible. Quick as that, she had you between the bread pans and the blanket placed over top of you again. We waited for the warmer to cool and when the midwife thought the heat right, she put you right back into the oven and closed the lid. She said to me, "you give yourself to that fire Moo. You make sure it don't burn up and don't burn out". With Edna's help we kept the coals burning good and steady and low for three long days. No one could open the lid to the warmer except for the midwife. We spent all our time tending to your young mother, my own wonderful child, trying to keep her wound from bleeding out her soul,

and when not doing that, we were kneeling before the oven, praying to your silent little heart hidden away between the bread pans. Neither of your bodies seemed to know if it was going into death or coming into life; all the while, inside the stove, the embers too were undecidedly alive, faintly pulsing in the ash. For three days, every three hours the midwife would open the lid to the warmer and carry you over to your mother's bed where I would raise the blanket from over your mother's breasts. With your little red head, not a great deal smaller than your mother's swollen nipple, the midwife would lift the veil from over your face and lower your lips to your mother. Your bodies were entirely silent, and so was the house in which we prayed for your souls. It was early on the fourth morning, with the sun risen crimson over the harbour, that you finally made your first whimper: softly you echoed from within the warmer. And that's when it became only too clear why your mother had opened her eyes. Her soul is your heart.

The Brides

Angel Head

And this is a true story. Her name was Roseanne Cheeks, and I'm sure you've guessed where this has already gone to, and she thinks you're funny for laughing at it, but we all still call the wife Rosie Cheeks even though she's now married to me, Richard Bride. I'll never forget when I saw her the first time. We had gone birding in the fall of the year to Angel Head point on Popplestone Island, the thickest bird nest in Bonavista Bay. True, it was some distance to travel simply for birding, but as we figured it, by going in a crowd—twelve of us split in three punts, gone long before the sun's rise—we'd make the six mile row worth its work as we knew it would yield at least a few good barrels of salt duck for the winter. So sure enough shooting was good and we got a rich count loaded in the punts, cousin Eli says over four hundred between us, but based on the way he plays cards the flock amounted more justly to three hundred, maybe a few wings more. In any case, it really was on Angel Head that I saw her first..

By the time we had the birds stacked in the gunnels, a sure weight in the bottom of a small punt, the sea seemed to be coming on something awful and we weren't ready to say the haul home were a smart notion, but ol' Skipper Alcock didn't seem so worried—he knew the water better than any us, only because he's never hidden away from her, never given in to her, even after having been adrift with bare poles, not a solid stitch left in all the canvas, for five days in the storm of '29 which left him and the crowd belonging to Wesleyville he was fishin with lost in the barbarous sea half way to England before finally being spotted by a ship that brought the lot of 'em to Manchester from where he returned, twenty-one days after disappearing. And it's common knowledge to this day that Skipper Alcock made it home just in time to see his own funeral. But I

suppose that don't matter much because just as we were rowing clear of the northern point of Popplestone Island we looked easterly through the night into the tickle that leads to Bragg's Island only to see the faint light of a lantern bobbing in the lop of the sea and sure enough with that light came a voice softened by the wind that delivered to our punts such a message as "Alcock! Crazy fool you! Never did have the bird's wit to go in harbour, did ya!" And so we followed Skipper Alcock's punt toward the lantern and the voice that would soon lead us into the kind outport of Bragg's Island where we were served tea and warmed to our heart's content by the Cheeks family: mother Ruby Cheeks and father Bobby Cheeks (Skipper's wartime buddy) and their lovely lone daughter, Rosie Cheeks. So maybe it isn't true that I met my wife on Angel Head, but that's how I like to tell the story, that's how I remember meeting my lovely wife, Rosie Bride.

Stage

I never thought you would finally come near me. I mean, I always knew you, always thought you were the smartest looking boy on the island. I could see into your bedroom window, you could see into mine. We grew up like that, curtained. When I'd look out my window into your glowing room, I could faintly trace your body beyond the linen that kept us from seeing into one another's bedrooms—sometimes I pretended to see inside your dreams, make them mine. And they were lovely dreams, of course, because I was in them, and I was you dreaming of me, wanting us. There I would be, casting my shadow into the frosted window, peering into the night from my oil-lit chamber, with my little sisters—Anastasia, Verna, and Adeline teasing me about being forever in love with you, and I would dream this one dream for you. You would come walking out of your grandmother's house and descend the path toward the stage. I would be down on the stage, barking nets in the tub, keeping a close eye on that little devil Doffy, knowing damn well your little brother was waiting for his chance to spray water at me—that little devil, never did change much. It was a bright summer's day, and you knew I was so joyous because the by's had just come home from the Labrador with a great many quintal of fish and this meant, and you couldn't stop thinking about it, I'd get at least one new dress for the school year and another for church. You were coming closer towards me, staring at me as I was looking into the blackened water of the tub, and you were wondering if I was catching fragments of my smiling face floating among the soap bubbles, and you knew that I was seeing that my eyes were lit with a love that you couldn't help but notice on that day and you were thinking that you wanted to smell my hair and touch how curly it was in the summer's hot dampness and you could feel that I

was just so happy to be wearing my nightgown with little red flowers printed on it, even though it was the middle of the day—that's how you knew this was a dream, because mother would have never let me out like that, but you loved how I looked like I was floating in a cloud, the sun so lit all over my cotton gown. And then that's when you would call out my name and I would hear your voice, just like an angel's. You would call out to me, almost singing my name, *Nita, Nita Bride*. And something inside you would stir at the sight of me, and you'd want to come close to me. And I never understood it, why this was the part when the dream would stop being real. This is when I'd have to take over, make it happen for you. This is when I would I have to force my eyes shut, clamp them tight. I would try to keep it from happening, forcing myself to defeat the actual memory, the real dream. I would walk down towards me, sometimes a wild flower in my hand, and I would come closer to me, and I'd step onto the stage, and I'd put my hands around my own waist, and I'd hold onto to me so tight, I could feel my small bones under the light cotton of my white gown, and I'd lay my hands around my ribcage, pressing each finger in the bony crevices, and then I'd lean over my back and I'd put my nose into my hair, and I'd kiss myself on the back of the neck and I'd smell how sweet I was and I'd feel with my nose how thick my hair was in the summer dampness. But I couldn't do it. I'd be inside of you, inside your dream, making you real. And then, and this is where I always hated myself, I couldn't control that one part. I'd have to look up from the wash tub. I'd have to look at me standing with my face next to my own cheek and have to see it, I'd have to see that you weren't there. You weren't there any longer. It has been such a long time. There was nobody looking at me, just your absence, just me.

Oh Mark. Oh, my Mark-Annuel. It has been such a long time since I've seen you. Why won't you ever leave me alone?

A Good Hand

The first time I had my hand inside her skirt I was grateful. I could tell she was not convinced. She wanted to know I was a man, not a boy getting lucky as one gets lucky by being dealt the joker after making a bet based on a bluff. There was no bluff: she was a wild card and both of us knew we weren't in the game for love. I saw her as a body designed for the support of skirts and if she had a second purpose it was simply to be relieved of the cloth she supported. There were no lies between us. She had brushed up against my shoulder, her heavy breast wanting my arm. She had done this at church and on the wharf and in the post office. In her eyes the current stirred, and surrounding us as we laid in the spring grass on cemetery hill were wildflowers that had barely begun to make their way out of the dirt. On her neck a fragrance too sweet for such rocky grounds as these coastal islands. But in her mouth, in our mouths that night, the musk pungency of fresh moss and decayed bark passed between our lungs, stirring our wanting for each other's bodies. I had had her fat breasts pressed beneath my hands and in her black hair the moon glistened. I watched her breathe. Her eyes closed. The frost of the cooling night, its shimmering in the moonlit air, entombed us: we were sparkles in black marble. I moved my hand up her woolen legging, pausing momentarily to circle her bony kneecap with my finger, and then proceeded with my palm over her bare thigh. On that night, my fingers did press against the lips of her passage, and the smell of her made my lips quiver. But I got no further. Clearly what she saw in me was a man destined to be her provider of cloth. For, by the time I got both of my hands gripped over the waistline of her

underwear, wildflowers were in full bloom, thickly fragrant over cemetery hill. We had been hurriedly wed on that day, June 21, twenty-one years ago: a joker and a wild card.

The Ice

Blinded by the Light

I am alone in the icefield. In the distance I see a figure. It's glowing white, whiter than the ice, like a star in daylight. I make the long journey leaping from pan to pan. Unlike in most dreams, where I can leap and often fly, this time every jump is almost impossible to complete. I feel like my boots are filled with lead, and I'm terrified of not making it over the water, stove black as it appears. It's a hard journey and the dream seems to last all night, but when I make it close enough to the form, to the light, I see it is a beautiful woman in a white gown. The more I move towards her, the more striking her beauty becomes. I would have imagined her an angel if not for the strong feeling I had towards her. As I got closer, I could see her gown was not cloth. At first I thought feathers, but soon realized she was draped in the white fluff of pup fur. Her head was inside a hood, but I could see she had blue eyes, blond hair, and lips red and full as apples. I wanted to get closer, but something was stopping me. You won't want to know this, but soon you'll understand. She opened her fur coat and was naked as the day she was born, not even any boots on her feet. And what a figure did she have. Blond like I had been told it was only possible with the Irish girls of the South Shore. And then suddenly, for no good reason, she is cuddling a white pup in her arms, covering her breasts with it. And then the pup starts feeding from her, its little cat mouth on her nipple. I hear the pup moaning, like they do on the ice when you come up to them. And there I am, standing with a gaff in my hands. I could hardly look at her any more, could hardly look at the pup. So I drop the gaff and raise my two hands as though I've been caught committing murder but want to show that I am innocent. I look at the hands that I've raised to my face and they are covered, I mean soaked, in bright blood. I can hardly

breathe. When I look past my hands, there she is, close enough to me I could touch her face. She's still wearing her white fur coat, which I think might be polar bear, and all down her naked body, down to the feet, she's got thick blood on her, as if red paint has been flowing down from her neck. I look to our feet and then to the ice between us, where there is no blood, not a single drop of it. Between the two of us is the white pup, clean as the snow, looking alive and divine as a real angel. I look up to her again, and this time, she has more make-up on than I've ever seen on any painted thing. And it's all in a mess, black splattered around her eyes and running over her cheeks, more blue paint marked along her nostrils. She's like she was an advertisement left out in the rain. And then her lips are smudged in bright red wax, thick as ointment and nearly covering her cheeks and chin. A horrible mess of a woman. Imagine, a figure I believed was an angel, beautiful and filled with the light from above.

I can't understand why going towards her had to be such a long hard journey. I was sure I would die in that dream, trying to get across the ice, trying to make it to the light. Why it is she just turned horrid-looking like one of them street women in Sin John's, the ones you'll only touch once, knowing that if you do it twice, you might never get your hands clean. An angel whore, is that it? In the end, she was nowhere to be found. There was just myself and the pup, little thing looking innocent as ever. I think I may have picked it up and carried back to the ship, I can't recall that part of the dream.

Lucky Boy

It had many names but the game was called “copy” and the point was to keep from falling into the water—you had to be smart enough to save the pan from tipping over, keep yourself from sliding under, so’s to speak. It was called “tippy-pan” too, but that was only by the young ones. When you became boy enough to know that this wasn’t merely a game but a preparation for the seal hunt, the greatest hunt on earth, you understood it was best to name the game for what it was: you “copied” the leader and leapt from one pan of floating ice to another. When Uncle Hump rounded the boys up for a game of “cocky-pan”, as he called it, you knew you were in for a good dare cause he was half-cracked and he’d come out with his gaff and you had to run down to the ice with your best stick at hand if you were going to last any time at all out on the ice. When you were near shore, knowing the water was little more than waist deep, even the youngest boy could “coody” along over the ice pans at the tail end of the brotherly snake. But when Hump led the crowd, there’d always be a sharp motherly voice calling the young ones not to stray, and they knew they were best to break from the line and run back home at the call of the crow because the licking they would get would be something worse than drowning.

So I remember and I’ll never forget that spring night when I heard the ice breaking up all over the harbour, cracking as though the earth were coming undone at the seams. I knew sure well, because Ron and I spent the night owl-eyed arguing about it, that this was the year I’d be boy enough to join the others who would become almost-men tomorrow morning as we would “coony” over the fractured harbour, one end to other, with our make-believe gaffs at hand, leaping from pan to pan, proving ourselves to

be Old Hump's best copies, all in perfect imitation of our leader. Ron said I wasn't ready yet and if I was half-cracked enough to believe I was then I could be sure he wouldn't break from the crowd if I tipped a pan and slipped in the water: "Even if you're drowning", he warned. I told him he'd be the one copying me as of tomorrow morning.

True to the southerly wind in the early morning, Uncle Hump was down at the frozen landwash herding the boys into a game of "quibby", as some people will call it when they don't know it's named "copy". The next thing I knew there was only five of us left in a line caught pretty much at the center of the harbour. Mother had given up on calling out to me. I had refused to break from the adventurous chain knowing damn well I'd prove her foolish fussing unwarranted and utterly undeserved, for I, in this glorious morning, would prove myself a mere shoesize short of true manhood. And then we came to the big gap. I knew it would take some special leap if not a sudden growth of the legs to get me over it. I was the last in line and Ron had just barely cleared what might prove to be a black hole for me and my pre-adolescent shortfalls. But just because Ron could spurt it out of him and I couldn't yet, but I knew it was coming soon—I could feel it my gut, wanting to come out—I wasn't going to give in to mother's frantic yapping and I wasn't gonna go in the homeward direction that Ron's stick was pointing from across the black hole: "Go home before ya falls in," he was yelling. But I was determined to prove that my inability to make my peter spurt made me no less of a boy than he was. I was almost a man too.

I could see it happening. I was gonna be the youngest lad in Bonnavista Bay to get his sealing legs yet. I was gonna jump the black hole. So I got a good run at her and was up in the air and the next thing I saw was my right foot fall an inch short of the ice

pan's edge and it was the beginning of the end for me now because Ron would never let up on the teasing and mother would sure enough break my frozen arse with the wooden ladle and by some tunderin' jeezuz good luck the ice pan had a lower lip that caught my foot and gave me fortune enough to land my left knee at the edge of the pan. And did I give Ron a whack with my gaff that was no longer a simple stick when I stood up to join the men on our hunt for seal. It's at this point that Ron confirmed my suspicion that he was a fool. He called me a lucky boy. "Lucky boy!" I said to him, "well now you copy me my son if you's so good", and I shoved myself ahead of him in the crowd, pushing him back with my gaff.

On our way back from the other side of the harbour, Uncle Hump got us real excited, all savage at the mouth, saying we were taking the path that would lead us to the meanest seal known to Newfoundland: Old Dog'Hood. Killing such a monster was no easy job and only the best of the boys, the truest of the men, would survive the journey, never mind the kill because Old Dog'Hood, Hump told us, "was known to be the size of a Spanish Bull with more might in one flipper than a whale's got in its tail." "And all you've got between you and Old Dog'Hood." Hump said, "is your little gaff, so you'd best know how to use it." As he said this he was repeatedly jabbing the gaff viciously into the air in front of him, stomping down with his right foot with each killing motion. And so there we were, afloat on a big pan of ice in the middle of our tiny harbour, the five remaining boys and Uncle Hump, two hands hard gripped to our gaffs which were no longer straight branches that we had each debarked with our pocket knives but they were the real, the lone weapon used to survive the greatest hunt on earth. There we were, madmen ready for war, yelling and stomping and killing the air by sharp murderous

point. The road to Old Dog'Hood was a long winding one that took us leaping over every rivulet of black water in the harbour. We all knew sure enough that Old Hump was snaking his way back to the doom's day gap at the center of the cove. And sure enough before we could drive the gaff into the King of the ice, conquer the monster of our adventure and prove to be boys enough to be called men, we would have to make the leap of the black hole one more time.

My legs were now tired and I was shaky at the knees but I wasn't gonna let the fact that I had now fallen to the back of the line from proving I was boy enough to be a man. The four other boys had made it across and this time I knew I didn't feel quite so sure of myself. The gap in the ice looked like it had gotten bigger and the water seemed to shine two shades blacker than before. I looked homeward and saw that mother had gone inside and neither was Ron provoking me by saying I couldn't do it: "You'll never make it", I didn't hear him say. He just stood there and looked at me, leaning on his stick. It seemed easier to prove myself when all I had to do was prove the others wrong. But now it was simply terrifying to have to prove myself to myself; something told me I was still a boy and I shouldn't have been out there with the men. Truth be told I was frozen. Not cold. Frozen. Filled with fear. Old Hump snapped me out of it, "Let's go Charlie, ya gotta jump now cause Old Dog'Hood is getting away and I'll be damned if you're the one who's gonna keep me from killin'im". And the rest of them were steaming at the mouth cheering me on as though I were a miracle child and not some terrified lad lost in his rubber boots two sizes too big trying to see if his mother was at least looking at him from inside the kitchen window. And she wasn't.

I could have, of course, walked around the black hole, but had that been my choice, I'd have no story to tell, no memory worth reminding myself of. In the end, what had made me boy enough to be a man on that day is the scar I still got on my arse when Old Hump had to fish me out of the cold water with his real gaff, the brute metal hook having caught me by the buttcheek to pull me out from under the ice where I think I may have been trying to hide. When mother got her hands on me, I was almost comforted by her anger, her fiery voice seemed to warm me a little as she worked the frozen casket of cloth off my skinny red body. Some funny sight to imagine of myself, standing on the kitchen table bare as the baby lamb with mother behind me sewing up the new hole in my hind and me with two hands over my peter trying to hide how bald and tiny and frozen it was from Ron and the boys and even crazy Old Hump who were all laughing up a good steam at the kitchen window.

Learning How to Take It

We're nearing the end of the hunt and are in some wonderful need of a tub of warm water and a good soapy scrub, head to toe. The lot of us must smell bad enough to make a gull yuck up his breakfast. But we endure it all. There's not much to help us. There's not much to stop us. We live in the seal fat, sleep on the stacks of slimy skins, and we even pick maggots out of hard tack before we eat it. But the one thing that could make me douse my head into a bucket of fire is the lice. I can't get used to the endless scuttle under my skin, lice living in my scalp and in every crevice of my body. Keeps me awake, three nights now. Last night, the old man across my bunk, Samuel Prickett from Heart's Content. He gets out of his bunk and pulls off his trousers and his underwear, turns 'em inside and puts 'em back on. Jumps back into his bunk. I whispered out to him, "what d'ya do that for Ol' Sam?" "Couldn't sleep" he says. "Couldn't sleep ol'man. They tore it out of me so bad. Now I figure by the time they gets back into me, I'll be long asleep." I guess after so many years, you get adjusted to it, you get used to having it tore out of ya. You learn to take it. But I'm not there yet. Hope to christ things are different when I'm the old man across the bunk. Hope I won't have to be taking it like that, not that way. Not as a poor old man.

How Sweet It Was

You can be sure that whenever they get their chance, the boys here love to play pranks on one another, especially towards the ones who are green around the ears. On the third night of the hunt I was subject to one of these playful acts, the ones that are done out of a good sort of badness. As I laid down into my bunk, an opened can filled with molasses fell from between the boards of the bed above. Face covered, hair too, sticky with black syrup. I should have known better, this is a common prank. I do admit it's all in good humour, which is why I want to tell you about the act of vengeance I attempted to perform in defense of my so called pride, foolish a notion as I know it to be.

Yesterday when we were out on the ice, a big brutish man, Tom Cane, points to a lone pup across the pan and says, "you can have that one, my son." I admit being quite thrilled by his generosity, never assumed Cane was the type to make such an offer. In hindsight, however, I see now that this was not a gift meant for the advancement of mankind. I should have known better than to accept an unreasonable gift from an unlikely donor. It hardly made any sense that this lone seal had not been killed during the day. We had covered this general area of the icefield for most of the afternoon, killing hundreds of seals, and there were countless boot prints in the snow surrounding this little animal, the lone living pup.

Nonetheless, believing that the enormous size of Tom Cane could mean that he had a bigger heart than most men, I start walking towards the baby seal, following the footprints of a trail that leads nearly to its nose. Foolish young me, is all I can say. Sudden like the drop of a hammer, I fall through the ice, into to a hole that had been covered over with snow. Seeing as how all the other boys had gone to the ice with Tom

Cane numerous springs before, they had all foreseen the trap that awaited me. They had all seen it happen before, most of them having lost the green behind their eyes down the same deceptive hole. And what a release of mad laughter this ritual of initiation had ignited, each of them crackling out the mouth, the bright fire of good comedy in their eyes. Once they lifted me out of the water, Tom Cane showed a pair of boots that were tied to two long and arched sticks, with which he had used to press the false prints into the snow that had been formed as a cover over the hole in the ice.

Having been well schooled in the bonding value of brotherly devilment, I believed it socially correct to return the favour to Tom Cane, so's to speak. Without wanting to appear overly clever, I decided to tie a string from an open can filled with molasses to fix it in the bunk where Big Cane lays his head. One small detail I hadn't planned for. It was Saturday night and I had failed to foretell that Big Cane would be on the shine something heavy that night. When he comes to the bunk he hardly walks straight. Doesn't exactly gracefully insert his bull of a body into the small bunk, either. Rather, flops in like the tossed carcass of a big Dog Hood. Utterly fails to notice that a tin can has bopped him on the forehead and that there is molasses in his eyes, his nostrils, over his lips. Thick syrup stuck to his vast beard and filling his ears. He just starts snoring. Pays no mind. The occasional black bubble out his nostril or over his lips. Tom Cane, drunk foolish on shine, sleeps the whole night through.

Next morning all of us are gathered around his bunk watching him. Nearly the whole crew, awake early and ready for Sunday morning prayer. Our heads over top and in between and under each others' bodies, the full crowd of us looking at the big lump, the giant snoring with the face of a black bear. When he starts to stir, the whole crowd

rumbles with laughter, and this lasts a good while. His big mouth wide open like that of a cod and his tongue looking like a little red capelin trying to swim its way out, reaching almost to the nostrils. It seemed Tom's eyes were sealed shut by the syrup, and he couldn't wake because of it. Then he snorts heavily like a moose will do, his nostrils flared up like he just got a whiff of a nearby cow who is calling out to him through the trees. He raises his hand up to his face. Rubs from his forehead down to his chin, all through his beard and then up again, all over his thick head of hair. He doesn't wake up. Instead, he appears to be dreaming. He snorts again, the same big animal sound. His nostrils fully open, he appears to be dreaming of what may as well be a cow in heat and not his dear wife. He moves his big hand down into his pants, seeming like he's about to perform a certain morning ritual that most of us will seek privacy for, if ever we can. And it seems that molasses is truly working to his favour for it doesn't take very much for his nostrils to shut down, his heavy snorting to return to small breaths. The crowd of us may as well have been a full colony of mixed birds, squawking and screeching, chirping and screaming, gone fully feral with laughter. And because of the riotous sound of us split open with laughter, he awakes. Looking like a monster. The white of his eyes inside his black face staring at us in no different a manner than a beast would when glaring out of his cave. He gets a taste of his lips. Immediately understands and doesn't open his mouth again. Instead he jerks himself up from his seat, ready to attack. But Tom Cane fails to remember the size of the bunk in which he lies, hits his forehead hard enough to make the bed above bounce with the boards that support. Tom Cane's bear-like head falls to his mattress. He appears to be breathing, but nobody dares verify too closely. Still has his hand in his pants.

There was not a single other man left below when Tom Cane finally came to. We were all on deck, standing in rows under the open sky for Sunday morning service. But not one of the men appeared to have enough room from the lord's name in their mouths, their lips stretched from ear to ear as they tried their hardest to hold in the laughter, each of them imagining the scene of Big Tom Cane slowly pulling his right wrist out from under his belt, raising his hand over his face to rub the lump on his forehead. Every man unable to pray, except for me.

The Burdens

Fatty Me Mommy

I look Fatty into the eyes and I looked into her eyes because they were big ones and I can see my head in there and I am round headed like a ball and I liked to see my head round like that because it's funny and since mommy went into the sky I live in that house here but Uncle Reg is a grumbler and doesn't talk to me very good and has a hard face on his skin and all I do to Aunty is make her lips get hard and she has two big yellow toofs in her mouth that stinks and when she looks at me with her mouth when she yells at me she wants to bite me with her two yellow toofs and I wish the boy Lucence could be good but he bangs the rabbits and pulls their ears in his hands and makes them go round really fast and sometimes lets go but rabbits don't fly so there can be blood on the rocks and once on my dress on sunday because the boy Lucence hit me on the back with the rabbits and Aunty slapped me in the face because the blood is on my dress and it's not because of the rabbits but because I was broken but I'm not gonna say why and no one wants to listen because Aunty says my daddy was the devil but I don't know that and that's why I always talk to Fatty because I can't let myself be nice to the boy Lucence but Fatty has bigger legs than me and I can touch the funny snakes inside there when I can push on the snake to make it go empty and when I let go of my finger the snake fills up again with the white blood but blood is red so Fatty has milk in her legs and that's why she's so fat cause she has lots of milk in her bellybag and that's where I like to put my hands because they can get cold and her bellybag is hot and has skin like my belly but I don't have funny fingers on my bellybag so that's why when Uncle Reg is gone away with the water I can get under her bellybag and play with her fingers and sometimes and I can get thirsty under her and Fatty is happy when I look her in the eyes and play with her funny fingers

that's how come I know she doesn't bite me when she kisses because I used to think her yellow toofs could be like Aunty's toofs and that's how come she kisses me with her nose so I'm not afraid but that makes my face stink and I don't want to like my stinky face but I like Fatty so Aunty can hit me if she needs to make my face not stink like her face stinks when Fatty lifts her tail and I can make stinkies too but not good like Fatty because I don't have a tail and my stinkies aren't green not yet but one day I want a tail like Fatty so I can have a little sister pull it and she can look me in the eye and see her face in me and if the boy Lucence comes screaming with his rabbits by the ears and says he wants to fix my sister because a girl is broken she can come hide behind me because Fatty doesn't like the boy Lucence and his rabbits and one time he put his gun to Fatty's eye but she didn't look at him and I was crying and he yelled a mean Bang but Fatty is bigger than the rabbits so the boy Lucence had to push me into the dirt but Fatty looked at me and said it was ok because the boy Lucence is smaller than she is and big people don't understand that much so that's how come I really don't like to watch when Uncle Reg hits her bellybag because his hands are mean and sometimes they hit me and do things to do what Lucence says is to fix me but Fatty can Moo and lift her tail and make a stinky when she doesn't like Uncle Reg to pull her fingers and to yell at her because she's not stupid and nobody listens to Fatty and when Uncle Reg and the boy Lucence couldn't bring her to the wharf today because they pulled at her head and hit her with the wood on the big bum and told her she was stupid I had to go see her when Uncle Reg pulled me by the arm and made me walk her to the wharf where I tried to kiss her and tell her everybody was smaller than she and then I could only see her in the eyes when Aunty put me in her arms near her toofs and the boy Lucence yelled a big bang bang bang Bang

with his gun at Fatty again and laughed at me and Fatty and now Auntie put me in my room under the stairs and told me to stay here or she can hit me really bad so now I have Grumpy in my arms but he cant talk like Fatty and I know Fatty wanted to kiss me with her nose and so I kiss Grumpy because he's a nice bear and my mommy made him with my daddy's clothing and I like my mommy's pillow and that's why I want to go see Fatty because I miss mommy and I want my mommy to see Fatty so she can tell her where the sky is and that way Fatty can take me to my mommy because my mommy's not here and now I miss Fatty and I want my mommy

Fix

you lay down here edna and let me show you how it's gonna be. it's easy to understand, even for you edna. this is why I do it to you, because when a bucket is broken you fix it with a plug, that's how you make it good again. that's right. you've got to plug the hole if you're gonna keep the bucket, if you're not gonna burn it. so this is the game, the way it has to be for you and for all little girls edna. you're the bucket, and I'm your plug. you like games don't you. then close your eyes and no matter what I do, don't you move. I'm just gonna take this off of you first, but you can't move, and remember I'm allowed to hurt you if I want to. that's right, don't you try to fight it. good. come here, let me show what I mean. bring your head up here. see. I said you were broken. look at the hole you've got. that's why girls is no good. now you know that I'm gonna do what I gotta do, it's just part of the game. and it's good for you, it'll make you good again. you've got this hole, see, I'm gonna touch it now and you can't stop me. touch it. you feel that. you're no good because you've got this useless hole at your centre, and I need to plug it for you. see boys is not like girls, boys is not broken like girls, boys is made to fix girls. you know you're broken, you can feel it when I push into you, you feel it, how you are broken down here, right up into your hole. come on bring me your face and look at it this. it's cause of this, c'mon look at it. you're no good because you've got that hole in ya. fine you lay there, but you just shut your mouth and I'm gonna open you up. that's alright, you look the other way. but you just shut your mouth because I'm made to fix you and that's the way it's gonna be. I'm a boy and I can fix you cause you're a girl and girls is no good. you see this thing, you see it. look at it. I'm gonna fix you with this. I'm gonna get you good in your hole. and when I'm done you can't say a word about how your big

friend Lucence is fixing you. cause every time you say it, you'll be broken again. and every time you think about it, you'll be broken again. you just have to think about me and think about saying that I've been fixing you, and you'll be broken again. and now I know you've been thinking about it, I know you have, I can see it because you're even more broken more than last time. so you just be quiet. look the other way. don't you say a word, you just shut your little mouth and forget about it cause you wouldn't want me to hurt you now, do you? I can make you bloody like I do to the little rabbits. make you broken good so no man can ever fix you nomore. so just be quiet now and don't move. and remember, it's like I told you last time, if you ever say anything, you'll be hurting you and you'll be hurting your mommy, and I know you don't want to hurt your mommy, cause then she won't like you very much, will she. no she wont. and she'll never come back to see you again, and I know you want to see her again, don't you. you do know that's why she's gone, don't you. she's gone because of you, because you're broken and you're no good. and that's why she left you to me, so I can fix you so you're mommy will want to see you again. don't you want to see your mommy, I know you do. so you have to be quiet about it if you want her to come back, you've got to let me plug your little hole, fix you real good. so you just shut your mouth tight and don't say a word, not a bloody whisper from your stupid mouth. just shut up and look away, let Lucence fix you real good little girl

Chip Shatter

Until I saw her for the first time, I had never really known what the heart was made of, how it is fragile like tea cup. My father had taken me over to Paul's island. A lady he had known since childhood, an Eleanor Burdon, had died of tuberculosis. We were going to her funeral. Eleanor's little daughter, Edna. Broke my heart she did. When they lowered the casket into the earth, Edna broke away from her Aunt's arms and jumped onto the pinebox, screaming and clawing at it. The word "mommy" from her lips, sounded like the poor girl was on fire, and I'm sure she felt she was.

I was maybe twelve years old when this happened, and Edna could have been no more than four, but when I saw her again, more than ten years after that, I knew her face as though she had always been family. I wanted to marry her, wanted to make her life better. Wanted to give her a little of what I had had: love, and lots of it.

It was never an easy thing, and though I know those around us couldn't entirely understand, I really did love her. Never regret having married her, just wish it could have been possible to make her heart whole again, keep its chips and cracks from causing it to shatter, break her soul all to pieces from the inside. She had had some hard life, dropped in the darkest tunnel once her mother passed. Edna was a merrybegot, and there wasn't a single hand willing to hold her, keep her from falling into the pit that was to become her life. Given over to her aunt and uncle near Newport, they were some terrible people to her. She never got the full story out, never got past the mere surface of it. But she didn't have to either. It wasn't very hard to read her eyes and her hands and the way her shoulders got hard like rock under the weight. If that Lucence hadn't taken a gun to his

own head, I'd a done it to him myself. Blood of a bitch he was, his old man much worse. Breaking a little girl like they did.

When she got anxious about anything, and sometimes it didn't take much, just going to bed some nights, she'd get all in a panic, flustered and foaming at the mouth, shakes all over. And the only way she could calm herself was to clean the house, polish it inside and out. Into the second year of our marriage, when these fits started, I'd try to talk her out of it, try to get a hold of her to calm her down. Poor Edna couldn't understand that sometimes physical control is meant to be tender, generous. She couldn't see into my eyes, how I was trying to be calm. She scratched me across the face, senseless as a stray cat. After that, I just stayed in bed, trying to sleep through it all. But she'd mumble her way through the work, talking her way clean of the pain. "Fix it, I'll fix you. Fix it, I'll fix you. Fix it, I'll fix you." she'd say. "Broken. I'm not broken. Broken. I'm not broken. I'll fix you, fix you right clean of yourself, you blood of a bitch." She'd go on all night, grinding what was left of her teeth, saying everything that can be found between the words "broken" and "fixed". Never able to get hold of herself, and never able let go either. Some horrible memories our lives can become.

I'd come down in the morning and she'd be asleep somewhere in the house, at the table, in the rocker, and even on the floor, the cleaning cloth or the mop still in her hand. I'd carry her to bed and be out fishing before sunrise. I think I'm the only man I know who's pained to the stomach at the sight of immaculate cleanliness.

I always wanted it to get better. I'm not sure if I can say it ever did for her. It seemed like it would for a short while, once she got pregnant. It seemed that giving life meant she had been born all over again. She was calm and devoted to our little William.

She was perfect. Immaculate. It terrified me somehow. But she was sure she was happy. "Your boy has fixed me" she said to me once, and now I can't take that out of my mind.

After she lost the second baby, her fits started again. Mother came to live with us, trying to keep life in order for poor Edna, helping to keep William strong. When the third child was born still, cold, she could hardly get control over herself anymore. At first she'd cry and cry, to no end. And two months after that, she'd break into rages, fits worse than ever before. Nearly tore most of her own hair out, gouges in her arms as if she'd been fighting with a bird. And then the third stage came, she'd try to laugh at it, use words to fill the hole of how she felt. "Dropped a stone out of me". "Bag of flour come through my bottom." "Baked a loaf of bread and it come out of me stale, hard as old tack." She'd laugh with her eyes glazed over and then break into it. "Well, I must be broken. Been broken me whole life. Can't get fixed. Like a bucket. Broken. I just drop it all. Baby and the water too." I wanted nothing more than to hold her, but after the second stillbirth I could never get close to her again. Never got to feel her heart beat after that.

I was gone when it finally happened, down the Labrador for the summer. Mother tells me she came into the house and Edna had our little William naked on the ironing board. Edna was holding the hot iron over him, she was shaking and foaming at the mouth. Mother says Edna couldn't stop saying it, "I'm gonna fix you, fix you little boy. Boys don't need a plug, boys don't need to fix girls. I'm not broken. Your little plugs won't fix me no more." Mother says she pulled William away and Edna hardly even noticed that the child was no longer there. She just kept on shaking, foaming at the mouth, repeating.

“We had no choice” mother tells me. “I know she didn’t burn the little boy, but she could, and I fear she will some day. Father Caleb said Edna couldn’t be helped, not in this world. So I had to sign the paper in your name, so’s she could be sent to St. John’s, to the Waterford. She needed to be placed. I done it for William. I done it for you,” she said. I know mother is right. Somehow, that doesn’t make it any easier.

Broken

i want to be home again and i don't know what that means. never had a home but never had to be in a place like this, no window and the floors cold and polished just by sweeping. i want to be good with my baby boy William, the way albert wants me to be, the way mother buckens can show me to be, and i know somewhere in me i can be that good. and i could truly have been that good. i don't need to be only this ruined. i can want to be good too. i could be too, almost most of the time. i know now that i needed to give out those two little dead ones from inside me. because they was the death inside me i can feel how soft my life really needs to be. but i can't get there through a man, not with men. i'm broken and that's the truth of it. shattered all up the centre, and that's who i am. i've always been like this, made to be broken. albert doesn't know it. i can't ever go back to him. no man is ever gonna be good for me. i can't feel him in me, never could. it may as well be a block of ice he's shoving in there, cause i'm numb and frozen and on the verge of breaking every time he puts it in me. and i know he's gentle, i can see that much. he's gentle most of the time, but i'm not butter and i don't melt. i just get colder, freeze up. it's a hard job not to remember when my legs are open. like i've got a wound between my legs and i'm letting you poke it with your stick. all i see is these faces, like it's fire that's holding me down to mattress. i know albert meant to be kind, but it seems that in the dark the devils and the angels all wear the same mask, all have the same god and all want the same things. and i guess i'm meant to want them too. but i never want to, even when i do.

when william come out of my wound it felt like i had finally bled out all the bad blood. i had been given a new life inside, a whole new set of legs and lungs too. i could

see how beautiful man and woman was meant to be. together. our skin pure as leaves, gentle looking, like in the garden. and when i had my boy's lips on my nipple, it's a funny thing, but it seemed I was making love to him. not the way a man gets on top of a woman, but the way the body is meant to feel on the inside. william would suck on me and it was like my body was as good as a loaf of bread in the oven, full and warm. fresh and clean and white all through the centre. he'd suck on me and i'd laugh inside my heart and think of myself as fatty, and my little william was me on the cold days when i'd get under that cow and keep my hands warm, put my lips on her nipples and i'd drink her milk, the sweet fat of her good life. and with william in my arms, and his face on my chest, i thought i could see the milk inside of me, as if the skin that the breast is made of, is made of milk. and i wanted the feeding to last my whole life, wanted to pour my life into my child until he had grown to be me, and i would be as strong as he was going to become, strong as a good man. all that changed. i never became the mother that my body was meant to be, and i know that, i never became the mother that i imagined my mother wanted to be, wanted me to be.

after the two dead ones, i went numb again like i kept ice under my skirt. and every time baby william dirtied his diapers and i had to heave them clean, i'd see him move around the house, naked with his little fishy hanging out. his little plug. and i had to hate him. he'd play with it, grab like it was a clothes pin, pinch it and tug it. they know what they can do with it, they have what it's made to do deep inside them, and they want to do to you what the little thing is made for. for ruining you. even as little babies who can't yet walk and can only tug at your tit, they pull it and it gets hard for them, and even as babies they start to get hard for what it is they can do to you. and it seemed that every

time i wiped him clean, wiped his horrible little arse, i'd want to break him, break the little dick before he got the legs to use it, before it became him and took away my william who made me feel my body like it was new and was not part of my own life. i wanted to break it to help the child be a child, help him become a good man. make him learn how it is to be a girl. i wanted to break my own son to make one man know what it is to be broken, to be made to be broken right up through your centre. boys is the devils of the earth. they will piss on you, especially if you're their mother. even as babies it don't matter. they're only made to ruin you. albert was a good man, almost like he wasn't a man, not man enough. he wanted only to be what his mother wanted him to be, wanted me too to be his own mother, i could see that in him, always knew if she weren't nearby he'd become the man his mother had kept him from being. he'd become the man who is the baby that pisses at his mother's face.

funny thing, the show i need to put on to keep them believing in what i need them to think of me, what foolish things i do to keep myself safe of myself. the doctor comes in here and he thinks i don't know any better, i let on that i'm a real cracked bird. i act right strange and make faces anytime he gets near me, make it look like i just licked turpentine off the floor. if i give him one chance to think i could lay down and be looked at by him, he'll be on top of me saying he's wanting to fix me. saying you're broken little edna and i can fix you. goddamn every man and his codrotten cock. not even the lord is cleaner than lucence after a bath. that doctor knows if he wants to come in here, there'd better be three good nurses, and they're the only ones who can touch me, they're the only ones who can try to fix me without breaking me the way a man is gonna want to do it. all i want is to go home and i don't even know what that means.

The Pritches

Empty Handed

The punt turned over, rolled from the surge of a sporadic wave: a devilish swell that took me on starboard side. Never learned to swim. Wouldn't have helped. The water is too cold, and besides, when your garnsey's made of wool and so is your long underwear and over all that you're in rubber boots and oilskins, swimming won't do you much good. You simply go in, and you go down. It's not quite painless. I guess the last thing I can see is my arm pointing up, reaching for what? I can't say. But whatever it was, it wasn't there. Hope? I looked up to my arm, toward the face that had swallowed me, and no sign of god, no beam of light to cut the clouds, the cold day thick as the heavy hand. And besides, that doesn't really matter. Thinking about that, about heaven and god and eternity, that was the easy part to living; seeing the sudden absence of my life didn't even sadden me much, it may have indeed been comforting. I can no longer say. The burning is what made me know my dying was real. I may as well have had to swallow fire, but that would have made it easier too. The ones who drown are almost lucky. It's a faint torture, like being choked in your sleep unaware of not having woken. Besides, as a fisherman who never learned to swim, drowning is little different from becoming comfortable with a nightmare that shares your bed. With time you learn to breathe with the old hag at your throat, bewitched at the bedside. When you spend your days on the water, your life in the fog, you quickly come to know the eternal sleep that looms over every waking day. The burning that hurts is in your lungs, but not like fire. It's just one hot coal, quietly lodged. I can't say it ever burns out. It hasn't yet, not for me—it just carries on. The hot coal never leaves your dead body. It keeps on burning in the ones you love, in the strangled hearts of your lovely wife Ruby, your little gaffer Eliol, in your

little ducky Dorcas, and the little one who hasn't come into the world yet, the one who will never know your face or your voice but will always remember the absence of your touch. I suppose that's what I was reaching for. That is what I can't let go of. When you go in, you go down. Only your absence comes up, and that never leaves the lives of the ones you've loved. When they found me, I still had my arm reaching up, my hand stiffly open, wanting to leave something behind. Hope.

Praying to Boulders for Berries

In the splendour of summer, when time was good, I'd go looking for berries—blueberries and partridgeberries, bakeapples too. I'd fill up the paint cans, sometimes four in one day, and I'd bring them to the store in Sydney Cove. Skipper Malcolm would give me flour, a stone or two of it to take home. With that, poor Mother could bake the Royal Yeast cake that kept us alive, especially in the long hungry month of March.

Whenever we had flour, we could eat. Mother would mix flour and barm that had salt and sometimes molasses in it. Overnight, placed near the woodstove, the dough would rise to the brim of the Royal Yeast can. We couldn't afford yeast anymore but Mother kept the aluminum can from when we had once bought some. She made her own barm, mostly from potato scraps, rice, and even spruce needles. There were nights I would watch the dough rise, unable to sleep. Early in the morning, an hour or two before the sun would rise, Mother would place the can that had once been blue and gold but had become grey and black inside the oven. Once baked, she knocked the hot heap onto the table. I always thought that the Royal Yeast cake looked something like a new baby, moist and smooth. We burned our fingers eating it.

Mother would get six dollars a month for her dole. She and three other widows from the island would row to Greenspond. Almost never with the help of a man. Always five miles, each way. At no time can six-dollars for a month keep a person clear of hunger, especially not a family of four. In those years, it seemed every house had to set an extra plate for starvation at the table. Only Skipper Malcolm was a penny or two farther away from poverty, and it wasn't a penny he kept hidden inside his pocket.

One year, 1930, was worse than any other. It was in that winter that I wore the knees out of my pants, praying so hard. We were in the long hungry month of March. We didn't have a crumb to hide from a mouse and my poor baby sister Addie, Eli's twin, hadn't made it through the middle of February. I can still hear her cough, her lungs like rotten wood. Blue and purple, folded in Mother's arms. That child coughed to shake the walls. On the final night, Addie coughed up blood and mother was never able to rub the stain out of her dress. I always wanted to know, what if father hadn't gone fishing that morning?

Behind any boulder that was bigger than our little dog Mikey, I'd drop to my knees, hard and fast as I could. Spring was coming on fast and by the middle of March all the snow had melted and the sun was mostly shining. In our family, we had gotten hungry to make our bones come through the flesh and nobody on the island was in much of a better way. Even the fish dried up from the ocean, and at the time, none of us knew that nearly the whole world was dry at the lips. All I could think was at least I didn't have to be my good friend Gideon Cartwright. My mother hadn't died when I was born and though I no longer had a father, I wasn't Rufus Cartwright's son. The only thing old Rufus could love was the belt and the blood.

Mother wasn't too happy that night to have to sew patches from flour sacks over the knees of the pants. I was ten years old and I was desperate, on my knees all day long, praying to every rock on the island. I'd hold my hands tight and say dear lord jesus christ please bring me to a berry patch. And then I'd get up and go to the next boulder and fall down on my knees and pray to it like it was an altar. I'd have my hands pushed hard together and I'd close my eyes. Because of the sun, the colours red and yellow poured in

through my eyelids. It looked like fire and I wanted to see the face of god in the flames. I prayed fast and hard to each rock because I knew that god wrote his words into stone. I wanted to make a deal with him: Jesus had little Addie in his arms and I wanted berries so I could get a stone of flour for my Mother and for Addie and for my little gaffer Eli.

I returned home with red juice over my knees and pants, lines of liquid running down shins. I wanted to believe it was sweet partridgeberry juice and crushed blueberries that I had pressed beneath my knees all day long, praying in the dirt and cold earth. Mother wasn't too happy to have to clean the mottled muck and little rocks from the cuts all over my knee caps. I never wanted to believe it was blood.

When she got me cleaned up, she told me to go the church in Sydney Cove and pray there and not to pray to the boulders any longer. She also asked me to ask Jesus to forgive me for having prayed to his name in the dirt. I went to church and I tried to pray. I said god lord Jesus Christ I just want a stone of flour, Mother told me to pray for flour and not for berries. As I came down the hill toward Round Harbour, I smelled the freshness of cake being baked as I neared the door. I entered and Mother said she hadn't gotten any flour yet but I had been a good boy. I wish I knew why I smelled cake.

It was dark and mother had Dorcas in her arms, singing soft while Dorcas tried to understand how not to cry. I laid on the floor nearest the oven looking up at the counter, looking to the dirty Royal Yeast can. I could see that the barm that Mother had prepared for our cake was foaming over the brim of the can. I didn't want to tell Mother the barm was ready and that she could make our cake now. I couldn't let myself know that there wouldn't be cake without flour. My stomach hurt so much that I could only imagine food, I hardly wanted anything anymore.

We had all fallen asleep without going to bed. It seemed we did this regularly at the time. I was asleep on the floor, sometimes with brother Eli at my side. Mother in her chair with Dorcas over her thighs. It is too difficult to go to bed when you are hungry. But on that night, we all awoke to the faint shimmer of an approaching lantern. Skipper Malcolm opened the door and said, "thought I'd bring this to you from the store, maid. I knows March is the longest and hungriest month of the year, but it seems that spring is upon us and I'm sure your good son Eliol will soon have lots berries to bring in for payment." Skipper said this and winked down at me.

That flour lasted until April, when mother rowed into Greenspond for her six dollars of dole. It wasn't long after that was spent and we were all hungry again, the four of us falling to sleep without going to bed. I'd spend every day on my knees, believing in boulders and enduring mother's cursing as she cleaned the cuts over my knee caps. Even today, I will sometimes fall to my knees in the long hungry month of March. Not because I'm hungry, but because I'm grateful. I pray to the goodness of god and the grace of the earth, to wee and colourful berries and to that royal sky.

Our Last Chance

We were picking berries that afternoon and Eli said what he should never have said. *You's a cowly cat.* He yelled it out. And this is how it all started. I tried to ignore him but he kept silent, staring at me while I pretended not to hear him. I kept filling mother's pot with partridgeberries, keeping my head turned away from him. The little devil knew that if he would just say it a second time the first dare would be canceled out, the authority of having spoken the dare would be entirely lost. I waited in silence, crouched down in vain. He was standing tall even though he was short, shadow of him cast over me. My little brother looking down at me. Throwing a dare in my face like a frog down my dress. The silence had to be broken because he was holding, controlled it. I dropped the bucket. Stood up, his snotty nose at my neckbone. I let him have it. *No I isn't.* I said it into his forehead. *Yes you is.* He said up to my chin. *No I isn't. Yes you is. No I isn't Eli. Yes you is, Dorcas and I can prove it. No you can't Eli, I'm no cowly cat and I can prove it better than you.*

I knew what the dare would be before he said a word. Brother Eliol had told little Eli the story the night before even though mother had threatened to gut him through the throat if he did. From the first words out of Eliol's mouth—*Never go to the bog for fear of the two-headed man*—I could see little Eli was determined to defy the warning of the story, especially because it came from his big brother. As Eliol continued—*The two-headed man will come from behind, maybe out of the bog. He'll grab you by the ankles, lift you into the air.* Little Eli's eyes had gotten shiny as candy, his mouth wet with the need to prove that the story was either true or false, no matter the consequence. And I knew from the moment we came up the path, with the supposed intent of picking berries

for Mother, that little Eli could not shake his head clear of the challenge, knowing darn well that I never backed down from a single dare. *Fine*, he said, *if you's no cowly cat then make a mark on the tree in the bog with me, or else you's forever the sissy cowly cat that I knows you is.* That was Eli, always thirsty for devilment.

So off we went, leaving mother's good pot in the berry patch. We each picked a sharp stone along the path and went over the hill. We turned into a thin and hardly known trail that snakes through the spruce limbs, the dense and scrawny forest of islands like ours. I was in the lead, little conniving Eli already holding fast to my dress, needing me to be the one to go head first into his foolish dare. I suddenly stopped, his nose bumped into my shoulders. *The trail ends here, Eli.* He didn't know what to expect, said to me *You took the wrong trail, Dorcas. You's too scared to go to the bog.* A sadly innocent soul he was. *No I isn't*, I said back to him. *It ends cause nobody has ever gone to the bog you saucy little cracky.*

This meant that we had met the wall where all the other children had stopped, turned and darted home, fearing that they could hear the heavy breathing of the two-headed man pacing behind them. I was ready to believe that young Eli would turn and run as soon as we would reach the edge of the forest, the beginning of the bog. My strategy would be to move fast, no hesitation. I knew that as soon as I stretched my leg out of the trees and put one foot into the bog, he'd turn and run. I said down to him, getting up on the tips of my toes, *We're not turning back Eli, we're gonna mark the tree. We're not going home until we do.* Without giving him time to mouth back, I took the boy by the hand and pulled him in tow, wedged my way through the scraggy limbs of spruce, hoping to put the fear of the devil into him.

Here we are, one last step and we're in the bog, Eli. This is no time to run now.

With his fiery little tongue he lashes back at me, *Well, what are you waiting for cowly cat, take it.* Tongue of a snake on that boy. I said to him real slow and calm, *I'm not taking it alone my little boy. It's only fair that we take the last safe step together,* and I yanked his little body to my side, arm cupping his shoulder. *Now you remember the dare Eli. We have to go all the way to the tree and mark it with the rock. You're sure you can do this? We can go back and I won't tell anyone that you got scared. Once we're in the bog, the two-headed man might get you by the ankles, he'll choose you first because boys taste better than girls, especially saucy ones like you.* Eli gulped. He was hesitating. He looked up at me, his big sister, standing nearly a head taller than he, and he said *You's a cowly cat. You's afraid of the two-headed man.* Brains of a bird, that child.

We were each unwilling to appear weaker than the other, and that was what became our strength. Without making words of it, we agreed to move as allies, believing that by advancing as one unified body, we would both be protected. We were doing it together, we lifted our right legs forward out of the trees and into the open air of the bog. I was holding him and moving slowly, waiting for the smallest flinch in his body. I would turn and run and he would be left behind. Alone to learn the best kind of lesson. But as we came out of the forest, the brazen little bugger didn't buckle. Breaks out on his own. Leaps and lands both feet in the bog. Now I was the one who had to follow him, imagine the nerve in that senseless child.

Before I could understand it, we were standing with our feet wet in moss and muck. Looking. Fearing. Knowing the two-headed man would get us now. He would rise out of the bog, out of the earth, take us by the feet. We stared. Stood frozen, certain of our

need not to move. No sight of him. Nothing. No two headed man. No one headed man. No no-headed man. No man, no sir, not whatsoever. I was nothing more than terrified at the sight of it, of seeing that the monster wasn't even eager to get us. Eli was scared too, but under all that—his trembling knees and white face and sweat beads like glass marbles—I had a feeling he was a little disappointed. He sighed and almost sounded sad.

Our unison struck again. With our sharp stones under hard grip, we stepped in mirror of each other, shielded as one body. Advancing together toward the rotting juniper that stood like the silhouette of a fire, its limbs blazing like black flames. We had become each other's side. Eli looking right. I was scanning left. We held hands at the centre and stepped lightly, steadily, tightly. And then the world turned against us. The sinking sun burst and bled red all through the sky, pouring fire over the hills. I swear the juniper appeared to be the figure of Death itself. The mad lightless fire signifying the end of the world. The mud and moss, so cold to our feet. And then from out of the forest, a raven crossed the sky and landed into the juniper branches. And that's when the thunderous voice of the two-headed man boomed like a bomb over the sky: "This is Your Last Chance". Celestial and metallic, a voice loud like gunfire in a cave. We were stunned, utterly immobilized by it. Only the sky continued to move, bleeding fiery blood into the hills. The voice had struck us with such shock that I was certain I had gone deaf. It seemed I was under water, all I could hear was my heart, sickly beating inside my frozen body. And then the booming voice threatened again: "This Is Your Last Chance."

Eli's sweaty little hand slipped from my burning grip and the boy was in decided flight for the tree. I watched him scurry and heard him scream with the full vocal range of piglet on fire. I hesitated. I always hesitated. Truly terrible for it. And then I ran too and

as I ran I thought I ought to hesitate. I ought not move. I ought to turn around. I ought to run for the forest. As I ran, essential questions took over. Why the hell is Eli going to the tree? Why in the name of the lord am I following that brazen little bugger with the tongue of a dog and the brain of a bird? I ought to leave the little devil all to his own, let the two headed man argue over which head gets to bite him first. But if I leave him alone, mother will say it was my idea to go to the bog, to taunt the two-headed man, to defy her, and that little bastard Eli will no longer be around to speak the truth and to say that he's the one who plays with the devil, he's the one who loves badness something terrible. And as I thought about all of this, I was racing in the tracks of little Eli and I was screaming louder than that little devil of a piglet with his arse in a fire pit. As Eli got closer to the tree that would become our death, I got closer to him. Just as he leaped into the tree, I reached out for his back, and as he rose into the air, my fingernails clawed into the flesh of his shoulder. Up I went with him, big sister hanging from her little brother's neck. I was still screaming as he climbed up the trunk, carrying both of us into the branches. A startled raven ascended into the sky, the above world thick with the colour of blood. Eli and I clawed into each other's flesh for safety.

Now perched in the black branches, we scanned over the bog. We had each dropped our rocks when leaping into the tree. Neither one of us mentioned it. We searched the bog for a sign of the two headed man. Nothing. An empty world with only a raven circling above. No more voice. Only the sound of the wind rustling in the risky branches. Only the dead juniper creaking. Only our hearts racing, our lungs panting beneath pinched and parched mouths. The bog seemed hollow. A lifeless dell. A place where dead things continue to live. And then the voice blasted out of its phantom mouth

again, a metallic thunder broader than the sky: *This is Your Last Chance*. I heard Eli chirp chokingly. My throat squeaked as I swallowed.

We had met our doom, the monster was far greater than the myth of him could grasp. We looked every which way for a sign of that two-headed man. We felt we had been cheated by the stories. If nobody truly knew who he was, nobody should have ever talked about him. We had never been told he was invisible. We weren't ready for that. All we could see of him was what we heard, his invisible mouth repeating *This Is Your Last Chance*. And just as I went to say to Eli that maybe it wasn't the voice of a two-headed man, the voice added, *before we come in to get you*. Now it was true. I knew it was true. If the monster didn't have two heads it wouldn't have said *we*, it would have said *I*. I had learned that much about the English language in school. And so I whispered to Eli, *we're gonna have to run. Run fast for the forest and pray that he doesn't catch us by the ankles*. He agreed. We were ready to jump, prepared to hit the soggy ground in full flight. And then the voice boomed over the bog again, *If you won't come out, we will come in to get you. This is your last chance*. Again, the trickery of the stories we had been told. Nobody had ever said the two-headed man was kind before he killed. And then I thought maybe we were blessed, maybe he was giving us one last chance to get home and never come to the bog again. We moved over the ground like mice running from cats, cats running from hawks, the fear of our lives burning at our heels. Out of the bog and into the forest where the crimson sky now cast deathly shadows through the branches. We didn't bother with the trail that brought us to the bog but plowed wildly through the woody web in the direction of the road that would take us home, down the hill and around the harbour, into the arms of our mother. But before we reached the path, the

voice proved its love for hellish games. It spoke from all around us this time, "We will now come in to get you!" None of the tales we had been told mentioned that the two-headed man would leave the bog, that what he loved the most was to chase children through the trees. We continued our dash, but I swore I could hear him pacing behind. I could feel he was steadily gaining. He was breathing on my neck. He was reaching for my ankles, his arms were low beneath the trees and his claws were closing around my feet. I could feel him, and just as he went to do it, to grab me and maybe Eli too, Eli and I leaped out of the trees and tumbled into the clear of the path.

As fast as our little feet could go, we were in mad gallop down the path, descending towards the harbour. Neither of us dared to look back, but I had a feeling that the two-headed man had changed his strategy. And I was right. Because his voice boomed again, louder than before. He was closer to us now. *We are now coming to get you.*

It wasn't like Eli and I were gonna stop running, was it? No sir. We came tumbling down the hill that leads into the bottom of the harbour, knowing that if we could get that far, the two-headed man was sure to give up chasing us because we'd be in clear sight from across the water. And by the time we could see the water through the trees, Eli and I were screaming our little heads off, wanting our big brother Eliol and good Skipper Malcolm to have their guards up and be ready to fight off the two-headed man. I was beginning to believe that we were the ones who were reeling in the monster, and not the other way around.

When we got into the bottom of the harbour and we stood clear of trees, standing on the boulders and looking over the water, we were stopped dead in our feet. We

weren't screaming anymore. We weren't running either. We were speechless, our mouths felt like they were stuffed with wood. It was something we had never seen before.

Enormous. White and glowing. Nearly too big to get inside our snug harbour. Its gleaming whiteness and its sharpened shape made me believe it had come from another world. It had to have descended from the heavens, I was ready to believe. The biggest, the whitest thing I'd ever seen. Because of what was in our harbour, there could no longer be a two-headed man on trail, that much we understood.

Our harbour was filled with the white glow of an immense metallic ship. Across its bow, in bright red letters, the words: Easter Seals. And what little Eli and I would discover when we finally got back to our home was that this boat was equipped with an x-ray chamber, its crew was going from outport to outport, scanning people's chests for tuberculosis. The approach was to first invite the able bodied to come aboard at their own will, and then to either warn the unwilling by announcing through their speakers, "This is your last chance", or by kindly and loudly informing the elderly and the disabled that, "We will now come in to get you." When we were brought aboard, I had chills like sand pebbles running down my back. The air was filled with the metallic whisper of a lone accordion, a haunting reel screeched from the two speakers at the head of the ship. When Eli and I were brought into the x-ray room, surely they believed we were sick. Our faces white as ailing lambs.

Eli and I had never heard such a sound as that of a voice booming through a metal mouth, speaking through two electric speakers. It had confused us, terrified us. It had injured our sense of wonder, leaving us to forever remember what it meant to have been told by a voice echoing heavy over the harbour, reaching deep into the bottom of the bog,

almost bleeding disappointment into the red of our little hearts. When the nurses led us out of the x-ray chamber, where they told us photos of inside our bodies had been taken, the sun had entirely set, and I couldn't find a star in the sky. I went to bed feeling empty like I had never known it possible. What the voice had said had become true. That day was indeed our last chance.

If Sister Hadn't

Sister fell through the longers. Can't say how she fell, but in the water and on the rocks. The stage is taller than Eliol, cause he went under to get her. I was beside sister and she fell through. Mother always tells us to stay off the longers, "stay away from the flakes" she says, "youse gonna get hurt. It's not a place to play". It was only because Mikey was there and sister said we need to get him off, "the flakes is no place for dogs", she said. We ran out to Mikey and sister got closer, bent low to lift him up. But he ran away. Mikey always runs. Off the flakes. I wanted to follow Mikey and when I reached back for sister's hand, she was gone. The longers can roll, they're big sticks. She soused over into the hole. Eliol carried sister back to the house and now she won't look at me. She says she can't talk and she can't open her eyes anymore. She says it will be like this for a long time, but I don't want to wait. I want sister again. Mikey says he won't run to the flakes nomore if sister can come back. But mother won't let me go talk to sister now, she says sister's not talking. But I know I can hear her. Mother says that's good, "just keep on listening". But I want to tell sister that I'm sorry but she can't hear me through the door, and mother won't let me go in, says the doctor needs to be alone with sister. But I know I can hear sister, and she wants to see me. I can hear her through the door.

Hey! You Let Me In! Sister says it's not my fault. It's Mikey's fault, he's the one that done it to her.

Counting on a Coin

In the spring of thirty-nine I had a dime in my pocket for so long I nearly wore the King's face flat, rubbing the coin clean every night. I tried everything to get a penny so I could buy a can of Old Bugler, eleven cents for the cheapest tobacco. That's how hard it was for our crowd on Pork Island, not one penny to spare between us. By the end of summer I had learned one thing: you can never foresee how Lady Luck will play her cards. At first I thought I was in the fat because I had found a dime pressed in the mud along the path to Sydney Cove. Polished it up and kept it clean as a secret, hidden away in my pocket. But as the days wore on, it became a bitter fortune because I couldn't buy what I wanted, my first supply of cigarettes, a boy's badge of manhood.

I suppose that's what motivated me to get my first real job. I wanted nothing more than to be a man and crack the lid off a can of fresh tobacco, sharp blue as it was with the drawing of a man standing proud on a mountain peak. I wanted to be like "Old Bugler" himself, and sound my horn over the valley below. So with this in mind, though I was no more than twelve, I lied about my age and went to work on a schooner for a merchant from Greenspond. I kept the dime in my pocket the whole time, rubbed it clean in the bunk every night. Two months along the Labrador, on my knees in the hold for more than sixteen hours of the day, spreading salt on layer after layer of cod fish. Got home with nothing but a slip of paper, an I.O.U. for twenty dollars, that could only be spent with the merchant in Greenspond. The tragedy was that the merchant didn't sell any tobacco. Imagining myself to be Old Bugler, I felt like I had climbed the mountain top, stood tall on its peak and raised my hand to sound a horn I didn't have. So without being able to spend even a penny of my pay on a can of tobacco, I gave my summer's wage to mother

when I got home to Round Harbour. She was some proud of me, saying I was as good as the husband she no longer had, the father I never got to know. Mother could hardly wait to get to Greenspond so she could restock a kitchen that had been reduced to little more than bird's feed.

I went to bed that night and tried to rub my coin clean. Couldn't do it. All I could see in the glow of the oil lamp was the face of a king I had worked so hard to keep clean. I went outside and threw the coin into the harbour as hard as I could, heard it sink somewhere in the moonlight. Next morning I could hardly wake up, a pain I had had in my side for the last month had suddenly gotten so terrible that my face had turned the color of dead grass and I could count cold sweat beads like gull eyes rolling off my forehead. Mother put two vinegar plants on my chest, but when Eliol came by to see how my three months on the Labrador had gone, he lifted me out bed and carried me to Skipper Malcolm's motorboat, told mother he'd bring me to Greenspond to see the doctor. She said she was coming along, figuring she'd at least get her provisions. By early afternoon, her and Eliol were through the doctor's door and into the room where I lay, feeling mostly relieved of the worst pain I've ever known. The doctor told me that I had faded out not long after he opened me up. I was still in a daze and my stomach felt like a metal rod had pushed through it. Mother said I looked much better than when they had brought me in. She started telling me about the pounds of food they had loaded into the motorboat: flour, salt, tea, salt beef, dried apricots and raisins, the full list. The doctor came in the room and said "Nearly exploded". My appendix had been removed at a cost of twenty dollars.

Mother didn't say a word to the doctor when he gave her the bill, and she didn't hesitate either. Out the door and back through again before the doctor could figure out where she and Eliol had gone. She handed him the I.O.U. for twenty dollars, signed by the local merchant. "Paid in full," she said.

We motored home in the evening, a soft breeze over the sea, and a good thing it was calm too because I was laid flat in the cuddy, mother at my side, rubbing my hand. "Some luck" I whispered to her, thinking of all our misfortune. "Yiess, some luck" she said, "you'd better believe it is. Could have lost you, my son, if not for that slip of paper." And with that she gave me something I keep to this day, a shinny copper penny with hardly any trace of a face on it. "Rub it for good luck," she said, "every night."

Waiting Still

“Come in. He’s in the parlour,” she says excitedly, opening the door for you. You are now inside her kitchen. She is standing alone near the Waterloo stove, waiting for the kettle to begin rumbling over the iron stovetop. And then there is nobody in the house with her, not even you. There is still her but she can barely understand the thought of that—that she is alone now, she is a widow, and has been for most of her life. She understands only that she is absence. And so she spends most of her time looking out the window, following patterns in the sky or in the crystalline flesh of the frosted window, there is also the steam from the kettle to plug the hole in time. She has no recollection of having been married to a second husband for three times the number of years she had with the first. It is only the one who got inside her heart that she remembers. She sits at her table, with her elbows heavily positioned before her, holding her saucer and the teacup that was steaming in the sunlight a moment ago but has now cooled. Faithfully, she watches the sun rise and she returns also to the same position when it sets behind the house and sinks beyond the dark hill. She awaits the moon and will sometimes stand on her porch. She is so still you might believe she tries to listen to the stars shining in the harbour and when she gazes upward, she blankly stares at the ambivalent moon, looking at it almost compassionately. Inside the quiet home, she will often enter the parlour. “He looks smart, doesn’t he,” she speaks pleasantly to the wall, making a gesture with her right hand to the coffin that had once been at her side, laid out along the easterly wall of the parlour. She continues to speak to the wall, “Did you go see him, he’s in the parlour. Go on now, it’ll do you some good to see Darius again.” Everyday, she will reach her two hands over the impossible coffin and understand that she is raising its lid, opening

the casket. She places her hands inside it, feeling that Darius is now silent and cold and blue but he is not dead. She will tell him with a dry eye, cupping his cheek at the end of her outstretched arm, "You're such a smart looker, Darius. Always were." There will be sounds of children running near the home. There will be disputes and conversations filling the jar that is the night. She does not hear the children, she will not open her windows to an excited calling of her name, and she hardly comprehends that Roslyn, the large woman with the auburn hair and apron whom you saw entering the kitchen yesterday, is the one who most commonly brings her fresh bread and soup and asks, "how is ya today maid?", to which she will reply "Come in ma love. He's in the parlour, but t'isn't so bad. It's good of you to bring this bread, I'm sure it will do us all some good. And soup too, oh you didn't have to do that maid." And when it isn't Roslyn, it's either Esther Jane or Ettie or it is you, today, who will stay for tea, elbows gently settled into the table, two hands rubbing those of poor widow Ruby, cupping them as they quiver inside your steady touch. Over tea she's said the same words for that last five years, and every day has no recollection beyond those few words. She will begin by welcoming everybody to the wake, but the mourning never seems to end. She will welcome you when you come to her door, bringing warm food for the wake, and she will say, "So happy you could come ma love. Wait till ya see how smart he looks in his suit. He's in the parlour, in his coffin." And all you will recall when you come to visit her is how you fear for yourself if ever your husband's casket were in the parlour of your home and you were told by your brothers Gid and Richard to not open the lid, "don't you open the casket love, won't do ya no good, and ya knows it. Darius is just not in there. He's gone now love, gone for good."

The Hidden

Tail

If you had strength at all you'd have your heart in your hand the way she does, the way your father did and the way your oldest brother holds it together, but you're a shaky one, always lured by the boulders, listening to the voices of sirens hidden inside the craggy holes of the shoreline, drawing you in as though magnetically, overpowering your mind's ability to speak for your body. If you had any strength at all you'd stay in the common, anchored at the center of the harbour, knowing sure well that storms give little warning and leave only the fallen as evidence of their rage. But you love exposure. You can't help it. You've had mermaids in your mind since hearing they were barebreasted creatures, fabulous as hospitable angels, generous to their tattooed core. If you could just get it for one minute that the whole human world is composed of a great deal more than the draw of a woman's bare skin, the blossoming crevice of flesh that swallows your every dreaming minute, then you'd finally get it, forever understand that human satisfaction—the full happy pot of existence—is little more than belonging and belonging goes hand in hand with keeping your mind within the four loving walls of your house, your home, your family. But it can never be entirely that simple for you, never that genuine, that wholesome, that good. If it's not dirt, it's dirty, and no matter how hard you rub your skull against the washboard, you can't seem to get your head clean. You just keep on wanting, devouring the memories of brushing your hand against the feminine cloth while dancing to Gideon's wild accordion in the late night of a sheltered Labrador harbour, or inside the nights when you landed in Sin John's at the end of the lonesome summer's toil, the beginning of the fall, when you'd stumble drunkenly from the brothel steps, falling face down to the dirt, your pants hardly pulled up and your pockets emptied of hard

earned pay. It's not that you don't love your wife and see that she is beautiful as the spring's first flower. It's that you're not strong enough to believe in perfection, to anchor your drifting boat in the heavenly real, the harbour of home. You just can't seem to forget how you first felt inside your manly body, how impatiently you desired the flesh of a wanton stranger, the bare breasted mermaid, tattooed with the signs of flames from her shoulders down to her wrists, the fiery story of sex curled in her sea-weed hair, singed all down her back with the handprints of a thousand burning sailors. The endless dream of the longed-for lady of the sea who visits you faithfully while you float lonely along the strange shorelines, listening for her swerve beneath your punt, looking desperately into the dark of the ocean, your nostrils thick and aflame, blowing steam into the frigid air, dreaming yourself away while hidden inside the blanket of fog, imagining that there is a way for you to ensnare and capture the rash body of flesh, blindly believing that the emptiness of the soul will not always follow the release of the body, that you will not only hear the rattle and hum of your exhausted heart, leaving you wanting countless more. Leaving you with nothing more than the desperate belief that somehow, if you can master the secret of the senses, gain grip over the key to the forbidden world of the body, you will truly and finally achieve, you will possess the impossible, you will indeed unlock and enter, finally comprehend the mystery of the mermaid's tail.

Bottled Up

Don't look back. That's how I began. There are those who call it running. And then there are the sheltered ones, the ones poisoned with reluctance, who call it escaping. For me, it's living hard that matters. Any other way is hardly living. It's not that I intentionally rise before the sun, it's just that I can't allow the day to wake before I do: I cannot trust it that much. I'd rather not sleep than allow myself to fall out of wakefulness. An idle man is a dying man, and I always keep my eyes moving quicker than my hands, my hands quick as my feet and my feet quick as my head. I didn't become skipper of my own schooner by age 36 from some god-given right, and I didn't inherit any privilege from a drunken father who met death like a fool as if he had lived standing numb before a mirror for so long that when he finally did fall face first into it, on that final night of drunkenness, he probably believed it was his own body that had shattered and not the mirror, the remains of a man who had become his own absence: hollowed and bottled, a man made of glass. And if I share any trace of that man it is his hollowness: his of the head, mine of the heart. In my den I keep one empty bottle of rum on a shelf and I use it as my mirror, satisfied with hardly being able to recognize my face over the brown glass. I keep a straight blade inside that bottle, I use it to shave. Every time I clear hairs from my throat I see the wraith of my father locked inside the bottle, moving under the blurred reflection of my own face. I promised myself on the morning after I had emptied this bottle of its rum, nearly 23 years ago, that the day I'd fill it with the devilish spirit of alcohol would be on the night I would smash it and take to shaving with my eyes shut, making no accidental slip of the blade across my throat. I've known since that morning that if I ever filled that bottle with rum again, I'd be drinking in the soul of my own

father, I'd be drinking in the weakness that was his blood. That's why every Sunday,
while the others pray in church, I sit alone in the den, the curtains drawn, and I reach for
the empty bottle, hold its ghost by the neck.

They've Called it an Omen

When wandering in the fog because you've lost your way, though you've walked that path a thousand times before, crossed it since childhood, it can happen that you no longer know where you are. And if ever you misplace yourself in this way, in the fog when walking along the most familiar of roads, there is a good chance you will come full face with a figure who you will assume is a stranger. The person will appear like a statue in the thick of the fog and then suddenly come towards you. It'll say "Good evening sir", and you will say "Good evening to you sir."

Happened to me one night, I was walking on to Sydney Cove for a game of Five Hundreds with Ol' Caleb Brown and some of the boys when the fog came on so thick that I could have written my name in it. I'm not too sure how this happened, but all of a sudden I'm off the path and standing at the water's edge, hearing the sea rushing into the land. Isn't this strange, I thought to myself, there's no way I could have come all the way to the water without walking flat into the backside of Uncle Rex's House. I certainly know my way to Caleb's, I've been walking it every other night since I was little more than a lad.

But on this night, I couldn't make sense of where I was and how I had gotten there. I decided to turn to the right and follow the shoreline, climbing over boulders and around the trees, figuring eventually I would find my way among the homes of Sydney Cove. As I come around one of the trees, I see the shape of what appeared to be a man standing among the trees, barely visible in the fog and dark. He was still as a statue. I thought for certain I must have fallen inside a dream. I must have unknowingly bumped my head or somehow fallen asleep while walking along the road to Sydney Cove only a

short while ago. And then the statue takes a step towards me. He says "Good evening, sir." So I step towards him and say, "Good evening to you, sir." I almost didn't finish greeting him. I could see his face and he looked more familiar than any man I've ever met. I wanted to say his name, but I couldn't seem to remember what it was. "May I walk with you?" he asked me. And with that he reaches out for my arm, takes me by the elbow. I tried to say to him, "That would be fine, sir" but I couldn't get the first word out of my mouth. It seemed as if I no longer had any lips.

He leads me through the trees and helps me over the many boulders along the shore, always keeping his hand on me, either on my arm or shoulder or back. He never says a word to me, and doesn't try to look me in the face either. It seemed that whenever I got a clear glimpse of his head, his face was turned away from me. There were many things that I wanted to say and ask this man who couldn't have been a stranger, but he had me moving along at such a steady pace that if I didn't watch my every step I would tumble over. I had a feeling that if that happened, he would be gone, disappeared into the fog and I would be left behind, alone along a strange shoreline.

We entered the clearing and were walking with ease down a path, his arm hooked into mine, his face looking sharply away. Suddenly he asks me my name. I went to say it but I couldn't get a single word out of my mouth. I bent my head low and tapped my chest as if to check if I was truly inside my own body. I felt as though his question had emptied me. It seemed I no longer had a name. I couldn't breathe either. He unhooked his arm from mine and the words jumped out of my mouth as though I were sick with them. "Elias Pritchett" I spat out, and lifted my head to take a deep breath. We had arrived at Caleb's door, I could see inside his kitchen. I looked toward the stranger and

saw the light of the glow from the oil lamp shine off his cheek. I saw every one of his features, even the patterns in his eyes. I reached up to touch his face, I had to know if who I was seeing was real. As my fingers got close to his cheek, he startled me by speaking. "Good Evening to you, sir," he said. I could no longer move my hand towards him. Without intending to do so, I said "Good Evening, sir." And with that he was gone. Old Caleb opened door and said they had started to play Five Hundreds without me.

I hadn't sat down at the table yet when good Aunt Mary Brown came through the kitchen door from the fog and moonless night. She looked at me while I stood next to the table. Her jaw dropped and she turned the colour of flour. Caleb asked her, alarmed by his wife's pale face, "What is it, Mary?" She was utterly befuddled, as was I, She tried to ask, "How did you..." but couldn't get it out. Caleb barely caught her as she fell to the floor.

On my knees in the flowers

Oh, forget it. You couldn't understand anyway, you'd think it's just foolishness. But I am crying, and it does make me cry. Not ashamed of it. No sir. You spend fifty-two years, every summer on your knees along the Labrador, and you'll know what it means to see a potato flower. First time I seen this since I was eight year old. First time I get to stand in a garden, and I remember being in the garden with mother too, that's more than fifty years gone, that is. And yet no farther away than yesterday, that memory of mother, and the same of sister too. Oh, but you just forget it. You'd have to spend your life with your face in fish guts to know what it means. But never mind that, it's not so bad as it could've been. Sure now I live alone, she's gone, love of my life. But I still keeps her by my side. It's not like you can just let go of her. I know she's dead, I don't need no photo to see she's gone. But she's still here too, and I can't care if you don't see her. But I do, and it's not foolishness either. Imagine, what she'd do for me. She used to cut up her nightgown when it got too worn, cut up all that lovely material and she'd sew it into the knees of my long underwear. I started work as a salter, see. In the hold along with my father since I was nine year old. And the salter is the worst of the jobs, I knows cause I done'em all. Header for a long time and splitter too. But more than thirty summers I salted, and it was only in the year that I had come home to my new and lovely wife Audrey that she saw what it was like for me, how bad it was on my knees. See my mother had passed on when I was nine year old, tuberculosis took sister too. So I'd never had nobody to be tender to me, not til I met her, my Audrey. Father was good, good enough, but not a soft man. Man wasn't soft when I was a child. And he never married again. Audrey cried, she did. Yes she did, when she saw me the first fall I come home.

She could hardly look at how raw my knees were, white and worse than dead. Worn raw to the bone, the skin rubbed and burned off, looked no better than fish meat, it did.

Imagine, eighteen hours of the day kneeling on rough wood, your legs soaked in brine like they're worth no more than pig's feet. Imagine how that felt. You can't. But blisters and cuts and slivers, all of it soaking in fish brine, the whole summer long. The next year, and every year after that, more than thirty of them, she kept my knees safe in the layers of her night gowns. That's what she'd done, the way she was, Audrey was. Little patterns of flowers, soft as pillows, to keep my knees from being torn off, burned by the work of the salter. So now you know what it means. How little flowers will get to you, the potato ones even, the sight of them can make you cry. Not ashamed of it. That's the way she was.

*Glossary of Terms**

bakeapple: A low plant growing in bogs and producing an amber berry in late summer: cloudberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*).

barking nets: To immerse a fish-net, sail, etc. in the liquid formed by boiling the bark and buds of a conifer, as a preservative.

barm: Fermented preparation used for leavening bread; mixture of yeast and flour added to dough to induce rising.

cracky: also cracky dog, krackie. A small, noisy mongrel dog; frequent in phrase saucy as a crackie.

gaff: A stout pole, 5-8 feet long with an iron hook and spike fastened to one end, used to assist a sealer on the ice and to kill seals.

grapnel: Light anchor to moor small boats and fixed or stationary fishing gear.

garnsey: also gansey. Heavy, closely-knit pull-over sweater worn by fishermen and sealers.

header: Member of a fishing crew who removes the heads and entrails of cod-fish to be dressed. The fish is then thrust to the splitter who is on the other side of the table.

heave: 1. To lift, bring, move, throw, etc. 2. Phrase *heave in*: of heavy seas, to roll in on the shore.

jiggers: Unbaited, weighted hook(s) used with a line to catch cod (or squid) by giving a sharp, upward jerk.

longer: A long tapering pole, usually a conifer with bark left on, used in constructing roofs, floors, surfaces of stages and flakes, etc; fence rail.

mug-up: A cup or mug of tea and a snack taken between any of the main meals, especially in a pause from work.

prong: (noun) A long-handled implement with one or sometimes two sharp tines used to transfer fish from one place to another; fish-fork. (verb) To pierce and transfer fish using a prong.

puncheon: The largest of the wooden casks used as containers in the fisheries; a molasses cask with a capacity of 44-140 gallons.

* All definitions from *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*

puncheon tub: A puncheon sawn in half and used for various fisheries activities and processes.

salter: Member of a fishing crew who applies salt in the processing of dried cod.

saucy: Skittish, belligerent; unpredictable, dangerous.

slut: A tin kettle, often one with a large flat bottom and tapering to the top, used to boil water on an open fire.

smart: Lively, alert, active, vigorous. In good health.

souse: To fall over.

splitter: Member of a fishing crew who cuts around the backbone of cod-fish to be dressed, opening the fish for salting and drying.

stage: An elevated platform on the shore with working tables, sheds, etc., where fish are landed and processes for salting and drying, and fishing gear and supplies are stored.

store: A building forming part of a merchant's, planter's or fisherman's waterfront premises or 'room' where supplies and gear are stored for use or trade.

tant: Of a tree, tall, slender, and straight.

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