

# Heartbreak Hotel, St. John's, Newfoundland

Stan Dragland

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Heartbreak Hotel, St. John's, Newfoundland

*The Night Season*. Paul Bowdring. St. John's: Killick Press, Creative Publishers, 1997, 248 p. ISBN 1895-3878-92.

STAN DRAGLAND

*We live both inside history and inside imagination.*

Daphne Marlatt, *Readings from the Labyrinth*

*If there were any justice, these Ron Hynes songs would be known all over the world.*

Paul Bowdring

THERE IS NO E.J. PRATT LIBRARY in Newfoundland. Or am I wrong? On the way out to view an errant walrus last fall, did I not glimpse the name of E.J. Pratt scrawled on the side of a shack beyond Harbour Grace? Pratt was born nearby in Western Bay. There is an E.J. Pratt Library at Victoria University in Toronto. In the Northrop Frye Room of the E.J. Pratt Library I was making notes on Paul Bowdring's *The Night Season*, and the portrait of Frye high on the wall reminded me, by contrast, of the portrait of George Story in the reference area of the Queen Elizabeth II Library at Memorial University in St. John's. Frye is sitting on an invisible chair, suspended high above a generalized landscape. Story is standing, pondering, beside a detailed rock profile; his thinning hair branches beside his ear very much like tendrils of the huge roots of the tree clutching at that rock.

In the Victoria University used bookstore, a small anteroom of the Pratt Library, I found a copy of Pelham Edgar's *Across My Path*, and bought it for the essay on Duncan Campbell Scott in it. Research on Scott was my main reason for haunting University of Toronto libraries this trip.

The longer I write criticism, the more I feel like reflecting on the environment of each writing. The ambience is often fascinating and sometimes significant to me. Between living, reading and writing there is a continuum not often stressed in criticism. The choice of what to speak of is crucial, but (theoretically) nothing, no *class* of information, is irrelevant. I want a criticism that answers minutely to the whole text. I want an art and science of criticism to respect the heart and soul of a text. And yet I also want to record where I'm sitting as I write this. The "I" we were all taught to suppress in our essays is no ego when it rises in eros, but the signature of an actual person passing, just like you, mind and body through the world. I give you my hand as I give you my thoughts. Together we might consider the artificiality, the *madness*, of criticism. We might think of criticism as a gathering rather than a building, with the option if not the obligation to honour the time and place of its coming together. The critic might learn from the writer once in awhile to lift her mask and show us what she's like when she's at home. She might learn from *The Night Season* how to handle self-consciousness with restraint.

The respect I feel for a book like *The Night Season* throws up a field of energy which begins to crackle as I gear up to write about it. The field begins to attract what it needs. I opened *Across my Path* almost at random into Northrop Frye's Introduction and found a passage relevant to *The Night Season*:

[Edgar] learned from Sainte-Beuve that great culture is cosmopolitan, that the standards of the classic have no reference to time or space, to language or conditions of life. He learned from Shelley (I am thinking of the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*) that great culture is also completely provincial, that it is as racy of the soil as a fine wine, and can only grow where there is a powerful sense of reality. Whatever verbal contradiction there is between these two statements does not prevent them from being equally and simultaneously true.<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't long ago that the word "great," over which Frye's patrician prose slides so effortlessly, was not spoken about Canadian Literature. Writing in the conclusion of *The Literary History of Canada* (1965), Frye could not use the word anywhere. From high above the literary landscape, he said that Canadian Literature had not yet amounted to much. His opinion counted because, like Pelham Edgar, he paid attention to Canadian writing. He paid his dues to it.

If the Canadian literature surveyed in *The Literary History of Canada* was all second rate, what of a region that barely appears in it? "[I]t must be confessed that working through those nine hundred packed pages looking for Newfoundland writing is a dispiriting business,"<sup>2</sup> says George Story in "Notes From a Berry Patch." And, with telling understatement: "one is left a little uneasy at this dismissal

of four centuries of the experience of living on this Island, and skeptical of the implied ghostlike existence of an 'impoverished,' 'illiterate,' and 'dehumanized' populace."<sup>3</sup> Story knows as well as Northrop Frye how to distinguish between "'high culture' and the creations of the 'little traditions,' between a Child ballad and the *Divina Commedia*," but he says that "an adequate literary scholarship will be informed and sensitive to the context of literature, its full range, and to its springs...."<sup>4</sup> Because he wrote so eloquently on the balladeer Johnny Burke, on Judge Prowse and George Cartwright and others, he made sure that those springs would not dry, and he himself became a spring.<sup>5</sup>

And yet Story realized, in 1972, what was scarce in Newfoundland writing. He found it in Robert Burns: "his poems, in their subjects and their language, are thick with a sense of his region, of communal experience, and with a precise and concrete sense of place."<sup>6</sup> Patrick O'Flaherty's *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (1979) is another splendid survey which ends still looking forward to "a living literature."<sup>7</sup> *The Night Season*, big and urbane and quite local, is one of many recent signs of that literature's arrival. A sequel to *The Rock Observed* could now be written which would not have to mention *The Shipping News*, though it would probably be perverse and unfriendly not to.

So I'm now writing in the Pearson Airport, Toronto, where an Air Canada crowd-control person snickered when I told him my destination was St. John's. "Not Cancun?" he joked. After nine months in St. John's, knee-jerk jokes about Newfoundland piss me off. The best travel guide to Newfoundland is Patrick O'Flaherty's *Come Near at Your Peril*. What would a hardy traveller like me want with Cancun?

I'm with Gerald Squires, who painted that homage to George Story. You can see in the care he took with detail how much Squires loves that rock, what drama he feels in its tempestuous relationship with the tree clutching on to it. You can see how much he thought of George Story, who (with Messrs. Kirwin and Widdowson) gave The Rock a lexicon: *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*.<sup>8</sup> I'm with George Story and not with Northrop Frye if it comes to choosing, though I love the prose of both. I want my feet on the ground. I want to be rooted where rooting takes will, where there is no soft slide of identity into environment. But it needn't come to choosing.

*The Night Season* is not, as the jacket claims, the first St. John's novel — that is unfair to Wayne Johnston, Janet McNaughton and others — but it is very much a St. John's book. A reader from away, supplied with a map, could follow Will Wiseman's movements though the city, out to Cape Spear, out to Malady Head. The same goes for his vacation in Vancouver. Anyone who spends time in St. John's, as resident or visitor, noting the originals for settings in the novel (Bartlett's store — the model of Noseworthy's — or the actual "The" building, identified by definite article alone, and relocated with artistic licence from Duckworth to Water St.), has specific landmarks on a literary map to pleasure in, right down to the

manufactured-in-St. John's Silent Knight manhole covers. When the real is reinvented into story (or poetry or painting or drama) a parallel reality reciprocally thickens the real. "In a sense, we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (Robert Kroetsch).<sup>9</sup> "Any national identity, any identity," in James Reaney's necessary complication, "is a web of adjusting visions."<sup>10</sup> No population is rooted where it lives until it passes into art. Into high art? Because I'm not an insider and can't be accused of national bias, I would allow Newfoundland folk song much more identifying power than George Story does. Is there any place on the island that hasn't been sung, and beautifully? With the arrival and spread of "sophisticated" art, at any rate, Newfoundland is getting more real all the time.

In *The Night Season* a clock may be heard ticking, and the pages of a calendar turn through the seasons, as fictional coordinates of time and place align with their physical and historical equivalents. Will was a young man in the sixties, during the Vietnam War, not long after Newfoundland entered Confederation ("twenty years since we had a country of our own.")<sup>11</sup> In his forties in the present of the novel, in personal and metaphysical extremis, he is "rampant with memory"<sup>12</sup> like Hagar Shipley in *The Stone Angel*, though Will's memory is punctuated and shaped by literature. While his story slowly proceeds, his past and the people important to it are folded in. And time is something more than setting in its temporal dimension. There are enough stalled or enigmatic timepieces in the novel to recall Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, and Time actually makes a mysterious appearance, just after a cemetery visit, in the form of a black limousine which Will calls, after Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," "Time's winged chariot."<sup>13</sup> The wheel of time having turned Will out of his marriage, though, *The Night Season* is no lighthearted *carpe diem*. Mortality hurrying near is part of the weight Will bears. His heart is damaged, if not broken; he no longer has a home and family. As he approaches middle age belonging nowhere, confirmed as the solitaire it was always his habit to be, no wonder the tone of his narration is often melancholy and ironic. Habitual irony gives him a prickly identity and sometimes lends his observations a satiric bite. But irony is partly the refuge of a bruised soul, and it's not all there is to Will. He's also a sucker for astonishment.

I speak of Will as though he were alive because he is, though he has only the substance of words. The paradox — black marks on a white page, words made flesh in a reader — is even more poignant with respect to Will's estranged wife, Kate. She makes no physical appearance in the present of the novel, but her continuance in Will drenches the narrative with her absent presence. The ten years of their increasingly difficult marriage are filled in retrospectively, the attractive and the difficult in Kate (as Will sees her) feeding a love-hate stasis that could be broken only by separation. Will respects Kate's art and he loves to watch her making it, but she centres a curatorial world he finds full of phonies. He can't stand his witheringly hyper-critical and pretentious mother-in-law, either, surely one of the

sources of the gravity marked by Kate's "signature sighs," "this bad breath of the spirit, this soul's heaving."<sup>14</sup> I know Kate reasonably well, or so I feel, and I like her, but I also understand the pressures that caused this marriage to crack without becoming triangular. Kate is the dark lady of *The Night Season* (Shakespeare's sonnets are alluded to), conjured in her absence, a risky but successful venture in characterization. The absent Claire, the alienated girlfriend of *The Roncesvalles Pass* is perhaps a rehearsal for Kate, but the emotional stakes of separation are much higher when the lives of two people have intertwined, emotionally and also physically, in the person of their daughter, Anna.

*The Night Season* is about particular individuals, most of whom live in St. John's, Newfoundland, and whose complex lives run in normal late twentieth century North American channels. Will's story is a new version of the familiar story of an individual at odds with society, and beyond that a displaced version of the ancient myth of search for identity in the cosmos. If these layers of significance would detach from one another, it would be easy to speak of the novel's provincial and cosmopolitan dimensions (in Frye's terms), or of the margin-centre tension in it. But a good novel is an organism, not an allegory, and will not bifurcate. Yeats asks, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"<sup>15</sup> and that's more like it. It's certainly more like Bowdring's novels, which are sprung to an organic dynamism briefly overt in the narrative consciousness of both. Hugh Myers, the narrator of *The Roncesvalles Pass*, considers the difference between cosmology now and in the seventeenth century, when a fixed earth was thought to centre the universe:

Now they tell us that everything is moving: the earth, spinning and circling the sun; the sun, rotating and orbiting the centre of the galaxy; and the Milky Way itself, spiralling. And the atomic universe, a mirror image: each atom, a miniature solar system; the very flesh, in constant motion. It would make you dizzy just thinking about it. You have to wonder sometimes whether you're looking in or looking out.<sup>16</sup>

Looking into the night sky with his sister Ruth, Will in *The Night Season* revisits this cosmological meditation remembering how William Blake nested the many into the one: "I was hoping [like John Donne?] to catch a falling star, a streaking incandescent world — a world in a grain of sand — burning itself up before my very eyes, but the sky was absolutely still, and voices that seemed as distant as the stars floated on the night air below the hill."<sup>17</sup> Neither passage is reassuring. Neither of Bowdring's novels rests in packaged meaning, though in both you sense the strength of human desire for family extending everywhichway from local speck to life at the outer limits, and thus the power of desire, imagination, in all human inquiry.

Novelists whose characters think cosmos are seeing limited human lives within a much larger flow. Between Noseworthy's store on Water Street and the Milky Way, the bundle of human concerns persists, and the ancient shadows the modern.

The novel's first epigraph locates the title of the book and signals that Will's story touches Job's: "My bones are pierced in me in the night season," Job laments, "and my sinews take no rest."<sup>18</sup> Will Wiseman is passing various levels of night season: a solitary Christmas (a season-long night in the darkest part of the year) on the anniversary of his marital split and the entire year of his separation, a dark night of the soul threatening to go on and on. He is stuck in the low arc of the story in which the hero enters and endures a darkness but eventually emerges into light; Will's life is all *nachtmusik*. "I was born in '56," he says. "I was ten at the time. I can hardly recall a thing before then. It was in the spring, on my birthday, that I first heard 'Heartbreak Hotel'."<sup>19</sup> Thirty years later, he's living there. Will is a very witty guy, and much that he tells is funny, even hilarious, so *The Night Season* as a whole is not stuck where he is, but the humour should not distract a reader from his pain.

Job's story, then and now, is no walk in the park, and it's a question whether the ancient or the contemporary suffering would be harder to handle. The Creator turned vindictive and apparently playing into the hands of the Tempter is a puzzle, but still a character in the story. His existence is not in doubt. Will's suffering is less acute than Job's, but he's alone in it. "Let heaven exist, though my place be in hell," cries the narrator of Borges' story, "The Library of Babel." "Let me be outraged and annihilated, but for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous Library [universe] be justified."<sup>20</sup> The only cry of equivalent intensity in *The Night Season* is a single word: "Kate!"<sup>21</sup> Will's cry of "regret and desire"<sup>22</sup> for his lost wife echoes through the rest of the novel, as personal and metaphysical loneliness converge. Will's Catholic education gave him a catechism with answers for all the questions, but he had long ago exchanged all that for literature, and doubt has infected even his secular faith. His scientist-sister, also separated, holds onto the "so-called natural world" for solace. Will's source of comfort is — or was — different:

[T]hat fall I began to fear that I was losing my grasp of my own world — the unnatural world, the world of literature — mired as I was in the almost supernatural world of compulsory first-year literary studies.

Novels, stories, plays and poems — indeed movements, schools, periods, oeuvres, and ages entire — were slowly unravelling and, as it were, decomposing. It was probably some weird compensatory mechanism related to what Dorcas [Will's mother-in-law], in her menacingly matter-of-fact way, would later refer to as my "occupational crisis."

Yes, though I had once professed literature like a faith, and ministered dutifully to my captive congregations, that faith was obviously — to borrow a phrase from the Reverend Arnold — no longer at the full.<sup>23</sup>

*The Night Season* is strewn with scraps from the old faith and the new, some, like the one just quoted, composed of both. Will is in exile where he ought to be at home. He is living a monkish life by default — he can't stay at home and he isn't professing

any faith — but there is nevertheless much in him of those servants of Christ, the Church Fathers, who also appear in *The Roncesvalles Pass*.

Bowdring's first novel is set in Toronto, where Hugh Myers lives in exile from Newfoundland on Roncesvalles Avenue, distant in every way from its namesake, the pass where the legendary Roland winded his mighty horn in vain. The epigraph to the novel, from Hugo of St. Victor (better known as Hugh, a name he shares with Bowdring's narrator), might almost have introduced *The Night Season*: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land."<sup>24</sup> The rhetoric builds towards an affirmation of detachment from this vale of tears underwritten by faith in an afterlife home. It sounds as though renunciatory perfection is the end of a smooth path with well-defined stages. In the daily lives of Bowdring's characters, exile is rough.

Mr. Umani stared out the window, and the crumbling brick face of the library stared right back at him, reflecting his own eternally sad face — the face of a modern-day Quasimodo, but filled with a longing that no love could satisfy. He was an immigrant on a street full of immigrants, in a city full of displaced persons; but the nature of his exile seemed to be of a different sort altogether. He had the look of a man without a homeland — a man who would have felt like an exile even in his native land.<sup>25</sup>

A couple of paragraphs later, he locates a copy of *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross for a young nun. Back in Newfoundland, as one would say if *The Night Season* were a sequel to *The Roncesvalles Pass*, Will finds himself living a life as spare as Mr. Umani's. A "world-weary philosopher even at thirteen,"<sup>26</sup> he is bearing great weight as an adult. His problem is the existential bind introduced in *The Roncesvalles Pass*:

Why do anything at all? This is the question that finally confronts us, that we ultimately have to face after our headlong drives for food, for sex, for glory — for justice — have been satisfied, and we are almost at peace, sitting comfortably, free at last — only to watch other deeper hungers take their place. It is a question that extinguishes all our fires and seals us in dark, indifferent spaces, from which a flight to the shops, the pubs, or the Bahamas will not release us. Why, on this marvellous summer day, amidst this bloom and splendour, does the heart, like the sun, seem so far from the centre of things, and take pause before continuing on its course...?<sup>27</sup>

This is from a book in Mr. Umani's shop called *A Sad Heart at the Summer Solstice*. Even though he wonders if it was Emerson "who said that after thirty a man wakes up sad every day of his life,"<sup>28</sup> the thirtyish Hugh Myers is youthful enough to allow the question to be displaced by some witty marginalia; "orphaned forty-year-old"<sup>29</sup> Will is stuck with it:



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I leaned self-consciously against a tree wondering why no dark cold day of February or grey rainy November afternoon ever stirred in me the kind of sadness and longing I sometimes felt on a summer afternoon watching the aspens shimmering and trembling in the breeze and the yellow bells of the laburnam silently tolling.<sup>30</sup>

Bowdring's characters don't want to let go of life, but they know something about the contemplative tradition of the *via negativa*. Will, certainly, would understand why Dennis Lee is "tugged" by its exemplars:

'The negative way' wasn't just a general metaphor for going through a bad spell. First off, it referred to the experience of detachment: of being weaned away from possessing things. And it happened in stages. John of the Cross spoke of the dark night of sense, where you gave up attachment to things of the world — money, belongings, bodily pleasure. And then the dark night of the soul, where you found religious consolations being stripped away. Because the sweetness of contemplation had really been feeding a kind of spiritual materialism. Getting detached from possessiveness at that level was a far more radical affair; prayer went dry, God went missing, the works.<sup>31</sup>

"Perhaps I should have been a Father rather than a father," says Will, "a monk instead of a married man — a Desert Father, with hair to my heels, living on barley bread and brackish water ... a hermit priest, a sheepskinned ascetic in a small hut of stones, with a thin reed mat for a bed and a single dry loaf hanging in a basket."<sup>32</sup> Will has the requisite anti-social impulse but not the conviction that transforms renunciation into service. His life will not cohere around a metaphysics.

The gift of language that makes us philosophers also unmoors us. It detaches us from our ground, and we have no other means of thinking back home than the very instrument of our alienation. "We are lonely for where we are,"<sup>33</sup> says Tim Lilburn, another modern student of the negative way, in an essay whose title asks "How To Be Here?" "One cranes forward into the world in appetite and enters it in sorrow knowing that this good desire that casts him out of himself is right and must not be lost but is necessarily and sharply frustrated."<sup>34</sup> Newfoundland is no comforting distraction. The so-called pathetic fallacy would not have been invented here. "[T]hough I would be the first to admit that I have oft rested my weary head on Art's comforting breast," Will remarks. "I would always be a little wary of Nature, living as we did on a cold hard rock in the ice packed Atlantic. She could just as easily change this west wind into a southeaster, and chill us to the bone with a thick cold capelin-season fog."<sup>35</sup>

*The Night Season* feels like a prose version of the dispersed elegy introduced by *The Duino Elegies*, Rilke's lament for modern spiritual loneliness. Bowdring is further from the angels than Rilke, though perhaps no more absent from felicity than Lear on the heath (the split maple in the back yard of Will's rooming house reminds him of "unaccommodated man"<sup>36</sup>). The loneliness is not new, just perva-

sive and permanent. Will hasn't Rilke's faith that living with unstinting creative discipline rebuilds the real in the invisible (though that is almost what it means to say "the fiction makes us real"). "Consolation" is one of the leitmotif words of *The Night Season*, but the novel carries no consolation as decisive as Rilke's. Will is all but paralysed in and by the post-meaning world he occupies. He is hanging on, like Kip in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*: "[T]here was no order but the great maps of art that showed judgement, piety and sacrifice."<sup>37</sup> Naturally Will resents acquaintances like the Gibberts, New Age "pap philosophers"<sup>38</sup> who know all the answers because their questions are shallow. "The world has a way of insisting upon itself, of compelling us to accept the terms of its temporary categories," says Edward Chamberlin in defence of the imagination whose creations Will has been doubting,

of hypnotising us into the delusion that its elements are permanent, its priorities immutable. When we submit to that world by accepting its demands, we move closer and closer to what Thoreau once described as a life of quiet desperation in which we are always under pressure to react to what is happening outside ourselves, or elsewhere. That's if we are lucky. If we are unlucky, we become violent, or go mad. Or we surrender to the first thing that offers us survival of any sort, or any sort of power. It is only through the pressure of the imagination that we can resist this overwhelming pressure of reality. In this sense all stories — from the sciences as well as from the arts — are resistance stories. They give us a way of creating a centre of belief — which paradoxically involves its own kind of surrender — from which we can move out to live in the world of events.<sup>39</sup>

Even in its spiritual desolation, perhaps *because* of it, *The Night Season* is a resistance story and Will its spokesman. In his pull to reduction, simplification, minimalism he has stepped off "the capitalist wheel of misfortune."<sup>40</sup> He has an integrity that makes him a sort of modern monk. The Desert Fathers, according to Thomas Merton, "were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster."<sup>41</sup> Will is not high-minded about living a social vision. He doesn't care for pushy "virtuous" people like the Gibberts. But there is a congruence between, say, his attraction to Noseworthy's store, that "mercantile equivalent of a monastery"<sup>42</sup> with its post-minimal window display, and his spartan life in a rented room in the chapter called "Desert Father":

As the days went by I discovered that there were very few things that I really needed. I ate out, borrowed books from the library, and made do with only one change of clothes. I moved the hot plate and the No Cooking sign out into the hall lest I succumb to the urge to equip myself for teamaking. Then I would have to acquire a kettle, cups, spoons, sugar, milk, and tea; then perhaps a teapot, a tea strainer, a milk jug, and a sugar bowl; then a small fridge for the milk, a tea cozy for the pot, a tea tray, and tea

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biscuits for guests; and then some exotic, high-grown teas from the Himalayas and, yes, why not, a tea trolley and a silver tea service with china cups and saucers. You never know who might drop in for tea. And after a successful tea or two, thoughts of a tea room, a coast-to-coast tea-room chain... You can see where this tea tendency might lead.<sup>43</sup>

Will's tongue is in his cheek, but the snowballing passage is still a parable of luxury-load. I feel the same middle-class twinge, reading it, that I do in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* when the otherwise admirable Dr. Richardson, physician to the first idiotic Franklin expedition, expresses his views on the "economic development of primitives": "They must want more than they need. That is civilization."<sup>44</sup> Now *there's* a plain mind. The Desert Fathers "believed there was a way of getting along without slavish dependence on accepted, conventional values."<sup>45</sup> Will's night season has a spiritual meaning after all.

But nobody knows darkness without knowing light. *The Night Season* answers the technical challenge articulated by van Gogh in another of the novel's epigraphs: "One of the most difficult things to do is to paint darkness which nonetheless has some light in it."<sup>46</sup> The novel's points of light are few but intense, diffused through the tale, redistributing the traditional balance and progress of conventional linear narrative. There is no continuous light which "having been must ever be" (Will mentions "Lonesome Willie's great 'Ode,'"<sup>47</sup> which sounds like the words work of some Lake District blues guy), but there *is* light, and inviolable life. It's there in the Newfoundland berries "whose bushes gave new meaning to the term 'low lying' in their struggle for survival on the windswept cliffs and barrens. Their genetic make-up might even have military applications."<sup>48</sup> Connecting points of light, even joy, in *The Night Season* softens the hard edges of Will's bleak world. So does humour, which never serves the dark. Elegance of design and of style contribute a lightness I will discuss below, but first — light in the emotional or spiritual sense.

The passage in the novel that anchors the joy in it has its usual protective thicket of irony:

Maybe astonishment was the last high left — though I would be the last one to diminish it. This common cockroach of the emotions had been selected, naturally, for some good reason. Like a banana peel it always had a way of leaving us on our intellectual asses, mumbling and trembling on the verge of an assurance of something or other, we know not what.<sup>49</sup>

"Cockroach" (most likely still to be scuttling when all other life is lost) and "banana peel" (slapstick archetype) stress the capacity of astonishment to short-circuit the intellect. Bleak and ironic and arms-length as Bowdring's fiction may seem, one of the things he does best is capture a sublunary world unexpectedly alive with mystery. Miss Nussey's "sad crinkled rainbonnet": "a thin translucent miracle membrane as protective as grace."<sup>50</sup>

*The Roncesvalles Pass* is simpler than *The Night Season*, but no less packed with vignettes of quotidian life glowing with barely withheld significance, pregnant with meanings to which the narrator has no access. *The Night Season*, more self-reflexive, offers a reader more sorts of perspective, because more balls of analogue are aloft in it, but it too counters exile and alienation with an ordinary world too mysterious and fascinating to give up on and a narrator/protagonist whose curiosity is his most endearing feature. In the last chapter of the novel, Will sets up a bird feeder in the back yard of his boarding house. "I sat there a long time but not a single bird appeared, not even a starling."<sup>51</sup> If he were in a reader's relation to his own story, he might have remembered his previous efforts to expect the unexpected, to be ready for astonishment. "But, of course," he realizes, "nothing ever happens then. It's like planning a surprise party for yourself."<sup>52</sup> Astonishment misses cues; cause and effect are as ships in the night. But a gift of birds does arrive. A large flock of cedar waxwings ignores his feeder and clusters on the dogberry tree out back. "They seemed on display, freeze-framed beneath the streetlight, but then they rose suddenly, like a single silhouetted shape, and disappeared over the rooftops into the fading light."<sup>53</sup>

This gift, the last in a family, an ecology, of birds and related creatures in the novel, rubs Will's nose in its independence of him. It's like El Sol, his sister Ruth's canary, "a real virtuoso performer. But there were stretches where there was neither rhyme nor reason to his song — just a lot of disjointed and atonal twittering, not too many whistleable tunes coming out of him."<sup>54</sup> Is it Will's own unbelonging that makes him twig to the otherness even of this caged and domesticated singer? It's certainly why he identifies with the cat nicknamed Sculpin, an unaccommodated, "probably downright unkillable"<sup>55</sup> stray who seems on his way back to the wild state. Sculpin in turn recalls the crow Will's mother had always called "hard as ignivite," a phrase he could never fathom until, later in life, "the word came blazing back to me when I came upon the Latin phrase *ignis vitae*, 'the fire of life.' His Blackness, the uncommon crow, was suddenly transfigured."<sup>56</sup> "*Ignis vitae*" recalls "aqua vitae, the water of life, as the Scots liked to call their national drink...."<sup>57</sup> A skinful of Scotch brings out the Irish song in Will's friend Tasker Murphy, and nothing is more Irish than the doleful "Carrickfergus," which nevertheless has an "undercurrent of meditative content, of crooning consolation."<sup>58</sup> And Tasker Murphy in cry is related to the Hermit Thrush Will hears while camping with his sister. This "North American nightingale"<sup>59</sup> localizes a flock of literary nightingales perching in epigraphs and narrative alike. In fact Keats's nightingale appears in the passage about the hermit thrush.

[H]e was not singing of summer in full-throated ease — no, what intrigued me, what I liked about it most of all, was the barely perceptible note, the undertone, of hesitation in his song. Perhaps not hesitation — more a note of surprise, astonishment even, that he was able to do this at all, that this beautiful song was actually coming out of him.<sup>60</sup>

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All these songs share wordless meaning inappellable by reason, emotional territory visited by Lynda, the singer in Will's '60s band. Performing "Unchained Melody," "she was out there on her own, beyond all measure, a capella ecstatic, beyond the bars and chains of time."<sup>61</sup>

Nonsense, that banana peel promising the skid of intellect out of language. "[E]ven apt names," says Don McKay,

touch but a tiny portion of a creature, place or thing. When that vertigo [of insight] arrives, we're aware of the abject thinness of language, while simultaneously realizing its necessity.... [I]t is often during such momentary breakdowns that we sense the enormous, unnameable wilderness beyond it — a wilderness we both long for and fear."<sup>62</sup>

Longing is much stronger than fear in urban St. John's, and muted in the most important story in Kate's life. She tells this vignette of childhood oneness with her deceased father over and over, presumably because it fills a need not satisfied by her adult life. She wants to keep this kingfisher tale going, and Will's contribution to its continuance is the present tense he recounts it in:

She is talking and watching the line in the water through a veil of smoke when her father makes a shushing sound in her ear, whispers "Look, look," and points to a hole in the high pug bank on the opposite side. Suddenly, from out of the red clay, a winged and crested blue and white blur emerges and swoops down to the brook, catches a trout in its beak, and then rises and disappears over the tops of the trees.<sup>63</sup>

There — the kingfisher, as is, ordinary otherness respectfully not interpreted and *therefore* feeding ecological vision. How? There is no Hopkins here ("As kingfishers catch fire ..."<sup>64</sup> might be expected in such a literary book), no symbol, no meaning englobed. But looking over the young Kate's shoulder, we are surely "on the verge of an assurance of something" — poised on that verge, like Kate, filled with longing and wonder. "[W]e don't own what we know" is what the practice of metaphor, that figure of irrational plenitude, tells Don McKay.<sup>65</sup> It might be the motto of *The Night Season*.

The Chinese garden Will finds on his vacation in Vancouver is overtly symbolic. Like an eastern *via negativa*, it cultivates Zen serenity. The guide points out "the yin-yang balance of the Garden — light and dark, small and large, hard and soft, still and flowing."<sup>66</sup> This garden, with its "borrowed views" representing all views, "seasonal, changing, 'passing strange,' there for the brief pleasure of our transient lives,"<sup>67</sup> seems available as a test pattern for *The Night Season*. Restless and grave though it is, the novel has its balancing signs of grit and determination, fun, love and joy. When, against the rapacity of consumer Christmas Will endorses

the spirit of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, it's in terms of joy and astonishment surprisingly irrepressible.

Every year I've watched [Marley] struggling with his chain, leading Scrooge down the road to repentance and rebirth; leaving him, finally, surprised by joy and the possibility of love, looking ... nakedly astonished ... and leaving me, as always, with an astonishing lump in my throat, as amazed as anyone else that my emotional dew line had been infiltrated once again.<sup>68</sup>

Bowdring stays on this side of symbol, so his novel is and is not the display of precarious balance expressed in a dream-like scene towards the end:

As I came to the end of the tunnel of rock, I saw a pale mottled white moon low in the eastern sky. In the west, a cold January sun laid its tired head on the horizon. On that high white road, with a pale disc in the corner of each eye, I felt like a tightrope walker with outstretched arms and a planet in each palm for balance; or a figure in some distant constellation, holding a planetary pendulum or a celestial scales of justice. I fixed my eyes on the far horizon, where the sea met the sky. Never look at your feet, I once heard a tightrope walker say.<sup>69</sup>

This is based on one of those emblems of harmony illustrating some hoary book of cosmology, but the tightrope is new. It makes the question of balance literal and vertiginous. Blondin got rich and famous for occasional feats of balance on the tightrope, but how'd you like to live that way? Once more over the falls, dear friends. If you never look at your feet, remember, how are you ever going notice that mildly astonishing cast-iron marvel of incongruity, the Silent Knight manhole cover?

Will's faith in literature may be threatened, but he parses the world in the terms it gave him. It holds his world together (Ry Cooder: "In Cuba the music flows like a river. It takes care of you and rebuilds you from the inside out"<sup>70</sup>), and it does the same for Bowdring's novel. Literary texts are Will's constant companions, though his wide range of reference includes music (classical and popular), visual art, film and ephemera. His literary loves run from Shakespeare to *Goodnight Moon*, the wonderful children's picture book that anchors the last section of *The Night Season*. He is an insatiable reader who will use the text of a restaurant place mat to interpret his own situation. He reads everything in the light of his own sad present, and distorts everything accordingly — unless it would be more accurate to say that obsession with the sources of his own solitude merely picks out the solitude and melancholy present everywhere. He is, in a passage from Coleridge's "The Nightingale" that is the novel's second epigraph, a "night-wandering man" who has "filled all things with himself,/ And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale/ Of his own sorrow."<sup>71</sup> Will is a mobile parable of the pleasures and perils of interpretation. His readings are subtle, responsive to nuance, undertone, meaning between

the lines or under the skin, and they are partial. They remind me, and I remind you in turn, that my reading is limited by what I'm equipped to see and what I choose to stress. *The Night Season* is fascinating as a translation of St. John's into words and as a drama of physical and spiritual ecologies, but there is more to it than that. It teases the reader into active relationship with narrator and novelist.

Will is quoting and alluding on almost every page, and not just passively. Straight or crooked, he is always playing with the received texts of his tradition, embracing them in such a way as to make a verbal matrix of his own, "using the language of that other text to further its own thought — rather than 'framing' it with quotation marks that separate it off".<sup>72</sup>

Things sure had changed since my rock and roll days, when we were lucky to get to bed before eight o'clock. But the eighties had long been icumen in, loud sing goddamn. What music had crept by us upon the waters? Almost twenty years had passed since the Summer of Love and now we were limping toward the next millennium.<sup>73</sup>

After the colloquial first sentence: a bit of medieval lyric with tone lowered by Ezra Pound, a line from *The Tempest* filtered through T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," and a Bowdring parody of the last line of W.B. Yeats' "The Second Coming" — a three-sentence anthology of historically layered allusion. Such passages come and go in the novel, or the narrative might begin to limp under the weight of allusion, but the cumulative intertextual content is huge. Another example, one more of many, concerns the strained relationships of Will and Kate's generation and the New Age predators poised to "redeem" them:

Emotional and political minefields all. And in our autumnal phase, the Gibberts, evangelical corbies that they were, had perched in the bare trees among the last few dry leaves waiting to take advantage of Kate and me in our emotionally exhausted state. And o'er our bones when they are bare the wind shall blow for evermair.<sup>74</sup>

In "The Twa Corbies," than which no Scottish ballad is bleaker, that couplet has a line break.

None of the reviews of *The Night Season* I have read complained about Will's persistent, almost obsessive, quotation, but some were annoyed by the fifty-five epigraphs preceding sections and chapters. The jacket writer has used the term "epigraphy" to prepare the reader for paratextual infiltration of the entire novel. He or she must have known that many readers don't like their literature too literary. I find it odd that readers should object to Bowdring's quotation while accepting Will's as natural — assuming that the reviewers in question noticed his forays into "the great anthology."<sup>75</sup> Will's literary occupation and avocation seem to have

refined his quotation out of existence, while Bowdring's, undissolved in story, sticks out.

*The Night Season* does not harp on its literariness, even if I do. You can read it avidly for plot and character, those once and future foundations of fiction, but I can't imagine the narrator's proliferant literary reference failing to tempt a reader up and out of the narrative to look at those epigraphs. There has to be a relationship between the author who put them there and his bookish narrator/character. In fact, as my use of them may already suggest, the epigraphs are part of the novel's instruction manual. They kick in as aids to interpretation when a reader transforms herself from plot-follower into watcher for those signs of oblique authorial communication usually known as self-reflexivity.

But doesn't this approach and this language spew from the make-work projects that are the private preserve of overtrained hairsplitting academics? I address for the moment any who would ask such a question — useful enough, despite the scorn, if it could just be made to boomerang. So, sez you, what makes me ask such a question? Not being you, I can only speculate. You hate pretentiousness? Complexity? You want literature neater than life? You like seamless novels? Multi-level thinking makes your head ache? You sound a lot like me. But I know we can expect more of ourselves. Why shouldn't we loop ourselves into that urge to parallel the real? Come back with me through one of those swinging doors of epigraph (into the novel, in this case, but they also open into the original texts), which are often in fact ambiguous as aids to interpretation. To figure out what they have to do with the novel, you sometimes have to stretch.

"It is, let me stress," writes Robert Alter in an epigraph drawn from *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, "an unnatural act to compose a poem or write a story."<sup>76</sup> In an extension of the thought, not quoted, he goes on: "No one would think of perpetrating such an act without having been exposed to poems or stories that present themselves as objects of emulation or rivalry."<sup>77</sup> I have already quoted the passage in which "unnatural" means *of culture* rather than *perverted* (the spin Alter is playing with). Maybe it's only a reader who loves books as much as Will and his author who will enjoy dancing the epigraphs into the story. Well, that's you and I. We crave unlimited access to the art of the text, to its design. Part 1 of *The Night Season* is called "Unnatural History," for example, and that title is drawn from Chapter 5 of Part 1, which is set in the public library, the nearest thing solitary Will has to a home.

"Unnatural," artificial, composed. Each chapter of *The Night Season* is an almost free-standing composition, circuitously advancing plot, delineating character, but also working variations on a motif or theme or location or preoccupation. And subject matter always inflects style; style and form are substance. It's crucial to pick up on this, because the heavy themes — the weight of transience, the remoteness of certainty — are so lightly carried by the medium. *The Night Season* is made of artful sentences, units of sound and sense often elegantly shaped and



delightful in themselves, and the sentences playfully metamorphose throughout chapters which themselves are linked in musical ways, as one might expect since the novel opens with a prelude, rather than a prologue. The playfulness is already felt in the Prelude, "The Consolation of Pastry" (not philosophy), where it counterpoints the sadness of the content. Will is bringing his mother a Christmas gift of croissants, and the taxi driver he engages happens to know pastry:

[He] entertained me en route with a half-baked history of the croissant delivered in a St. John's brogue so well preserved it might have been buried in a peat bog for the last two hundred years.<sup>78</sup>

He had once worked under a pastry chef in a Montreal hotel. He had very cold hands, he said. Perfect for pastry.<sup>79</sup>

With the meter running, I waited patiently while he licked the last few flakes of his story from his perfectly cold fingers....<sup>80</sup>

With metaphors rising from the taxi driver's story and metamorphosing in his version of it, Will transforms, augments and undercuts as he recounts. Stylistically, he is *cooking*. As surely as anything in the content of the novel, such threads of active motif warping through each section establish Will's ironic aloofness from life and his compensating delight in composition. He is not merely (naturally) telling his story; he is palpably shaping it, going out of his way to make verbal pattern. "[P]ut that in a book and who would believe it," he asks late in the novel when the taxi driver coincidentally reappears as a pizza delivery man, bringing a reprise of the cool hand motif. "I wondered if he recognized me, and why his cold-handed expertise was not being used on the production end of the operation."<sup>81</sup>

If the standard novel has a plot which complicates while rising to a climax and resolution, and if that plot is the product of Western linear (even patriarchal) thinking, then *The Night Season* is a resistance story in another sense: it relaxes the single narrative strand, bunches it into interwoven multiples and stalls its progression, so that the narrative becomes associational, layered, relational. It is *for* exploration and *against* crashing towards a destination. One of its internal analogues is a Kim Novak film, *The Notorious Landlady*, which Will says is confusing until understood as an expression of the director's loss (he was once married to Kim Novak). "[O]ur *auteur's* painful longing filled every frame. Having lost *her*, how could he have been expected to keep his mind on something as trivial as plot."<sup>82</sup> Takes one to know one. I feel Kate everywhere in *The Night Season* because she shows up under other names. Will makes *The Notorious Landlady* sound like his own sad story. In the process he gives a reader some purchase on the relatively discontinuous advance of the novel. Since the energies of each section circulate musically within themselves, a light leap is required to pass from section to section.

The forward thrust of plot is chastened by the lyrical impulse to stand and sing variations on a theme of loss. *The Night Season* is full of poetry and song, referred to and quoted, and it makes good sense to think of the novel as both, in narrative form.

The Prelude may have its lighthearted moments, but its last paragraph about snow is heartbreaking. It ends with a sad cadence ("the useless grief of the living") that arches over the whole novel to join the last chapter of the book, entitled "Snow." Has the novel gotten anywhere? "Acting on some epiphanic whim,"<sup>83</sup> Will attempts to meet Kate at the airport in the last chapter, raising the possibility of reconciliation. But snow at an airport on the other side of the island grounds her flight. So much for epiphany (James Joyce's borrowed word for sudden recognition in fiction) in a chapter that, like the Prelude, brushes Joyce's "The Dead" — though, as Will points out, the day is January 6, The Feast of the Epiphany. So much for climax, so much for reconciliation and closure.

Consciously shaped though it certainly is, the novel caters to no desire for resolution such as even the coolest postmodern reader might be astonished to find s/he craves. Of course it's none of Will's doing that the meeting with Kate doesn't happen. Maybe reconciliation is deferred, not defeated. The ache for Kate that causes Will to cry out for her is what sends him to the airport. The meaning of that trip is not its result. And maybe this novel shows how to look for reconciliation in unexpected places. How about Part II, in Vancouver, where Will discovers he has been "the unconscious agent of a most unlikely, a most serendipitous match: Stan and Gale, both of whom had confessed to me that they'd stopped looking, had obviously decided to take one last look."<sup>84</sup>

Given all the overt verbal play, the intricate musical development of motifs within and between chapters, it doesn't make sense to think of style and form in *The Night Season* as transparent, meant to carry the people and events of the novel without calling attention to itself. The writing is always rising into foreground in an incomplete thrust towards metafiction that stretches but preserves the novel's realism. *The Night Season* never quite breaks with verisimilitude. One of a reader's pleasures is the sly way it finesses Will's relationship to the text he is narrating and thus, in some sense, producing. Is he a writer? *The* writer? At one point Kate "accused me of writing things in secret. I said I'd never written a thing in my life. Did the world need another half-hearted professorial proser."<sup>85</sup> No to the rhetorical question, but the accusation was made when Will and Kate were half-hearted spouses. Is Will whole-heartedly writing out his misery after the separation? If so, we never catch him at it. All we have are a couple of remarks made during a visit to Kate's brother, writer and editor of a little magazine. Bill looks at his current burden of submissions. "And when we're not writing it," he remarks to Will, "we're reading it...or talking about it."<sup>86</sup> Does "we" implicate the brother-in-law in this writing? Does Will give himself away in his comment about Bill's study: "Farther down the hall, there was a room for the soul — a windowless writing room, little

more than a closet, really, with nothing in it but a manual typewriter, table and chair."<sup>87</sup>

Will's mind does leap into invention like a writer's. The world and the language are charged with association for him, and anything that he hears or sees or thinks may flick him out of his own space and moment into some otherwhere. This is one reason the narrative proceeds associationally, in accumulating layers. "[A]s I sat watching her and listening to Bing [Crosby] begin a spooky but seductive rendition of 'I'll Be Home For Christmas,' I had a sudden fantastic thought."<sup>88</sup> The thought is a shunt or a wrinkle or a parallel or a tributary to the main narrative, a story breaking out inside the story in the spirit of *Shahrazad* (*The Arabian Nights* makes an appearance in "The Historic Fart," a tragi-comic tale of exile). Some such outbreak happens so often that the novel seems almost *composed* of tributaries. Will's childhood mind had always invented: "As a boy I had been told that the lake was five hundred feet deep. On Sunday drives I had stared though the rear window of my father's car as we drove along the lakeshore into town and imagined a rainfall so heavy that the lake burst its banks."<sup>89</sup> He is still imagining as an adult: "I constructed the probable sequence of events in her flight from home and hearth;"<sup>90</sup> "In my mind I could see a cool white room in a whitewashed stone house on a tiny island in the Aegean, the tip of a long-dead volcano."<sup>91</sup>

The possibility that Will has written the story we are reading is not foreclosed, and that's the most that can be said. The novel is extremely writerly, of course. It carries its literary forebears on its sleeve. And the Wiseman genealogy fits. As far as Will's father is concerned, the name "needed no further explanation," so he is perturbed to find in a book called *Family Names* that it may be ironic. "And there may have been tricksters, wizards, sorcerers, conjurers, enchanters, and diviners in the ancestral mix as well. These he could have let pass, but his brows had permanently darkened and knit at the book's suggestion that we might have been descended from a family of fools."<sup>92</sup> A literary man, remembering *King Lear*, is not going to be fazed by fools in the family tree. Lear's Fool is a trickster. In Canada, trickster (Robert Kroetsch, George Bowering) and diviner (Margaret Laurence) sometimes mean writer. (With Will's last name opened up for speculation, perhaps we should return to The Feast of the Epiphany, Old Christmas Day, remembering the Wise Men. Maybe we even want to look again at Silent [K]night. The pun, after all, is one of Will's favourite ways of stacking meanings.)

I have a lot of Newfoundland fiction yet to read, and I can't really generalize, but *The Night Season* is surprising in the context of what I have read so far. Perhaps because the phase of identifying is necessary, especially in a province which is also a nation<sup>93</sup> still in the process of shrugging off colonial mentality, much Newfoundland writing, even the poetry, serves a documentary function and serves it well. When Gordon Rodgers showed his father the poems about the Newfoundland fishery that became *Floating Houses*,<sup>94</sup> his father said, "It sounds like the way it was."<sup>95</sup> Anyone who underrates the value of that verdict about good poems from a

man who is literate but no reader doesn't understand the value of writing to a broad community. The Newfoundland novelist most respected as a forerunner is Percy Janes, whose *House of Hate* was a breakthrough in honest representation, particularly of Newfoundland speech. Written in the mid-nineteen sixties, it was roughly contemporaneous with Leonard Cohen's avant-garde *Beautiful Losers*, Canada's first postmodernist novel. If I were one of those who believes that no realism is any good in an age of postmodernism, I wouldn't be so taken with *House of Hate*. I wouldn't so admire the short fiction of Lisa Moore and Libby Creelman either. But I'm not an ism-booster. I like this book and that and the other across the categories. And there are always jokers in the identity pack. Borges has remarked on the paradox that he arrived as an Argentine writer when his writing left Argentina.<sup>96</sup> A vital writing community explodes in unforeseen directions. In fact, a year of Newfoundland fiction which includes *The Night Season*, Patrick Kavanagh's epic *Gaff Topsails*, Shree Ghatage's India-based *Awake When All the World is Asleep*, Robin McGrath's *Trouble and Desire*, and Ed Riche's *Rare Birds*<sup>97</sup> (to name only those shortlisted for The 1998 Newfoundland and Labrador Writer's Alliance Fiction Award), is a fireworks year, a sign that true fictional ferment is layering The Rock with visions.

A complete story of my efforts on this piece would have begun months ago, long before Toronto, with *Night Scenes*, a show of paintings by Jennifer Pohl at the LSPU Hall in St. John's. I had no sooner been asked to write on *The Night Season* when I found myself reading and loving the following artist's statement:

Out of my dreams, and under the shifting light of urban Newfoundland, I am exploring a world from both within and without. In this world, thousands of details in the city reveal themselves transformed through darkness. Car lights on wet and frozen streets. Prophets in dimly lit doorways. Red walls through bedroom windows. A dark haired singer in a floral dress and a smoky bar. Popcorn on a piano. Lamplight hits a tree and I reach towards Zen in dark and empty Turner-esque spaces.

...

Undoubtedly my time in the city has been an influence, especially the nightly walks to and from my studio ... and maybe it is my way of paying homage to a place that has been very good to me, and to the Newfoundlanders who continue to inspire me with their love of their homeland. In the quiet of a city, I see a part of Newfoundland that holds as much meaning as the sea.<sup>98</sup>

Will Wiseman has had enough of artist statements. Of Anne, the "impressionist" photographer, he says that she "specialized in blurry portraits of legendary locals, but excelled in pretentious artist statements. 'I want to awaken the viewers own stored memory-image from its retinal sleep,' her last exhibition catalogue had proclaimed. 'Ban all artist statements!' I had proclaimed to Kate one evening after I had scanned it. 'By their art ye shall know them' was her calming reply."<sup>99</sup> There is probably enough of Will in Paul Bowdring to keep the cap on artist statements

of his own. Maybe that's what so impressively restrains his impulse to metafiction. But I bet he'd feel as I do the affinity between his metaphorical and Jennifer Pohl's literal St. John's night.

I have spared you the full story of my making. It would have had all the snap of *Sympathy for the Devil*, the ennui-filled documentary about The Rolling Stones' haphazard composition of devil's music. "We must never, never make a virtue of our lonely burrowing,"<sup>100</sup> declares John Berger in *A Painter of Our Time*, one of the epigraphs introducing Part I of *The Night Season*. I'm not given to making pronouncements, but if I were I might insist we must not make a virtue of solipsism, never in criticism. Not a virtue, no, but how about a method, one probe of many? The essence of a good novel is as elusive to capture as a suburb or a city, after all, so every approach capable of bearing fruit or witness should be employed. An epidermal approach never gets under the skin of a novel, no. But think of skin anyway, think of body, consider the very bum of the wretched critic on the ripped padding of his card-table chair, his arthritic fingers hitting and missing keys and thoughts, but nevertheless writing with everything he's got. Think of him rising stiffly, then, stretching and walking out down Pennywell, past Jackman and Green's Grocery that was in that story he read by Bernice Morgan,<sup>101</sup> down Long's Hill, immortalized in "No Change," a song of Ron Hynes and Murray McLauchlan ("You could fire off a cannon from the top of Long's Hill/ And a Gulliver's taxi may be all that you'd kill"<sup>102</sup>), and down Duckworth to hear Ron Hynes present his brilliant St. John's soundtrack at The Ship Inn. "[I]f half the town drank on the George Street Strip" Will Wiseman says, "the other half drank at the Ship Inn, and this half included everyone you knew, among whom, of course, was everyone you didn't want to see."<sup>103</sup> The Ship Inn is no "agonistic crucible" for a visitor, though. I can sit by myself and listen to Ron Hynes. The other patrons don't seem to be paying attention. I wonder why on earth not.

Is that you Atlantic blue  
My heart is as cold  
As you.<sup>104</sup>

Whenever they stop talking, though, I see the words catch their ears and rise to their lips. They know these songs by heart.

The critic on his ass. The pedestrian critic looking for wings. Rising up and moving out into the St. John's he has been reading and writing about, hoping that his making will be of some service to the writer, his readers and the city.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pelham Edgar, *Across My Path*. Introduction by Northrop Frye (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952), x.

<sup>2</sup>George Story, *People of the Landwash: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Melvin Baker, Helen Peters and Shannon Ryan (St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, Ltd., 1997), 102.

<sup>3</sup>*People of the Landwash*, 103.

<sup>4</sup>*People of the Landwash*, 109.

<sup>5</sup>For example: Frank Holden's play, *Judge Prowse Presiding* (1987) is dedicated to George Story and Story is one of those acknowledged in John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992). He is also thanked in Peter Neary and Patrick O'Flaherty's *By Great Waters: A Newfoundland and Labrador Anthology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974). The influence of *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English* is pervasive. The title of *The Blasty Bough*, an anthology edited by Clyde Rose (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1976), comes from it, as does Al Pittman's *The Boughwollen and Other Stories* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1984). Mary Dalton is writing a series of poems called "Songs For the Newfoundland Dictionary." E. Annie Proulx does not cite the *Dictionary*, but Stuart Pierson hears an undigested influence "on every page" of *The Shipping News*: "Proulx loves words, and especially she loves archaic words with abrupt consonants in them — stookawn, scuddy, tagged, peckled, squiddy, komatik, slindeer, sishy, glitch — all carefully gleaned from the *DNE*, where she has also found a few antiquated practices, such as the construction of a komatik ... and a few accounts of a regional linguistic variation within the province. But she does this rather mechanically, without taking into account the nature of the *DNE*, how it was compiled or how it stands in relation to how people speak." *Newfoundland Studies* 11,1 (1995), 142.

<sup>6</sup>*People of the Landwash*, 108.

<sup>7</sup>Patrick O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 187.

<sup>8</sup>G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin and J.D.A. Widdowson, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup>Robert Kroetsch, "A Conversation With Margaret Laurence" in Robert Kroetsch, James Bacque and Pierre Gravel, eds. *Creation* (Toronto: New Press, 1970), 63.

<sup>10</sup>"A Letter From James Reaney," *Black Moss Series*, 1976, 2,1: 7.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Bowdring, *The Night Season* (St. John's: Killick Press, Creative Publishers, 1997), 236.

<sup>12</sup>Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), 4.

<sup>13</sup>*Night Season*, 84.

<sup>14</sup>*Night Season*, 61.

<sup>15</sup>"Among School Children," W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1990.

<sup>16</sup>Paul Bowdring, *The Roncesvalles Pass*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1989.

<sup>17</sup>*Night Season*, 116.

<sup>18</sup>*Night Season*, vii.

<sup>19</sup>*Night Season*, 31.

<sup>20</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Stories and Other Writings*. Ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby; Preface by Andre Maurois (New York: New Directions, 1964), 57.

<sup>21</sup>*Night Season*, 28.

<sup>22</sup>*Night Season*, 29.

<sup>23</sup>*Night Season*, 114.

<sup>24</sup>*Roncesvalles Pass*, 7.

<sup>25</sup>*Roncesvalles Pass*, 112-113.

<sup>26</sup>*Night Season*, 180.

<sup>27</sup>*Roncesvalles Pass*, 127.

<sup>28</sup>*Roncesvalles Pass*, 111.

<sup>29</sup>*Night Season*, 22.

<sup>30</sup>*Night Season*, 194.

<sup>31</sup>Dennis Lee, "Poetry and Unknowing," Tim Lilburn, ed. *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews* (Kingston, Ontario: Quarry, 1995), 35.

<sup>32</sup>*Night Season*, 39.

<sup>33</sup>Tim Lilburn, "How to Be Here," *Poetry and Knowing*, 171.

<sup>34</sup>"How to Be Here," 163.

<sup>35</sup>*Night Season*, 129. Not an isolated observation. Of William Cormack's *Narrative of a Journey across the Island of Newfoundland in 1822*, for example, Patrick O'Flaherty says that "It dramatizes another human encounter with Newfoundland's inhospitable hinterland, indicating, in ways similar to Cartwright's *Journal*, that romantic sentiment, together with the stock phraseology about 'vistas,' 'sylvan scenery,' and 'heavenly objects' that accompanies it, seems singularly out of place in this still primitive 'frayed edge' of North America, where nature is more often a force to be confronted than a scene to be enjoyed." (*The Rock Observed*, 48).

<sup>36</sup>*Night Season*, 246.

<sup>37</sup>Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 70.

<sup>38</sup>*Night Season*, 89.

<sup>39</sup>Edward Chamberlin, "The Telling of Tales," *University of Toronto Bulletin*, 12 (1998), 12.

<sup>40</sup>*Night Season*, 42.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*. (New York: New Directions, 1960), 3.

<sup>42</sup>*Night Season*, 25.

<sup>43</sup>*Night Season*, 41.

<sup>44</sup>Rudy Wiebe, *A Discovery of Strangers*. (Toronto: Knopf, 1994),

<sup>45</sup>*Wisdom of the Desert*, 5.

<sup>46</sup>*Night Season*, 125.

<sup>47</sup>*Night Season*, 40.

<sup>48</sup>*Night Season*, 128.

<sup>49</sup>*Night Season*, 95.

<sup>50</sup>*Night Season*, 67.

<sup>51</sup>*Night Season*, 246.

<sup>52</sup>*Night Season*, 95.

<sup>53</sup>*Night Season*, 247.

<sup>54</sup>*Night Season*, 128.

<sup>55</sup>*Night Season*, 88.

<sup>56</sup>*Night Season*, 80.

<sup>57</sup>*Night Season*, 216.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>*Night Season*, 114.

<sup>60</sup>*Night Season*, 115.

<sup>61</sup>*Night Season*, 34.

<sup>62</sup>Don McKay, "Remembering Apparatus." Unpublished, 8.

<sup>63</sup>*Night Season*, 83.

<sup>64</sup>["As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame"], *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. Norman H. Mackenzie. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 141. No Hopkins, but Kate's kingfisher is *doing* what Hopkins says "each mortal thing" does:

Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;

Selves — goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells,

Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.* (*Poetical Works*, 141)

<sup>65</sup>"Remembering Apparatus," 13.

<sup>66</sup>*Night Season*, 155.

<sup>67</sup>*Night Season*, 155-6.

<sup>68</sup>*Night Season*, 20. Is there, in this passage, an echo of C.S. Lewis's conversion narrative, *Surprised by Joy: the shape of my early life*. (London: Collins, 1959)?

<sup>69</sup>*Night Season*, 244-5.

<sup>70</sup>Ry Cooder et al., *Buena Vista Social Club*. A World Circuit Production (New York: Nonesuch Records, 1997), 3.

<sup>71</sup>*Night Season*, vii.

<sup>72</sup>Daphne Marlatt's *Readings From the Labyrinth*. (Edmonton: NeWest, 1998), 31. This is a book of "(revising) lesbian resistance to the already formulated" (203), especially to patriarchal ideology and method. Reading it while writing on *The Night Season*, I kept feeling that Bowdring's art is often compatible with Marlatt's theory. But one doesn't just up and shut, as though it were a door, the gap between Marlatt's outsider stance (imposed) and Bowdring/Will's (chosen). Feminist readers might well consider the absent Kate to be silenced in the time-honoured patriarchal way. Myself, I seem to hear her between the lines, trying to get through to Will, who admits he has become "solitary as a clam" (92). But there's no chinking up all openings to objection, no point in trying. Who wants difference to dissolve? Who wants an irreproachable text of pristine blandness? Still, I value male texts that are not programmatically Male, solitudes (after Rilke) that another might protect and touch and greet and, keeping a distance, be happy enough to share the world with.

<sup>73</sup>*Night Season*, 21.

<sup>74</sup>*Night Season*, 93.

<sup>75</sup>George Bowering, *Kerrisdale Elegies*. (Toronto: Coach House, 1984), 27.

<sup>76</sup>*Night Season*, 45.

<sup>77</sup>Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 113.

<sup>78</sup>*Night Season*, 3.

<sup>79</sup>*Night Season*, 4.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*



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<sup>81</sup>*Night Season*, 196.

<sup>82</sup>*Night Season*, 222.

<sup>83</sup>*Night Season*, 243.

<sup>84</sup>*Night Season*, 156.

<sup>85</sup>*Night Season*, 136.

<sup>86</sup>*Night Season*, 207.

<sup>87</sup>*Night Season*, 208.

<sup>88</sup>*Night Season*, 11.

<sup>89</sup>*Night Season*, 243.

<sup>90</sup>*Night Season*, 137.

<sup>91</sup>*Night Season*, 208.

<sup>92</sup>*Night Season*, 213.

<sup>93</sup>“[I]t is a common assumption that Newfoundland is, in Kenneth Peacock’s words (*Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*, vol. 1. Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1965, xxv) “a distinctive, homogeneous, cultural entity — a *nation*; possibly the only true English-speaking *nation* left in North America.”” George Story, “Notes From a Berry Patch,” 108.

<sup>94</sup>St. John’s: Creative Publishers, 1984.

<sup>95</sup>Conversation with Gordon Rodgers.

<sup>96</sup>“For many years, in books now happily forgotten, I tried to copy down the flavor, the essence of the outlying suburbs of Buenos Aires.... Then, about a year ago, I wrote a story called “*La muerte y la brujula*” (“Death and the Compass”), which is a kind of nightmare, a nightmare in which there are elements of Buenos Aires, deformed by the horror of the nightmare.... [W]hen this story was published, my friends told me that at last they had found in what I wrote the flavor of the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Precisely because I had not set out to find that flavor, because I had abandoned myself to a dream, I was able to accomplish, after so many years, what I had previously sought in vain.” “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” *Labyrinths*, (181-2).

<sup>97</sup>Dunvegan, Ontario: Cormorant, 1996; Toronto: Anansi, 1997; St. John’s: Killick Press, Creative Publishers, 1995.

<sup>98</sup>Jennifer Pohl, “Night Scenes: Recent Work.” RCA Gallery, LSPU Hall, St. John’s, Newfoundland, January 11<sup>th</sup> - February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

<sup>99</sup>*Night Season*, 92.

<sup>100</sup>*Night Season*, 15.

<sup>101</sup>“Vain Deceit,” *TickleAce* 33 (Spring/Summer 1997), 96-113.

<sup>102</sup>*Cryer’s Paradise*.

<sup>103</sup>*Night Season*, 239.

<sup>104</sup>*Cryer’s Paradise*.