

A Process in the Weather of the Heart: The Boatman Paintings of Gerald Squires

Mary Dalton

Volume 11, Number 1, Spring 1995

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds11_1art03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Dalton, M. (1995). A Process in the Weather of the Heart: The Boatman Paintings of Gerald Squires. *Newfoundland Studies*, 11(1), 31–52.

A Process in the Weather of the Heart: The *Boatman* Paintings of Gerald Squires

MARY DALTON

I was like a boat sinking in enclosed water;
Like a dead man, I had but one element.

Paul Eluard

Here is a place where resurrection occurs
every second.

Gerald Squires

LET THIS ESSAY unsay itself at the outset. Let me recall for you the two old men in Jack B. Yeats' *The Green Wave*, a prologue to his play *In Sand*. They are looking at a painting and one asks the other, "What is it?" "It's a wave." "I know that, but what sort of wave?" "A green wave — well — a rather green wave." "What does it mean?" "I think it means just to be a wave." This is an exchange not to be forgotten, as one embarks upon an exploration of the many-layered paintings of the *Boatman* series, in which a wave so often can be seen as more than a wave.

Words about a painting are like words about a poem — a description, an admiration, a conversation, always a circling around the thing itself. May no one substitute them for the living energies of the painting, for the act of standing before the painting and *looking*. The words that follow are acts of exploration that seek to send the reader out to the paintings themselves.¹

The *Boatman* paintings were the work of five years, during which Gerald Squires and his family were living in the Ferryland Lighthouse, at the tip of a barren headland jutting out three miles into the Atlantic. Eleven acrylic works on canvas and paper appeared under the collective title *The Boatman: A Relentless Journey* at the Memorial University Art Gallery in September 1976 (and subsequently in the Atlantic Provinces and in British Columbia).² They bore titles from various

poems of Dylan Thomas and, after the symbolist manner of Thomas' poems, incorporated features of landscape and mindscape to reflect intense emotional states.

Many local art reviewers and commentators emphasized one aspect of the *Boatman* series at the expense of another. Some saw the paintings as an elaboration of the sentiments expressed in an earlier painting, *Resettlement*, which shows a provincial government Social Services man standing with his briefcase in an outport graveyard; on the tombstones are the names of outports forcibly resettled during the 'sixties. In the background is a solitary fisherman in a dory. The elegiac titles and marine imagery of dissolution and loss, along with the invoking of figures of an earlier time, led some to focus on the paintings as a dirge for the destruction of Newfoundland culture at the hands of post-Confederation governments.

Others pointed out that *The Boatman* paintings were more than social and cultural protest, that they were a spiritual and psychic journey, thematically consonant with Squires' earlier series *The Wanderer*, which depicted a solitary figure in a landscape, and with the works inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, by Job and by Icarus. James Wade has written of *The Boatman* paintings as a "voyage into the subconscious":

The Wanderer had become the Boatman, pitted against a phantasmagoria set against the sea and barren cliffs and towns; images of imposing authority, empty crosses, dismembered figures, all the tortuous driftwood of the subconscious fill these paintings with disquieting power.³

While these polarized readings are to be found, some commentators have recognized the multi-dimensional power of Squires' *Boatman* works. Peter Bell described them as "very moving paintings...among the most important to have been executed in Newfoundland."⁴ In an article which considers Squires' painting in general, Patricia Grattan describes the *Boatman* pieces as the best of his work, "a kind of Newfoundland surrealism," and stresses the dual nature of the paintings: "While the basic theme of the Boatman as a symbol of the Newfoundland way of life destroyed by forces beyond his control is clear, a sense of the artist's own pain and struggle is equally clear."⁵ Gerald Squires himself has articulated this notion:

I think what I was doing . . . was trying to find my own self in the landscape. *The Boatman* was a journey of self-discovery and a discovery of the landscape and people I was living with. It was kind of a lament too for the lost communities and lost way of life.⁶

The fusion of nature and self is to be found elsewhere in Squires' work — in the St. Francis paintings, in the Cassandra series, in the 1988 *I Am a Wave of the Sea*.⁷ But it is in *The Boatman* that this synthesis becomes part of a larger synthesis. The series embodies the relentless working of time through weather on the

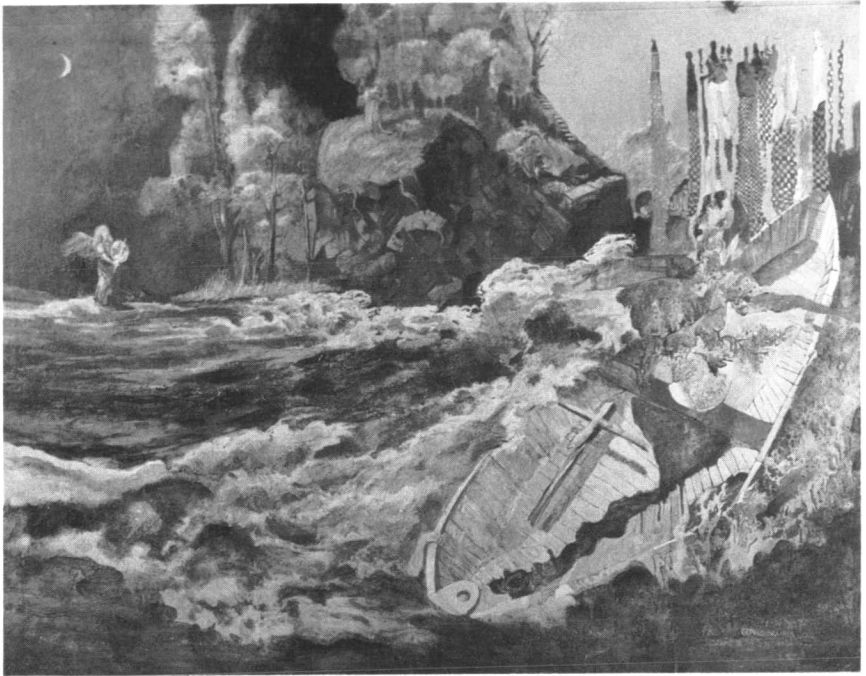
Paintings of Gerald Squires 33

Ferryland landscape; the journey of the history and culture and politics of Newfoundland; the anguished journey out of the dark of birth into the dark of death; and the painter's journey both through tradition and into the fractured consciousness of the twentieth century and through the materials of the art itself. These paintings are often about the journey of painting, self-reflexive excursions of the artist. In these paintings haunted by the presence (or, sometimes, the absence) of the solitary man in his dory, Squires has turned to his own ends the investigations of the symbolists and the surrealists to make original art of great force. The works speak at once of Newfoundland's harrowing journey in the twentieth century and of the existentialist journey of the human spirit, while acknowledging the inevitable limitations of art in its quest for expression. Just as Kafka's narratives of incapacity and failure and Beckett's dramas of inaction paradoxically celebrate the human struggle, so too do these paintings, full of an almost unbearable anguish, honour the strength and resilience of the human, rendering in all their complex dynamism the forces which threaten to engulf us. What follows is an attempt to articulate some of the many interconnecting strands of symbolic meaning operating in the series, by a close examination of some of the paintings. Through such a consideration one can better appreciate how the journey of a culture, the journey of the solitary human and the journey of the artist meet in Squires' densely packed, intensely lyrical poems in paint.

The first of the Boatman paintings, *Time is Bearing Another Son*,⁸ came into being as a tribute to the artist's infant son, Daemon Frazer Squires, who was born on March 7, 1972, and who died three days later of a respiratory illness. The child's name, birthdate and deathdate, along with the letters R.I.P., are inscribed on a tablet drawn within the prow of a frail boat borne down by the smash and crash of water into the centre foreground of the painting.

The boat itself dominates the right foreground and middle section of the work. The water swirling about this boat is water as devourer. Waves surge from the left all across the foreground to chew the boat in their white jaws. Water is spilling in over the sides and the boat is breaking apart. This boat is at once coffin and womb. The lines of the boards of the boat are emphasized; its lines are ribs, are coffin boards. The image of death is evoked not only through the disintegrating structure of the boat itself, but also by means of contiguous images. A forearm emerges from the water, its hand grabbing onto the left side of the boat; the shadow of a crucifix lies over the bottom of the boat, whose interior colours of taupes, tans, pale mossy greens, yellows and greys are suggestive of the colours of sunlit earth (a sunlit grave?); a green arm, at once human and frog, reaches out over the right side.

The figure hovering over/within the boat is a surreal composite. Out of speckled textures and muddied forms there is a sense of something winged emerging, something chaotic and ill-formed, emerging from a smashed skull-egg. One component of this mass is a bird head (dove or pigeon?); there are as well hints of feathers, of scales, of fish, bits of brain-like texture. Within this mass there are



Time is Bearing Another Son

conflicting energies; one movement is upward, as of wings, but the broken skull-like portion is being pulled downward into the boat which is being overwhelmed, almost, by the reaching waves. A branch with leaves of reds and yellows grows to the left out of the skull-egg.

Off to the far left the tumult of water subsides, although the water is dark and whitecaps curl about the small boat in which an angel stands, wings upraised. Above is dark sky, lit by a crescent moon. The angel's long hair streams over her shoulders; her mouth is open as if singing or crying out; across her chest she holds a circular shield-like object, with the silhouette of a horse and rider on it; she angles across it what looks to be a sword. This image summons up Psalm 91: "He shall cover thee with his feathers and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler."⁹ But superimposed on "the breastplate of righteousness" and "the shield of faith"¹⁰ is an image of apocalypse. The angel is as one crying out in a void. She is facing towards the scene of the disintegrating boat, but the static rendering of her figure and its scale and placement serve to diminish it and to emphasize by contrast the terrible boiling energy of the boat-battering sea.¹¹

Above the boat, drawing the eye up to the small scene of marine pastoral which occupies the upper right section of the painting, are elongated forms, some of them

reminiscent of shifting, melting human figures. A pattern of red and yellow-gold checks covers portions of these figures, like trousers, or in the case of one of the figures endowed with legs, like socks. These surreal forms are banners, ribbons of blood; they are also emblems of Harlequin, a richly resonant figure¹² — a manifestation of a chthonic deity, related to the gods of fertility. He is linked to the Otherworld and to transformations by magic.

Among this group of minimalist Harlequins are corkscrew-like forms which, because of their checkered patterning, can be seen as further attenuations of Harlequin, or as evocations of the spiral form, a macrocosmic symbol of great complexity, one of the basic symbolic elements of ornamental art all over the world. The spiral has been described as an image of the evolution of the universe and as a sign representing the breath and the spirit. Theorists concur that it is related to the lunar and to water, with its attendant associations of transformation, transition and regeneration. The spiral is present in many primitive rites of healing and renewal. Found everywhere in Celtic art, the spiral enables one “to escape from the material world and to enter the beyond, through the ‘hole’ symbolized by the mystic Centre.”¹³

These drifting, floating Harlequin forms and spiral-forms mediate between the homey realistic scene of the man in a dory above them and the drama of birth and dying within the womb-body-coffin boat below them. Emblems of transformation and the Otherworld, they hover between the upper and lower worlds, uniting them in visual and psychic terms. The upper world of the surface, the rational is rendered in the manner of a piece of Newfoundland folk realism that anticipates the work of Conrad Furey. Borne up by calm water of a bright sky-blue, the doryman is rowing towards the turmoil depicted beneath him. He is about to be swept into the seething flux beneath. The characteristic head-over-the shoulder gesture of the doryman becomes poignant and ambiguous.

This small boatman glancing over his shoulder at a world dramatically different from his own serene framework can be seen as the Newfoundland fisherman glimpsing the enigma of the dangerous, fecund sea he wrests a living from. This boatman can be viewed, too, in his social aspect, as a being whose world is undergoing cataclysmic change with resettlement programs, a declining fishery, the tidal invasion of the late twentieth century.

However, through the deeply resonant images created by Squires, the boatman is equally an emblem of the solitary self, akin to those travellers in the Anglo-Saxon poems *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*. The boatman journeys through time, and the wild waters tearing at the shattering boat are the waters of birth *and* the waters of death and regeneration. Water has ancient associations with the maternal and with giving birth; and the boat with the cradle. Freud has observed that in dreams birth is usually expressed through water imagery.¹⁴ The birth drama enacted in *Time Is Bearing Another Son* is also a drama of dying, for, as Gaston Bachelard has observed, “Water, the substance of life, is also the substance of death....”¹⁵ Death

36 Dalton

was the first boatman and a hollowed-out tree the first coffin. In some countries the ancient Celts gave their dead back to the waters, their mothers, by carving out a tree (itself a symbol of the maternal) and placing the dead body within to be carried off by the currents. Christian baptism enacts these rituals in its own way. St. John Chrysostom describes the significance of that immersion in water:

It represents death and interment, life and resurrection.... When we plunge our head beneath water, as in a sepulchre, the old man becomes completely immersed and buried. When we leave the water, the new man suddenly appears.¹⁶

This sense of water as emblematic of forces of birth, destruction and renewal, a *locus* of suffering and regeneration informs not only *Time is Bearing Another Son*. Its multifarious meanings, for what Bachelard would call “ambivalent reverie,” operate throughout the series, most powerfully and directly in the pre-1972 *Study for Though They Sink Through the Sea They Shall Rise Again*¹⁶ and in the final work in the series, *To The Fisherman Lost on the Land*.



Study for Though They Sink Through the Sea They Shall Rise Again

The seething of consciousness in *Time is Bearing Another Son* expresses itself also through the *mélange* of painterly styles incorporated within. The painting

reflects on the journey of painting itself into the disjunction and upheaval of modern consciousness. Painting itself is set adrift. The small boatman brings the world of folk art into the work. The upper-left quarter of the piece, with its inky, moonlit sky and mass of deciduous trees atop a craggy hill, evokes the world of Romantic landscape, both in composition and tonality. The hill sheers off into a Cubist cliff-face, à la Braque, while the angel conjures up mediaeval art and the attenuated Harlequin figures carry echoes of Picasso and Dali.¹⁸ The surreal, hallucinatory effect of the painting is thus intensified; the flux of mind is rendered not only through juxtaposition of disparate images as in dream but through the medium of painting itself. Time is bearing another painter.



Venus Lies Starstruck in her Wound

In *Venus Lies Starstruck in her Wound*¹⁹ the effect of the overall composition is one of dislocation, disorientation. A broad outer frame of the white paper is left untouched, so that the area of painting seems all the more crowded — a pell-mell

38 Dalton

of images. The work is taller than it is wide by one-third, so that verticality is emphasized. The various images are painted atop one another; there is an impression of levels, of a falling into depths. The eye wavers, doesn't know where to begin to read this picture, darts about looking for a centre. There is no centre, only a falling, a flowing, a dreaming.

In the uppermost panel there is a dory, with a shadowy cruciform silhouette standing in it. This figure is standing against the backdrop of an apocalyptic sky, a sky of fiery crimson. The drawing of the boat is visible, and the boat is rendered in detail, with its rib-like inner boards clearly articulated. The boat rides on choppy dark-blue water; it is poised on the brink of masses of swirling purple-pink water, a cataract billowing down and out at the viewer. The dory and doryman are outlined by fire, about to enter the universe of water. The whole painting bespeaks the turbulence of water, the turbulence of dream.

The human (or human-like) forms all lie along one vertical line in the painting. This creates a vertical line countering the horizontal bands and sets up linkages among the figures. Below the swirling purple cataract there is the naked figure of a woman. She is a reverse image of Degas' *After the Bath*. Her colours are the colours of drowning, a leaden grey with a touch of sea-frond green. Instead of a face there is a mask.²⁰ This figure is surrounded by forms rounded and multiple, with the greens and blues of peacock feathers, forms that hint at feathers but also at the briny gelatinous life-forms of the deep. There are scroll-forms, forms akin to oyster and fish. One fish-like form is as large as the woman who appears to be leaning away from it. Lacy sea-plants swirl about her. This is "the moon-chained and water-wound/ Metropolis of fishes."²¹ Here is the fluidity of drowning and dreaming, of immersion in the Otherworld, a quivering, bubbling blue-green world.

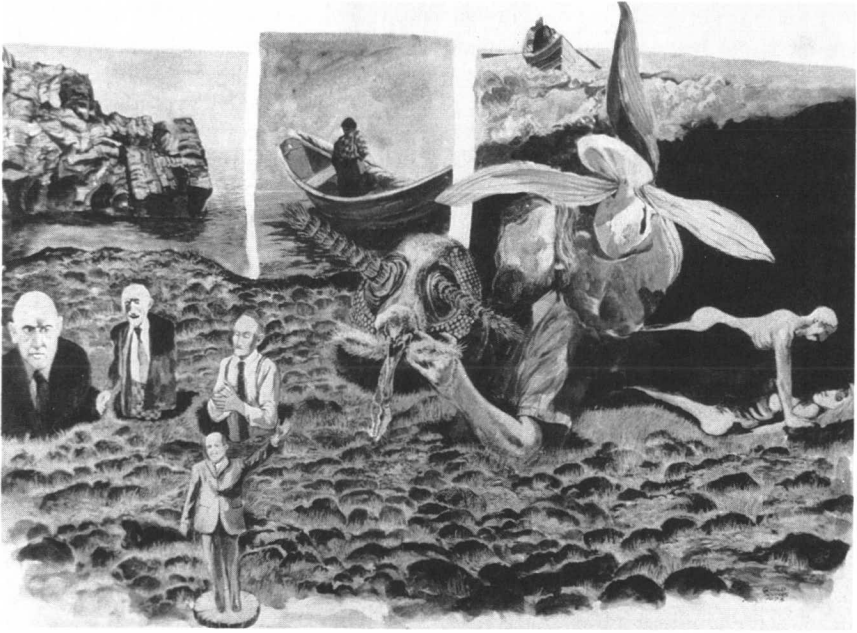
Beneath this underwater scene and dominating the lower half of the painting is the head of a woman.²² By virtue of being larger than any of the other figures, the woman's (sleeping? dreaming? dying?) head catches the eye first, perhaps. Her eyes are closed and her dark hair streams out across the width of the painting, streaming as in wind or water and swirling into the waves frothing up beneath her. The effect is of waves surging up to engulf her, submerge her. A fish rides along the right flowing current of her hair. She is Venus — Aphrodite, the wave-born — but a drowning, wounded, suffering Venus. She is, too, a Modigliani woman, a Rouault clown, and a Beothuk Indian.

Abutting her chin are the heads and shoulders of three hairless, terrifying figures. The overall impression is one of dissolution. Two are composed of a rusty orange, yellow, pinks and reds, with the main impact being of muddy orange with dark hollows for eyes. The third figure is grey, with eyes and nose hinted at. The three fade out into what are palpably dashes of paint. There are patches that could be fungi or erosion or corruption. Are these bodies transformed by water?

They are an unholy Trinity, exuding anger, grief, violence. They are reminiscent of Munch's screaming figure; the dark one brings Goya into this water-

wounded world; and the vicious-looking pearly teeth proclaim that here too is the spiritual wasteland of Francis Bacon.

As in *Time is Bearing Another Son*, there is turbulence and destruction. The painting has a phantasmagoric quality. Images blur, meld into one another. All is immersed in, surrounded by, juxtaposed against water — water that tears and ravages, but also water that bathes and soothes, the fecund mother-waters of sea-green life. The Christian symbols of redemption are muted here: the cruciform posture of the figure in the boat is the only certain one (although *ichthus* is one symbol of Christ). *Venus Lies Starstruck in her Wound* is a portrait of a psyche wounded and struggling to heal itself, of a smash-up. The smash-up of a psyche, a century, is expressed once again by means of “visual analogies for the experience of dreams”²³ and drowning. Once again, Newfoundland imagery and situations are fused with archetypal ones.



There is Nothing Left of the Sea but its Sound

In *There is Nothing Left of the Sea but its Sound* the imagery of dissolution continues, figured forth now through the interaction of a triptych-like upper half²⁴ whose panels merge into a foregrounded landscape of tufted grasses growing up through beach rocks. Against this overgrown beach various images of the human figure, as well as a sinister insect and an equally disturbing lady's slipper, are set. This acrylic on paper incorporates images of psychic pain and of cultural dissolu-

40 Dalton

tion; the social commentary receives greater emphasis than in many others of the series.

The triptych consists of three marine scenes which echo conventional depictions of Newfoundland — but with significant differences. The triptych form leads one to see these scenes of jagged rocks with water rippling about (left panel), of a man in a dory hauling a rope (central panel), and of a dory riding a swirling ocean (right panel) as on one level parodic. These images proclaim themselves pictures, memories, backdrop, commodities. They are objects of which we have become self-conscious. A further alienation effect is created in each by various means: the Cubist rendering of the rocks in the left panel,²⁵ the massive rope which disappears into fog in the central panel, and the sinister absence of a rower in the oar-propelled dory in the right panel.²⁶ All three panels subvert themselves, thus commenting on a culture that views itself in terms of false images.

Images of corruption and of a kind of traumatized eroticism dominate the foreground. The beach is growing over. Protruding from holes in the tufted beach are the upper bodies of three old men. Inspired by Nagg and Nell, the old couple relegated to ash-bins in Beckett's *Endgame*,²⁷ these figures might be taken as emblems of sorrow, laughing horror, and grief, respectively. The central figure (horror) is most suggestive, with his lean face and bald head; with his mask-face he is virtually a death's head. He is laughing, but this is a *rictus*, a death-laugh. His checkered pants bring into the painting, however, the resonances of the Harlequin motif discussed earlier. Like chthonian deities of the beach, these figures will not disappear. Consigned to holes, they continue to surface like Nagg and Nell, speaking their horror at an eroding landscape, where the old and their ways are denied.

This is a spiritual wasteland, presided over by a little doll-like man, placed in front of the three old figures. His legs end in a circular wooden base, such as that found on souvenir trinkets. He is a little smiling wooden doll, making a speech. His arm is upraised and outflung in the rhetorical gesture of the politician (or is it of tourist welcome?).

Surreal images dominate the lower right portion of *There is Nothing Left of the Sea but its Sound*. The head, shoulder and arm of a faceless bearded man (with some resemblance to the artist) are flanked by a huge flower and a huge insect-like head, each larger than the man's head. With its extended tufted eyes and pincers protruding from its leathery grey snout, the insect creature bespeaks the atavistic, the terrors of the deep and the terrors of unknown planets. It is reminiscent, too, of a gas-mask, and the bearded man holds it almost as a weapon. The swollen sac of a lady's slipper rests against the man's head and shoulders. The lady's slipper, rendered in all its pouting open-lipped fullness here, has had its sexual echoes acknowledged in its name, in many languages. Even the name of the genus, *Cypripedium*, means Aphrodite's little shoe. This avatar of female sexuality looms over an image of a man and woman copulating.

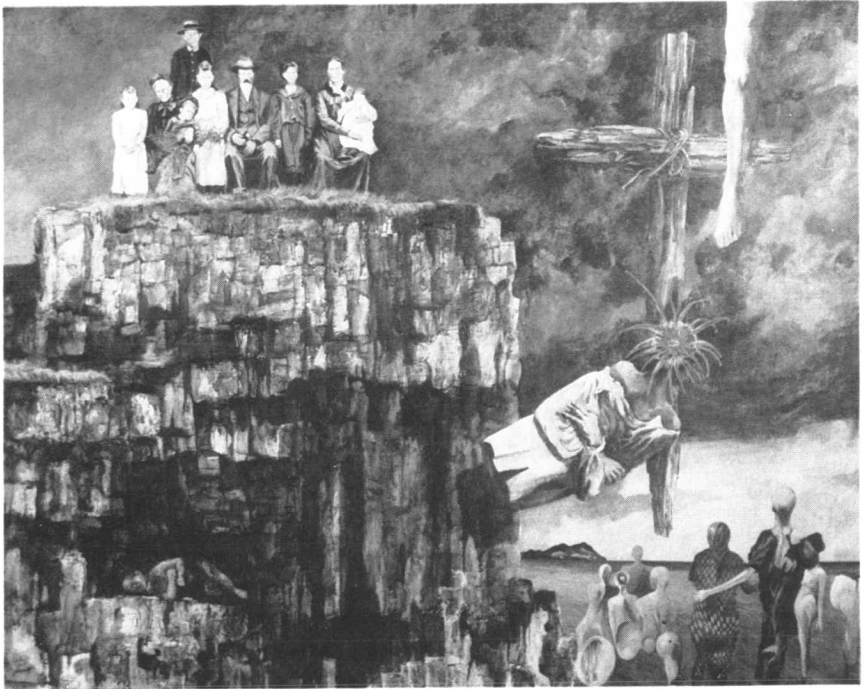
This scene of intercourse is a scene of necrophilia. The man is raised horizontally over the woman, leaning on his hands. A great wave of blue-black obscures parts of their bodies; the effect is of bodies eaten away. The man's head is a death's head — bald, lean-fleshed, open-mouthed with fang-like teeth visible in the lower jaw. The upper portion of his face is like a blue mask, a metallic mask. The face is evocative too of a bird beak. There is a black glinting slit of an eye. The woman beneath the male figure is both skeletal and voluptuous. She is lying on the tufted grass. Her hair echoes the lines and colours of the grass. She is all ribs and bones, a half-decayed corpse, a creature of midnight blacks and blues and the grey of drowned flesh. This scene of Eros and death is one of the most nightmarish in the entire series; in palette and gesture, and in emotional resonance it evokes Munch's 1900 study of a devouring horror, *Harpy*.

There is Nothing Left of the Sea but its Sound is one of the most unremittingly bleak of the *Boatman* paintings. Both landscape and human are rendered here as trapped in a universe of false consciousness. There is no escape; on this death ground even the act of love-making is suffused by death, is death. In such a wasteland, the sexual, the blooming of nature seem obscene. Self is eroded, and the connections of self with others.

In *There is Nothing Left of the Sea but its Sound* the boatman seems diminished to being a commercial and/or sentimental icon in one triptych panel and in another the boatman is missing altogether from his dory. The boatman and his dory are again absent from *No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears*, one of the large canvases in the series — and, like *I Flew the Earth and Naked Climbed the Weather*, epic in its fusion of landscape, psyche and history. It is a painting of multiple tensions. Superimposed on cliff, sky and water are images evoking dislocation, alienation, brokenness, suffering, grief, ineffable loss. The title of the piece itself speaks of irreversible change, of the journey into death, perhaps of the death of the sea itself and its life-forms. But part of the resonance of this title is its context, Dylan Thomas's great affirmation of rebirth and renewal in "And Death Shall Have No Dominion."

The left half of *No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears* is dominated by a cliff. This cliff is at once a fissured Newfoundland cliff and a tower, a pillar. It is a Tower of Babel, a cacophony of rocks, its colours evoking sky, earth, dried blood. The cliff thrusts about three-quarters up the height of the painting, its thin layer of grass and earth a footing for the Victorian family posed atop it, assembled as for a family photograph.²⁸ The cliff in its sheer upthrust, its verticality, is a pillar; the family, dressed in its formal best, sits atop it as a pillar in the desert. The juxtaposition evokes the hermits and visionaries of ancient Christianity.

The levels and layers and crevices of the cliff are highlighted; they are rendered as squares and rectangles of rock, as lozenges reminiscent of early Cubism. The rendering of the cliff in this way at once emphasizes its massiveness, its strength, its layerings over time and its friability. This rock fissures and crumbles. The stiffly



No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears

posed family, with their pallor and their varying expressions suggestive of wariness, unease or grief, are sitting atop the entrance to cataclysm. The sheered-away view presented highlights their vulnerability further. They look so set, so fixed, but they could so easily fall off, be blown off — into that other space of water and sky where crucifixion, ghosts, and the atavistic, the non-human, float and drift.

The cliff creates a sense of vertigo, of being exposed, but also — again the ambiguity — the cliff is a place of claustrophobia and suffocation, for wedged on a ledge within it is a baby figure who is at once a newborn and a Buddha.²⁹ The child figure is surrounded by dark; it is rendered in the blue-grey-charcoal colours of death. Its arms are folded across its chest as in death or as in a self-protective gesture. Its eyes are closed. Its face is slightly contorted, as a newborn's might be. The position of the child's body, lying on its side, is suggestive of being squashed, trapped.

The infant figure becomes part of several dynamic relationships in *No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears*. In conjunction with the family perched on the cliff, it evokes both the generations, the passing of time, history and layers of the psyche (one thinks of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Mind has mountains"). The trapped child, far below the sad stiff family atop the rock, becomes emblematic of their aspira-

tions, their vulnerability, their suffering and serenity — all buried deep, all unreachable in the depths of stone.

Set against a sky of billowing apocalyptic cloud, three images dominate the upper four-fifths of the painting's right half. A leg — a mannequin's leg, a piece of a sculpture — floats in the sky. The curving of toes and foot make one think of crucifixion, but there are no nail holes. Just below to the left, and intersecting with the truncated leg, is a cross made of two pieces of weather-eaten driftwood lashed together with rope. This crucifix is also a sea-cross, reminiscent of a killick. And protruding from the cliff at an angle of 45°, with its jellyfish crown of thorns lying across the base of the killick-cross, is another figure: a truncated torso consisting of neck and upper shoulders, arms clasped across the chest in the manner of the cliff-enwombed, cliff-entombed infant, with its torso clad in a short nightshirt that gives way to vacancy — the genital, the procreative is absent. The figure has no face. Atop the neck is a jellyfish; the curving gelatinous rays create a crown of thorns and a jester's cap. This is a sea crucifixion, with the jellyfish crown evoking the primordial, the atavistic. Imagery of death and sea-change, of renewing transformation are inextricably mingled here, in this surreal re-working of traditional Christian and marine images. Imagery of the sea, "The waters, which are our mothers,"³⁰ and of the sea as *Mare Tenebrarum* (Sea of Darkness)³¹ is fused with Christian images of suffering, death and resurrection.

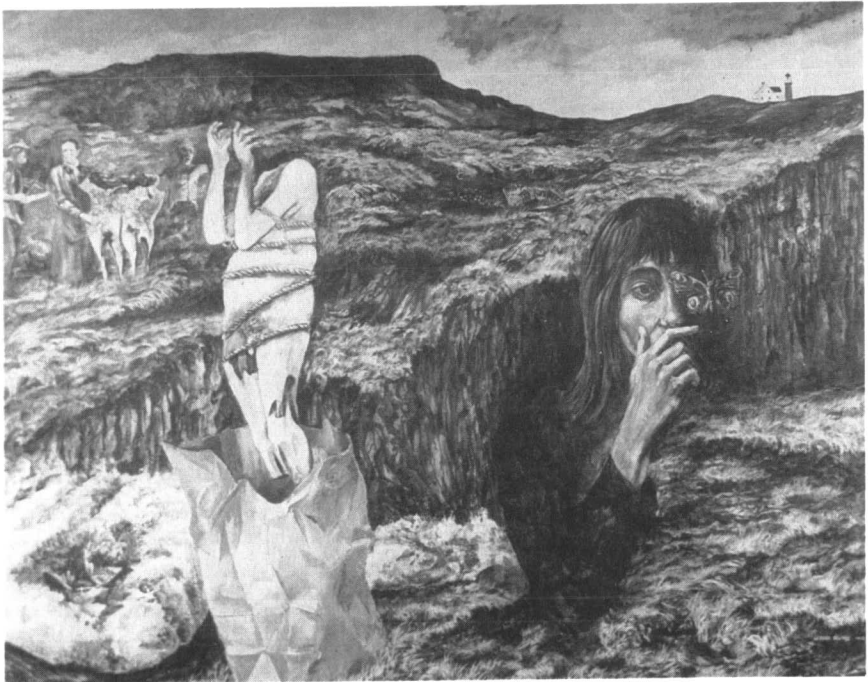
In the lower right fifth of the painting a group of eight surreal figures moves out over still water, a water of dream, of quiet contemplation, in contrast to the storm clouds moving in. These figures are oriented to the water and to the light on the horizon, with one exception: inside the circular ear/head shape which tops a shape hinting at bottle and at bone a tiny realistic face of Gerald Squires peers out at the viewer, with an expression of quiet grief and of *attentiveness*. The general effect is of deep pain, as this tiny face gazes out intently from a form that bespeaks bottle, bone, shroud and trowel. The echoes are of entrapment, but also of renewal. The bottle is one of the symbols of salvation, as is the bone.³² The trowel resonance has the painter enacting his own death and rebirth.

The remaining figures in this group are all richly suggestive of deeply buried psychic forces. They partake of what Gaston Bachelard has described as Salvador Dali's "pictorial Heracliteanism." Bachelard goes on to say that Dali's "deformations are often imperfectly understood because they are seen statically" without recognition of "the deep oneiric strength found in them."³³ Motifs that recur in the *Boatman* series — flower, shell, bird, the reptilian, the genital, the Harlequin, the death's head, tortured flesh — all manifest themselves here in these floating or bird-legged creatures of dream. Together they set up a symphony of symbolic resonances, at once evoking depths of dream and the particular dislocations of the twentieth century, psychological, historical³⁴ and philosophical. They bespeak strangeness and brokenness, but the counterpoint to this is water, a still water, towards which they move. As with the figures of the rock-bound infant and the

torso clasping itself, there is a suggestion of renewal to be found by journeying through pain.

Again painting itself is set adrift. The sense of disjunction is rendered not only through matters of composition and surreal image but through the incorporation of painterly allusion in the work. Bosch, El Greco, Piranesi and Dali are all invoked in *No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears*, as are the forms of sculpture and photography. As elsewhere in the series, the flux of mind and the flux of history are rendered through the very medium of painting itself.

A companion piece to *No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears* is *I Fled the Earth and Naked Climbed the Weather*, another epic canvas in which the personal and the cultural find harrowing expression. Among other things, the canvas renders the drama of a headless man and a bodiless woman set against the sweep of the ridged backs of the Ferryland Downs.³⁵ This landscape is expressive of even greater agony than the cliff/tower of *No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears*. The composition confounds distinctions; where one might expect water below cliffs there is an area of tufted grasses. The area of water, arena of the Boatman's struggle, is miniaturized. The relations of spaces to one another are disrupted, and there is an agitation of textures in the rendering of rock, grasses and water. The painting resembles



I Fled the Earth and Naked Climbed the Weather

Under the Earth the Loud Sea Walks in the degree of *angst* written in the rocks. The various textures are spiritually one, animated by a sense of incessant shifting. Land and time and psyche are all climbing the weather. The Downs rear up towards the upper frame of the painting; the upper eighth or so is given over to sky and a perfect little miniature of light on meadow and still water in the upper left corner. The Ferryland Lighthouse perched on the Downs in the upper right corner seems toy-like with its straight lines and its clear colours of white, red and black. It becomes a little box when set against this landscape of ripples, quivers, of unbearable tension rendered through a multiplicity of short strokes. The cliff rises and deepens; the depth of the eaten-away rock is greatest under the lighthouse. It can be toppled, smashed, whipped over the cliff. The lighthouse is essentially *other* in this landscape, representative of a world of order and control far distant from this landscape and the *angst* written on it.

Fragments of two human figures dominate the painting. A naked male torso, bound as Christ on the road to Calvary, raises its hands, clutching, groping as if for a head that isn't there. What this gesture becomes in the painting is a grasping of landscape; only the knoll, the head of the hill, lies above the upraised arms.

Another horrifying component of the bound figure, in conjunction with the Calvary echo, is its hollowness. A sense of this is created through the rag-like gaps on the thighs and legs. The metal framework visible within takes the nails of the Crucifixion inside the man. His crucifixion is inner. Also, there is the suggestion that he is part machine. He has undergone a contemporary crucifixion: the machine has invaded him. Set next to a skeletal figure, this bound figure's swollen belly seems all the more bloated. His feet are in touch with nothing. He is suspended above a paper bag; rendered in the manner of a conventional still life, the bag opens beneath him as a shroud, a grave, a twentieth-century throwaway trap. Container of commodities, the bag offers itself as refuge or as cage for the disintegrating man.

A group of smaller figures enacts a tableau of loss to the left of the headless torso. A fiddler in tam and jeans and rolled-up shirt-sleeves plays his fiddle, looking towards a woman in Victorian clothing who gazes off into the distance. She holds up for display forms which are at once suggestive of dried split codfish, dried pelts and a hollowed-out human form, Siamese, with four separate legs joined at the hip. Hues of pink, beige, blue, brown hint at flesh, but flesh corrupt, decaying. The third figure in this tableau contains echoes of Munch and of Bacon. Mannequin-like, skeleton-like, he is one-eyed, bald, cut off at the rib-cage, coloured the lead-grey of death. There is the hint of a broken Greek statue in the truncated right arm. But this is no Greek statue — rather, an image of the ruin of the twentieth century.

Still, the energy of struggle surges through this figure as through the waves of grass, water and rock. The circular lines of his rib cage are extended down and out onto the hill and onto the curve of a tuft of grass. He thus seems an emanation of the hill — a serpentine motion, a serpentine lower shape, with a diminished, tortured upper human half. As the serpent was a symbol of fertility in ancient

religions, this figure becomes emblematic of fertility and death. He is a nearly disembodied voice, yet he bodies forth the tensions between past and present, living and dying represented by the fiddler and the ancestral figure. His non-arm almost touches the bound male torso.

In the lower left corner of the painting, another reaches out to the headless figure. A small sea-drama unfolds as the little boatman — not much more than two inches as he kneels in his tiny boat — flings his arm out and up in the direction of the paper-bag man. The froth and swirl of the sea enclose the small boatman and his craft as a flower's petals its stamens. But this is no protective enclosing; here is a seething devouring fury of white water. Like the boats in *Time is Bearing Another Son* and *To the Fisherman Lost on the Land*, this boat is coming apart. Outside the boat is brown; its innards, its ribs are red — a red somewhere between blood and dried blood. In one spot the ribs of the boat are made to look like a mouth with eager teeth. Its boatman is a man but a fetus, too. Caught in the boiling waters of the sea in his frail craft, he is being born into death.

The boatman gestures supplicatingly. He calls out, but no one is noticing him. All the figures in this innerscape are disconnected from one another. The Boatman's gesture is prayerlike. In his desert of water he calls out, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But no divine Father hears. There is only a broken statue; a flabby emblem unable to hear or see, able only to gesture its own pain — a broken icon of "a botched civilization."³⁶

Among the harrowed figures of *I Fled the Earth and Naked Climbed the Weather*, the woman figure is most haunting of all.³⁷ Set against the cliff-lines in the right half of the painting, she faces the viewer, but her one expressive eye (the other is covered by a butterfly) is looking inwards. She is a head and face, a shoulder and arm reaching up to her face, a fine long hand covering her mouth and chin. Her arm and shoulder are clothed in black. The lines and crevices of the slightly jagged bangs of her long black hair echo the lines of the cliffs. Her form merges into the tufts of pale-green grasses. She seems to emanate out of the grasses and the cutaway cliff behind her. Though she is virtually bodiless, there's no sense of truncation, of incompleteness as with the headless figure and the skeletal figure.

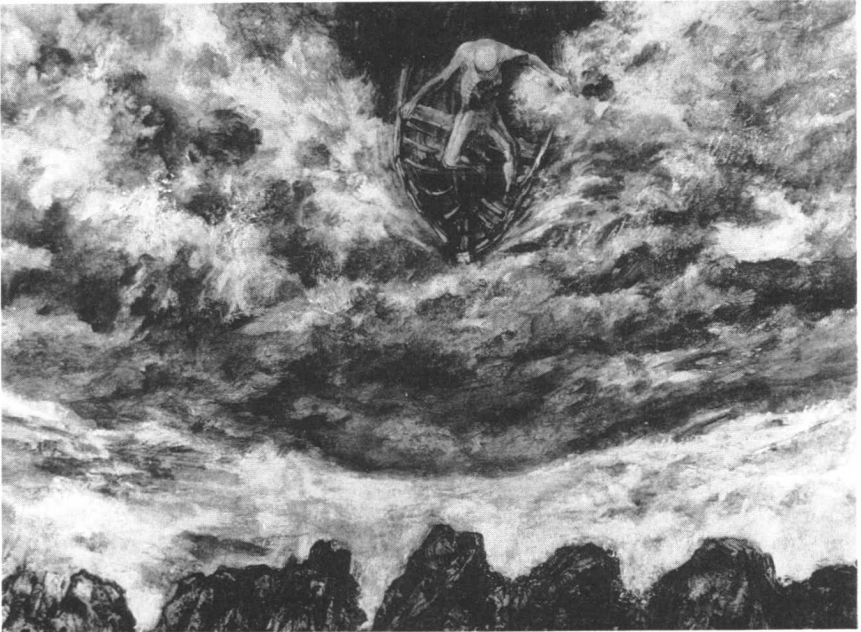
The long face has beautiful strong features. The brown eye gazing is the eye of a wounded deer. The strong, elegant hand covering the mouth is expressive of thought, of vulnerability, of not-speaking something that might be a scream. This is someone who inhabits stillness, a well of memory and sorrow. The butterfly obscuring the right half of her face sets up ambivalent associations. In itself it has a sinister effect, not least because it is a stiff butterfly, a pinned one, not the quivering creature of summer meadows. However, it introduces also notions of spiritual rebirth;³⁸ for the ancients the butterfly was an emblem of the soul and of unconscious attraction towards the light. It has come to be regarded as a symbol of rebirth. And in China it has the secondary meanings of joy and conjugal bliss.³⁹

Paintings of Gerald Squires 47

This woman figure is most definitely an individual woman, but the artist's depiction of her makes her emblematic of the embattled landscape which she seems an integral part of (with her strong dark features there are echoes, too, of lost Beothuks). She is nature and history and a soul in pain searching for grace.

The bodiless woman and the headless man are angled away from each other, each gesturing protectively toward themselves. One powerful dimension of *I Fled the Earth and Naked Climbed the Weather* is this dramatizing of loneliness, of an agonized spiritual solitude, with the butterfly, the lighthouse and the sunlit little meadow as grace notes, notes of grace in the hurricane weather of the heart.

The final work in the *Boatman* exhibition, *To the Fisherman Lost on the Land*, puts the boatman and his relentless journey at the centre of the painting, much in the manner of the early *Study for Though They Sink Through the Sea They Shall Rise Again*. All the rich symbolic resonance of boat and water is drawn on in this painting. The first visual impact of the painting is of the great driving force of a boat parting the waves as it cleaves the water. It is as if it comes smashing down through the upper frame of the painting; only half of it is visible, and that half pierces down into the centre of the piece. All about it is the whirl and smash of water — a great crashing symphony of spume and spray, curves, coils, wild dark drifts and currents.



To the Fisherman Lost on the Land

48 Dalton

The viewer's perspective is that of one looking down on the bald head of the bent, skeletal figure. He is naked and his arms are outstretched to either side of the womb-coffin-boat, in a posture of crucifixion. His chest is concave; his ribs are accentuated. His right foot is gone; he is one of the many truncated or limbless figures in the series. He inhabits the universe of Goya and of Francis Bacon. On his inexorable journey within his frail and disintegrating body, within his rotting boat, he lives out the Beckettian moment: "They give birth astride a grave."⁴⁰ His frail vessel carries him out of the darkness behind towards the veined, ridged rocks which jut their charcoal teeth all along the lower one-fifth of the painting. White water sprays onto these rocks. The rocks themselves are testament to the smashing, grinding power of the water that is working on the man and the boat. Gouged, seamed, indented, they endure the forces of erosion. They too are eaten away.

The painting embodies the complex vision of the series as a whole. Here is unaccommodated man, that poor, bare, forked animal, at the mercy of the savage forces of time and nature, yet here too is the transcendence of suffering in the living through it. The enormous energy of the figures and landscapes and their symbolic interplay in Squires' *Boatman* series serve to undermine any simple notion of these paintings as being solely laments for self or for a damaged culture. They are expressive of great grief, but that grief undergoes a transformation in the prism of art. Shakespeare says it well in his great dramatic poem to the sea and to the imagination, *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

In the creation of these works whose technical level he may have surpassed in the course of his artistic development but whose imaginative force and depth still earn them the right to be named among the most important paintings in Newfoundland, Gerald Squires proves the truth of Balzac's maxim: "Le hasard est le plus grand artiste."⁴¹

Appendix

The Boatman: A Relentless Journey

Curated by Edythe Goodridge.

Memorial University Art Gallery, September 1976.

1. *Time is Bearing Another Son* 1972

Acrylic on canvas 122.5 cm x 101.5 cm.

Paintings of Gerald Squires 49

2. *Till Every Bone in the Rushing Grave* 1973
Acrylic on paper. No measurements available.
3. *Venus Lies Starstruck in her Wound* 1973
Acrylic on paper 77.5 cm x 58 cm.
4. *There is Nothing Left of the Sea But its Sound* 1974
Acrylic on paper 76 cm x 101.5 cm.
5. *Study for Though They Sink through the Sea They Shall Rise Again*
Acrylic on canvas 61 cm x 78 cm.
6. *Though They Sink through the Sea They Shall Rise Again*
Acrylic on canvas 151.5 cm x 121 cm.
7. *No More May Gulls Cry at their Ears* 1975
Acrylic on canvas 167 cm x 136.3 cm.
8. *He Wept from the Crest of Grief. He Prayed to Veiled Sky* 1976
Acrylic on canvas 101.5 cm x 78.5 cm.
9. *Under the Earth the Loud Sea Walks* 1976
Acrylic on canvas 131.5 cm x 101.5 cm.
10. *I Fleed the Earth and Naked Climbed the Weather* 1976
Acrylic on canvas 142.5 cm x 114.5 cm.
11. *To the Fisherman Lost on the Land* 1976
Acrylic on canvas 101.5 cm x 132 cm.

Brief excerpts from this essay are included in *Gerald Squires: Newfoundland Artist*, eds. Des Walsh and Susan Jamieson (Breakwater, 1995).

Notes

¹Five of the series are in the Permanent Collection of the Memorial University Art Gallery, St. John's.

²See appendix for dates and dimensions of the paintings as given in the exhibition catalogue.

³"Touchstone to Nirvana," *Arts in formation* (December, 1985), p. 15.

⁴*The Evening Telegram* (11 September 1976).

⁵"Gerald Squires — 'a vast well of images'," *Arts Atlantic* 13 (Spring 1982), p. 31. [31-33, 41].

⁶*The Newfoundland Herald* (16 November 1977), p. 15. In the catalogue accompanying the *Boatman* exhibition, Edythe Goodridge also stresses this duality: "Gerry Squires has recorded ... the stripping of his individual darkness and by so doing has made clear the naked exposure of his lost islands."

⁷The title of this painting comes from the Celtic poem "Amairgen's Invocation to the Land." An incantation to Ireland, given in the *Leabhar Gabhála* (Book of Invasions), it opens thus:

I am the Wind that Blows over the Sea;
I am a Wave of the Sea;
I am the Sounding of the Billows

50 Dalton

In this chant, Amairgen fuses everything with his own being, in an outlook that is reminiscent of the Hindu *Bhagavadgita*. (One thinks, too, of the less easeful merging of the Old Woman of Beare with the Ocean:

And still the sea
Rears and plunges into me,
Shoving, rolling through my head
Images of the drifting dead.

“The Old Woman of Beare,” translated by Frank O’Connor.)

⁸This title, along with several others in the series, is taken from Dylan Thomas’ poem of a sea journey, “Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait.”

Time is bearing another son.
Kill Time! She turns in her pain!
The oak is felled in the acorn
And the hawk in the egg kills the wren.

The preceding two lines frame this stanza as a song:

The centuries throw back their hair
And the old men sing from newborn lips.

⁹Psalm 91, verse 4.

¹⁰Ephesians 6, verses 14-17.

¹¹The Christian symbols of the tiny lamb (the Lamb of Revelations?) and the Bishop (the Church?) are similarly diminished. They are enshrined in a grotto carved into a hillside behind the central boat-drama, small signs of redemption and renewal hidden in the rocks. An adjacent grotto holds an egg, emblem of possibility, new growth, the mystery of life itself — and, by extension, an emblem of immortality.

Peter Bell has described this angel as playing a lute. (*The Evening Telegram*, 11 September 1976), p. 17.

¹²For a discussion of the Harlequin figure, see A.D. Vries, *A Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (London: North Holland Publishing company, 1974), pp. 238-39; J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated Jack Sage (New York: Dorset Press, 1971), p. 44.

¹³For a summary of the symbolic attributes of the spiral, see Cirlot’s *Dictionary of Symbols*, pp. 305-6. Also of interest is Gaston Bachelard’s chapter on shells in *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 103-35.

¹⁴Cirlot, 365.

¹⁵Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Water*, translated by Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983), p. 72.

¹⁶St. John Chrysostom, *Homil. In Joh.*, xxv, 2, quoted in Cirlot, 365.

¹⁷Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

Dylan Thomas, “And Death shall Have No Dominion”

¹⁸The spirals also evoke Dali’s spiral shell and corkscrew in *The Great Masturbator* (1929).

¹⁹Venus lies star-struck in her wound
And the sensual ruins make
Seasons over the liquid world,

Paintings of Gerald Squires 51

White springs in the dark.

Dylan Thomas, "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait"

²⁰The mask recurs in *There is Nothing Left of the Sea but its Sound*, as an image suggestive of distance between a couple.

²¹Dylan Thomas, "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait," *Collected Poems*, p. 176.

²²The image is recognizable as the painter's wife, Gail Squires.

²³The phrase is used of Dali, by Dawn Ades, in *Dali and Surrealism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 75.

²⁴The triptych form recurs in Squires' work. This work anticipates his use of it in the *Cassandra* series. In an *arts in formation* interview with Des Walsh in 1983, Squires acknowledges his awareness of the symbolic and painterly significance of the triptych. He mentions also the use of the triptych by a painter whose influence is discernible in the *Boatman* and *Cassandra* series, Francis Bacon.

²⁵In commenting on his drawings for the painting "Where Genesis Begins," Gerald Squires told an audience gathered at the MUN Art Gallery on May 3, 1993, that "I've always been fascinated by how these rocks are breaking down. The rocks are drawings, a landscape making its drawing."

²⁶Is Death at the helm? Munch's painting of that name comes to mind when viewing *Study for Though They Sink Through the Sea They Shall Rise Again* and *To the Fisherman Lost on the Land*; in Squires' works Death and the fisherman have become one.

²⁷Conversation with Gerald Squires, spring, 1993.

²⁸When I remarked upon the photographic quality of this tableau, Gerald Squires told me that the image is based on a family photograph, of his Payne ancestors from Fogo.

²⁹Squires has studied Buddhism, according to J.M. Sullivan in her essay, "The Art of Gerry Squires," in *This Land*, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 22.

³⁰Vedic hymn, quoted by Bachelard in *Water and Dreams*, p. 118.

³¹Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 102.

³²See Cirlot, p. 31.

³³Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 106.

³⁴The sufferers of the Holocaust are shadow presences in these paintings.

³⁵I fled the earth and, naked, climbed the weather,

Reaching a second ground far from the stars;

And there we wept, I and a ghostly other,

My mothers-eyed, upon the tops of trees

Dylan Thomas, "I Fellowed Sleep"

³⁶Ezra Pound, "Pour l' Election de son Sepulchre."

³⁷As in *Venus Lies Starstruck in her Wound*, the figure is, on one level, a portrait of Gail Squires.

³⁸Gerald Squires has used the butterfly in representations of the resurrection as a sign of "the vital religious moment of renewal, rebirth." *The Newfoundland Herald* (4 April - 11 April 1980), p. 49.

³⁹Cirlot, p. 35.

⁴⁰Pozzo, in *Waiting for Godot*.

⁴¹John Russell applied this statement to another great risk-taker, Francis Bacon.

52 Dalton

References

- Ades, Dawn. *Dali and Surrealism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- . *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Water*, translated by Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983.
- Bell, Peter. Art Column, *The Evening Telegram* (11 September 1976), 17.
- Cirlot, J.E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated by Jack Sage. New York: Dorset Press, 1971.
- Goodridge, Edythe. *The Boatman: A Relentless Journey*. St. John's: Memorial University Art Gallery, 1976.
- Grattan, Patricia. "Gerald Squires—'a vast well of images,'" *Arts Atlantic* 13 (Spring 1982), 31-33, 41.
- Horan, George. "Gerald Squires," *Political Landscapes #1: Canadian Artists Exploring Perceptions of the Land*. Owen Sound, Ontario: Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, 1969.
- Kennedy, Brian P. *Jack B. Yeats*. Dublin: Town House, 1991.
- Luckyj, Natalie. *Other Realities: The Legacy of Surrealism in Canadian Art*. Kingston, Ontario: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1978.
- Lynch, Sheila. "Art as Expression: Creativity and Madness: An Interview with Gerald Squires," *Newfoundland Lifestyle*, VII, 4(1989), 17-21.
- Russell, John. *Francis Bacon*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1971.
- Squires, Gerald. Interview. *The Newfoundland Herald*. (16 November 1977), 15.
- Stang, Ragna. *Edvard Munch: The man and the artist*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1979.
- Sullivan, J. M. "The Art of Gerry Squires," *This Land*, IV, 1 (1990) 18-22; 44; 46.
- Thomas, Dylan. *The Collected Poems 1934-1952*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1957.
- Vries, A.D. *A Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*. London: North Holland Publishing Company, 1974.
- Wade, James. "Touchstone to Nirvana," *arts in formation*, III, 3 (December, 1985), 14-17.
- Walsh, Des. "Gerry Squires: The Cassandra Series," *arts in formation*, No. 1 (October 1983), 10-11.
- Zemans, Joyce. *Christopher Pratt: A Retrospective*. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1986.