

# Dreaming Backwards: Agnes Walsh's In the Old Country of My Heart.

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Dreaming Backwards: Agnes Walsh's *In the Old Country of My Heart*<sup>1</sup>

STANLEY DRAGLAND

While the West saw Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and colour, and Europe simply as a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia.

Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*<sup>2</sup>

Attention is a task we share, you and I. To keep attention strong means to keep it from settling.

Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*<sup>3</sup>

JEANETTE LYNES ASKS Agnes Walsh if she considers herself a regional writer. "I think about it more as 'place,' rather than 'region,'" she answers. "Maybe it's some of my anger that does that. If things are called 'regional,' then why isn't this place part of all that regional stuff they're always talking about, up there, you know, in Canada."<sup>4</sup> Until three years ago, when I spent ten months in Newfoundland, I had no idea that such anger existed here, though I might have had an inkling. I'd hear the Newfie jokes and I'd also hear The Great Eastern on CBC Radio. The dumb hick stereotype hardly squares with highly sophisticated parody, but I wasn't asking myself to square anything. I had no finer motive for moving temporarily to Newfoundland than seeking a change of scene. I intended to spend a sabbatical year

reading Indo-Canadian writing towards a graduate course to be offered when I returned to the University of Western Ontario.

This glosses over a rising but unfocused curiosity felt before we moved: *Gullages* on CBC TV, a terrific concert by Great Big Sea in Kingston, and — driving the Holleford Road between Thirteen Island Lake and Sydenham — Ron Hynes singing “Atlantic Blue” on CBC radio. Where on earth did it come from, that true poetry in song? Newfoundland, yes, but from what blue deeps of the heart? Call the song Newfoundland and its culture. The world doesn’t know it — yet. Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* has taught the world much of what it does know about Newfoundland, and some Newfoundlanders think it bogus.

Agnes Walsh: “There’s a part of me that has always felt so removed from Canada; I don’t call myself a Canadian. I can’t, in all honesty, do it. In some ways, I don’t give a good goddamn if they ever recognize us, because I feel more connected to Ireland, to Portugal, Iceland, Puerto Rico, writers from that area. Honest to god, if we all of a sudden drifted off, I’d never miss a single thing.”<sup>5</sup> I call myself a Canadian and now I live in Newfoundland. Now I know where “Atlantic Blue” comes from. It’s an elegy for the loss of the *Ocean Ranger* drilling platform in February 1982, the latest at the time in a long line of maritime triumphs and disasters that inform Newfoundland identity. “Atlantic Blue” is also one song in the important body of Ron Hynes’s musical poetry, and Ron Hynes is one of many Newfoundland songwriters with roots in a folk tradition centuries old on the island. So much meets in the one song, as it does also in the poetry of Agnes Walsh, and the song and the poetry are accomplished and compelling. Lack of recognition in Canada is a slight, yes, but also a shame. Good writing spills over national borders, of course, but as long as we’re using categories like “Canadian Literature” let’s embrace the whole field.

There has been no conspiracy to ignore. Conspiracy would be complimentary. No, Canadians — from Alberta, in my case, but with thirty years in Ontario — have plenty to pay attention to in our own regions. There’s no keeping pace with all developments in Canadian culture, not in a country so big. Or is that just an excuse? The fact is that I’ve spent thirty years teaching Canadian Literature in grave ignorance of Newfoundland which, for many of those years, would scarcely have been found on the literary map of Canada but for E.J. Pratt, and Pratt wrote mostly as a pan-Canadian. Now I know a little, just about enough to shut me up. Let those speak who know. But quitting the field out of a conviction of ignorance — the first step in knowing — would compound the oversight. Knowing is a process, a search, a verb. Knowing is perpetual work-in-progress. We never know enough to begin writing, and yet we do.

It’s not as though the cultural accomplishments of Newfoundlanders are universally recognized inside Newfoundland. There’s a lot of flailing at the place inside the place, a sign of colonial holdover. But one sure sign of post-colonial maturity is the high quality of some of the flailing, and the general quality of the

art proceeding from this underrated place. Everything I write about Newfoundland has a suspect edge of advocacy. I confess that up front, though I hope to achieve some objectivity by being suspicious of myself.

I also confess a tendency to spread out and away from the poetry of Agnes Walsh. I need to write my way towards it, then leap away from it once in awhile. I need to articulate what I'm learning about Newfoundland culture and I need to work with a certain insider-outsider tension between Newfoundlanders and others that I feel mainly as a boon, a creative discomfort. I never felt such tension in Ontario, even though moving there was what first confirmed my prairie identity. I never felt like a mainlander in Ontario — never heard the word there — not having looked at my place on the continent from an island off the edge of it. Ontario is a cultural sponge. It absorbs all sorts. In Newfoundland, outsider-dom is sometimes in your face. People from away, even passionate lovers of their adopted place, sometimes feel held at a distance — slight or great according to circumstances. Every now and then a chip may suddenly materialize on a shoulder. "I'd like to be a mainlander and have someone lick my ass," said a hitherto completely pleasant young man to my mainlander wife. This was not an invitation. He was angry about his lack of success in an academic competition that reserved some places for candidates from away.

I never got *my* ass licked, but what's the point of protesting that? Moving here means taking on something of the long history of marginalization and deprivation and mockery that such venom occasionally spits out of. It means sometimes being the bad guy. Moving around this country, you could get used to that. At my twenty-year high school reunion in Oyen, Alberta, my former classmates blamed me, now an Ontarian in their eyes, for Pierre Trudeau. A heavy responsibility. I often hear mainlanders in St. John's public meetings preface their remarks with a preemptive confession: yes, I'm not from here. You can tell that as soon as I open my mouth. But my place is here now, and I love it here, and I hope you'll give me a listen. Mainlanders in Newfoundland have to work harder. Complacency is always beyond their reach. That gift of an exile's perspective is sometimes hard to appreciate.

But it *is* a gift, this taste of exile in my own country, a gift of the defamiliarization that gets thinking started. One thing that's unsettled is my sense of audience for writing like this. I want to reach outsiders who don't know much about Newfoundland and need a lot explained, but I'm also writing for insiders who don't want to be told what they already know, especially not by a mainlander and a greenhorn at that. I have to avoid puzzling in the one direction and patronizing in the other. But never mind the hazards. Single vision is always to be resisted. Accepting the nationhood of Newfoundland, I don't repudiate Canada — my own difficult country — but I don't want the nations within it dissolving into homogeneity.

But chauvinism is not the answer. I have no use for the jingoistic side of Newfoundland nationalism, and I'm not alone. Many Newfoundlanders are racked between love and distaste for their place and its society and by no means lack perspective on it. Wayne Johnston has chosen not to live in the place he never thinks of "with anything but love"<sup>6</sup> but love doesn't block his irony:

Because of its climate and geography, Newfoundland is ideally suited for the production of alcoholics, royal commissions, snow, unsolvable enigmas, self-pity, mosquitoes and black flies, inferiority complexes, delusions of grandeur, savage irony, impotent malice, unwarranted optimism, entirely justified despair, tall tales, pipe dreams, cannon fodder, children who bear an unnatural resemblance to their grandparents, expatriates.<sup>7</sup>

Why do I delight in this? Why doesn't the palpable bitterness in it bring me down? For one thing, I love the way this sentence emerges from its context.

Johnston's father began his working life as an Experimental Farm agriculturalist under a mainlander afflicted with a typical imperialist syndrome, ignorance masked by ignorance: he little knew how little he knew of local conditions. To counteract the (experience-based<sup>8</sup>) resistance of Newfoundlanders to agricultural experiment, this man's motto for those toiling under him is "to see as their mandate the completion of this sentence: 'Because of its climate and geography, Newfoundland is ideally suited for the production of ....'"<sup>9</sup> Johnston's completion wittily folds that ignorance in. And then his list is not all negative. I like snow, unsolvable enigmas and tall tales. I'll bet Johnston does too. Like me, he may even have a soft spot for optimism, however unwarranted, and another for pipe dreams — though if the pipe dreamer or his patron is Joseph Smallwood the economy goes to hell. Even the dismal stuff in the list shows me that the expatriate who writes this sentence is in love with his subject, his place of birth. He is buffeted by it, wrenched by it this way and that. He is inside and outside at once. In a single fascinating sentence he makes Newfoundland fascinating to me. Good writing, no matter how dark or bitter the subject, dignifies the place.

The best of Newfoundland writing now stands with the best elsewhere. I don't hear people saying that very much. I often hear mainlanders and Europeans dismissing the local product in terms that make me wonder how they and I can be observing the same thing. I sometimes hear locals making harsh judgements of their Newfoundland contemporaries and wonder about the motivation. High standards? Nothing local to be esteemed for sentimental reasons? I think so, but there's also a whiff of determination not to be provincial. The sophisticate places herself above everything crude, limited, backwater, inferior — roughly two thirds of experience. Colonials are especially vulnerable to that disease and carry it long after most of the symptoms are gone. Well, I started teaching Canadian Literature in 1970 when arguments for its worth, even its validity as a field, were anything but won. I seem

to recognize in Newfoundland a familiar gap between accomplishment and recognition. I liked being in that gap before. I felt part of something important, worth working for, with very little of the drag of habit and orthodoxy that settles over a cultivated field. So here is Agnes Walsh's poetry with nothing but a few reviews to greet it, and here I go again. I often go with the Canadian literary context Walsh turns away from. It's what I know best, and may be overdetermined for that reason, but I refer to nothing that Walsh's poetry hasn't made me think of. Turning her back on what appears to turn its back on her, she might be missing a community worth making common cause with.

1

My thinking in this essay began with a conversation about Halldór Laxness. Agnes Walsh and I discovered that we both loved his novel *Independent People*. I'd found it in my high school library and never met anyone else (other than a few Canadian Icelanders) who'd so much as heard of it, even though Laxness was a Nobel Prize winner in 1955. Agnes was way ahead of me. She'd read most of Laxness and was, in fact, working on a stage version of *The Atom Station*. She told about being so fascinated with Laxness and his writing that she decided to try reaching him by phone in 1983, just to see if he was okay. That was part of what fascinated me — this quiet, determined woman up and calling Iceland on a whim of her heart. The other part fascinated both of us. It was what she learned about Laxness' fit in his community, learned it without ever speaking to the man himself. I wanted to do something with this story and I did, but I'll keep it to myself now that I have Agnes's own account, offered in response to my lame version. Hers came by way of e-mail, all in lower case.

hi stan, i'm taking your page 114 and i'm playing around with it. not because there's anything wrong with it but because it got me interested in thinking back over it all again. here goes a bit of fun. it's just my own fun. it does not mean that i think you should change a thing. i dial the info operator number and a woman answers in what i assume is icelandic but it sounds a bit like english too. i say i am looking for a phone number for a mr. halldór laxness, a writer from there who probably lives in reykjavik or has an office number at the university. she cuts me off with yes, yes, of course mr. laxness, but he isn't at the university any longer. he has retired, he is an old man. oh, i say, surprised at the stream of information, is he well known then in iceland, i ask. well, yes, of course, everyone knows him here, she tells me. i see, i say. i didn't know at the time that everyone in iceland reads everything. perhaps i'll take his home phone number then i say. all right, hold a moment, i have it right here.... ah, but that's right, she says, he isn't home now, he's in bangkok at a world peace conference. but i'll give you his number and you can try him next week. i took it knowing i would never

call. six months later i dial the icelandic info operator again and ask for his phone number, although i haven't lost it. the operator gives it to me. i ask if he is in the country. yes, she says, she thinks so. i ask how old mr. laxness is, if she knows. she pauses, says, let me see, one moment. i hear her speak in icelandic. i hear several voices with questioning intonations. she comes back and says, we think eighty-five. ah, i say, and do you know if his health is ok. oh yes, she assures me, he is very active, travels a lot. good i say. I tell her i am calling from nfld and that he is a favorite writer of mine. i ask if she likes his work. oh yes, he is an important writer for the icelandic people. yes, i say and i thank her. i called back about twice a year for some years to check on him. i used to imagine the operators would check in on him after their shift. probably discuss something in one of his novels, but that was taking it too far. when i read a few years ago that he had passed away i couldn't help but think about the operators. love, ag<sup>10</sup>

2

The me who rises to this story is not the one who feels that being outside is natural and even welcome for the sake of critical edge; no, it's the me who believes in community, and moreover, in a community that values its artists. That one envies Halldór Laxness his oneness with his audience. I may be wrong, but I can't see the operators at Bell or NewTel discussing Margaret Atwood or Wayne Johnston on their breaks. The Agnes Walsh who is "surprised at the stream of information" about Laxness has also had her doubts, her regrets, on this score. She wrote them down in "Percy Janes Boarding the Bus."

Percy who?

Percy Janes is revered by Newfoundland writers because he broke the ground, because he wrote *House of Hate*, a flinty novel so uncompromising in its depiction of a dysfunctional Western Newfoundland family, and its narrator so given to writing that family large, that an island nation apprehensive about negative self-image might well repudiate it.

Poverty, and its siamese twin ignorance, must have caused [my father] endless humiliations of spirit long before he was a man, and bred in him that profound modesty which is such a distinguishing mark of our people as a whole that it amounts to an island-wide inferiority complex. Emotional constriction — and from such causes — has always been a well-known feature of Newfoundland life.<sup>11</sup>

Is it or isn't it? Thirty-five years after *House of Hate* was published, the debate goes on. Newfoundland is ideally suited to the production of inferiority complexes, according to Wayne Johnston — along with delusions of grandeur. Right or wrong — and novels are not arguments, as novelists are not boomers for tourism — Janes

had the tough-mindedness to tell the story *he* knew and the art to make it stick. And his characters speak Newfoundland English, even though his narrator, in standard English, patronizes the dialect as “the local *patois* which our family speech had hammered down from the Irish and West Country of our heritage and the gobbled syntax of unlettered Newfoundlanders.”<sup>12</sup> The Writers’ Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador has posthumously recognized Percy Janes with an annual prize for the best unpublished novel of the year; Agnes Walsh’s poem about him in *In the Old Country of My Heart* suggests that he is nobody to Newfoundland society at large. This is the whole poem:

I was going to the Mall for a kettle  
waiting on the number five,  
when the number something-or-other  
pulled up.

I was looking past it for mine,  
when I saw him, an arm raised,  
running softly.

I jumped to life, beat on the bus door,  
said to the driver: “Mr. Janes,  
Mr. Percy Janes wants to get on.”

He raised a “So what?” eyebrow.

Mr. Janes straightened his astrakhan hat,  
mumbled thank you and stepped up.  
As the bus rumbled on  
I continued under my breath:  
“Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Percy Janes,  
Newfoundland writer, poet,  
just boarded the number something-or-other.”

If this was Portugal  
a plaque would be placed  
over the seat where he sat.

As it is, you have me  
mumbling in the street  
like a tourist in my own country.<sup>13</sup>

Agnes Walsh discussed Halldór Laxness with Icelandic telephone operators for years without hearing “so what?” Her poem about drawing a blank with the name of Percy Janes is humorously wry. The resignation in it — poet reduced to



mumbling — increases its power as cultural statement. How can you feel at home in a country that doesn't honour its literary pioneers, especially when you're a writer yourself?

It's hard to reconcile that alienation with Richard Gwyn's assessment of the artist's place in today's Newfoundland. I do like his argument in *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary* that Newfoundland's artists are Smallwood's inheritors: "For three decades, Smallwood was Newfoundland, so far as the rest of the world was concerned. Today, for most outsiders, it is the society's artists who *are* Newfoundland."<sup>14</sup> I like this more than I believe it, ignorant outsider that I was and in many ways remain. Here is something even harder to accept, except as hyperbolic wish: "The quality that defines Newfoundland artists is their overpowering sense of place, which in turn gives them the particular self-confidence that comes from knowing that they and their audience are one."<sup>15</sup> Maybe Agnes Walsh was addressing the only St. John's bus driver unfamiliar with Percy Janes. Maybe the driver was actually a Janes buff and merely offended by the suggestion that fame deserves privilege. Well, I'm not about to argue with Walsh's poem because of Gwyn — who is not, in fact, wrong, just too general, too rhapsodic. Presenting her Cape Shore plays to enthusiastic Cape Shore audiences, I'm sure Walsh knows exactly what Gwyn is talking about. But so much of her writing in *Old Country* is about hard struggle to find the local and then to write it that it shatters the image of Smallwood's mantle descending on the artists of the country he made into a province. As far as Walsh is concerned, that transformation never even took.

Agnes Walsh's image in *Old Country* for an organic national sensibility in matters literary is not Iceland, though Iceland and Halldór Laxness do come into the book. What she means in the Percy Janes poem by "if this was Portugal" is clarified by a quotation, a sort of buried epigraph (it appears on page 16), in which another Nobel Prize winner, the Portuguese novelist José Saramago, speaks of his identification with Portugal. "I like this country," Saramago says.

I have never thought this country insignificant even compared with others. It is my country, not for the simple reason that I was born here. It's very much simpler than that. Everything I am and was, my very understanding of the world, all that I did, for good or ill, positive or negative, worthwhile or mediocre, was here.<sup>16</sup>

This cuts more than one way for Walsh. For one thing, she loves Portugal too. She fell in love with the people, the language, the music brought to St. John's by the sailors of the Portuguese White Fleet. In the interview with Jeanette Lynes she speaks of wanting to keep alive a Portuguese connection with Newfoundland that goes back "five hundred years or more" (153). In 1999, she contributed poetry to a Portuguese/Newfoundland programme performed by herself, Anita Best and Pamela Morgan, in Portugal as well as Toronto and St. John's. The Saramago quotation introduces four poems set in Portugal; another poem ardently imagines

the return to St. John's of the White Fleet; another mentions speaking "the Portuguese" with Jim Harris, a Placentia Bay sea captain immortalized in a song composed by Peter Leonard, a distant relative of Agnes Walsh. Portuguese words appear in yet other poems. The Saramago quotation is printed in Portuguese as well as English.

But beyond all that, Saramago might have been articulating Agnes Walsh's relationship with Newfoundland. Newfoundland, not Canada, is the "country" she is referring to. It's one of the old countries of her heart. The Percy Janes poem suggests that few Newfoundlanders pay attention to their literary icons. A poet relegated to the status of tourist is estranged from her fellow citizens. But the land, for those who love it, is more welcoming. Other poems in Walsh's book express a pure relationship with the land, Gwyn's "overpowering sense of place," especially the Cape Shore around the coast from Placentia where Agnes Walsh was brought up. This is "Angel's Cove":

A cove nearly abandoned,  
but there's haymakers cutting,  
arching into the wind and sky.

The hills roll down,  
down onto black rocks that stop the sea.  
The waves swell up, leap like geysers:  
liquid fireworks.

We're expecting a full moon any minute.  
I lie down on the soft worn rock,  
let the water push over me,  
feel love moving around the beach:

he, standing on the highest rock,  
throwing up his arms into the fury;  
she, bending forward gathering fuel,  
heaving bleached timber, eyeing the sky.

The hills never move. The grass stands  
straight for the scythers' swoosh.  
My body shifts to fit  
the rounded places in the rock.

I press my cheek into the smooth hardness,  
feel the world through the rock,  
feel love circling me, the centuries under me.<sup>17</sup>

This would be a lovely poem about belonging to the landwash, the edge where rock and ocean meet, even if there weren't something more, a sense that the speaker might be in the company of a couple from a time past. The hay cutting and driftwood gathering are activities of the ages. It feels as though the centuries are not just under her and not just behind her but alongside, as though time has mysteriously pleated. The centuries (past) are now. But even if the poem is not playing with time, the speaker is "fully earthed,"<sup>18</sup> fully one with the land and its history. Eve in Eden might happily have reclined on such a rock, the hard future of the race yet unglimped. But well-being, like alienation, are temporary lyric moods in the emotional gamut of *The Old Country of My Heart*. The book is anything but prelapsarian. Body fits rock in "Angel Cove." If the body and the mind could meet naturally in language that grew on the landwash, there might be a fit for the whole person. But things are no longer that simple.

## 3

In *Pop The Rivets*, Buddy Wasiname puts on a hilarious pseudo-Oxbridge accent to pontificate on Newfoundland dialect as translator of the quaint Newfoundland words and phrases that his colleagues introduce to the tune of "Miss McLeod's Reel." From the second last stanza: "Doutin boughs was too blasty cos da flankers was too tick." The translation:

Extinguishing those fires  
which flare suddenly and wild  
when fueled with boughs  
when tindered do allow  
great showers of sparks  
carried on the wind may start  
unwanted fires and thus  
are a very great dan-ger.<sup>19</sup>

Pedantic overkill has set the Prof. up for a fall. Now his colleagues hit him with this one: "Singing songs with arsos what haven't got a clue." The instruments carry on but the professor does not; the shit he was shovelling just hit the fan.

Buddy Wasiname and the Other Fellers often work with dialect, the so-called "gobbled" English of Percy Janes's *House of Hate*, dialect not uniform across the island, not that variations matter much to speakers of "superior" English like Buddy's Professor. But the pedant isn't always so ridiculous. He isn't always funny. In his role as teacher he stands for the colonizing force behind standard English. When Buddy Wasiname and the Other Fellers fool with serious material, humour shades into satire.

The assault on the dialect and accent of her youth is no laughing matter to Mary Dalton. Lamenting the loss, she reacts with recognition to First Nations writers whose native language was also savaged in the interests of civilizing them.<sup>20</sup> The result sounds to me like a fall into written language, with consequent chilling of story and song with roots in the dialect. It's very easy to idealize the past, and in so doing to give it a fullness it never had. There is no ideal state of being outside the imagination. But the imagination doesn't just invent the image of a mind continuous with its surroundings, a link between physical environment and populace, human and other — all my relations, the First Nations say — and the tales and songs of their surroundings. As Robert Bringhurst says of Haida mythtelling in *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, “the poems themselves were ecological components of the world they describe.”<sup>21</sup>

This coherence between myth and world has its expression in Newfoundland. John Steffler's fictional George Cartwright, looking at one of his men lost to the Labrador winter, realizes he has been prepared for the sad sight:

This was familiar too, Cartwright thought, looking at Jones's frozen face. It was out of a mixture of songs he'd heard his Fogo Island furriers sing, out of stories they'd told of things they'd seen and been told themselves. Acting on people the land created a body of lore, a system of plots like a second geography. And like rivers and coasts the lore combined to shape people's fates.<sup>22</sup>

In 1771 that lore may already have been in place, though awareness of it must be ascribed to the contemporary Steffler, inhabiting Cartwright, as the eras meet in this historical fiction. Is the body of literature now growing in Newfoundland a third body or merely the written aspect of the oral body of lore? The answer is complicated by the colonial lurch into subordination of the lore and all it's connected to.

Poetry and song, story in fiction or drama certainly do grow out of folk forms in Newfoundland, and when they do there is continuity across the centuries. But books like *In the Old Country of My Heart* are literary in origin. Agnes Walsh's technique is not derived from the oral; she didn't learn how to write free verse from listening to folk ballads — though she won a *TickleAce* prize for writing one.<sup>23</sup> Content more than form in *Old Country* acknowledges the “second geography.” Some writers are creating the body of Newfoundland literature almost in bitterness or guilt at having been torn from the body of lore.

In her essay “A Book to Break Spells,” Mary Dalton speaks both as poet and professor of English at Memorial University of Newfoundland. In both roles she is “biblioholic, a book-child,”<sup>24</sup> just as sensible of what her education gained her as what it tore her from. Like all educated post-colonials, upgraded Eliza Dolittles everywhere, she excels in the colonizer's language. Complicit with it, she still

yearns for her own tongue — and is delighted to find it in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. This paradox of a book

has power to break the spell of books, to give back the key to the place of the singing spoken word. The book with its choir of voices reaffirms the living energies of Newfoundland speech, the rhythms and idioms of speech and story and song that have been muted by school, by books, by television — by all the forces that conspire to make lively ghosts of us.<sup>25</sup>

Lively ghosts walk and talk but do not think, not as individuals. They are consumers, interchangeable with other human units anywhere in the multi-national world. For Newfoundlanders like Dalton, writing their own language assuages phantom pain, limbs of language lost by involuntary actors in a very old story of winners and losers in undeclared cultural wars.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4

Agnes Walsh's poems are about places, people, relationships. Many of them are love poems of guarded intensity; others verge on polemic about fading knowledge of Newfoundland, the urgent need to recover what was, to foster what is now and should be in the nation's future. The book looks like a miscellany and it is: a gathering of poems on a variety of subjects in a variety of forms, from free verse to prose poem to brief narrative. Overall design doesn't leap out, but a sense of deep coherence grows on you. None of the poems is unrelated to another. Together they build a verbal community with staying power.

One thread that links everything — really several interwoven strands — is language. The speaker of these poems is often wondering about how words relate to her experience. She is a lover of spoken words, words anything but abstract — alive rather, malleable, metamorphic in their possibilities. She is a lover also of the written word. Her book has several homages to other writers and quotations from others yet. It's dedicated to Thomas Joseph James Bonfiglio III, an American serviceman stationed at Placentia, who shared and fostered the fifteen year old Walsh's love of poetry. With her own words, her own writing, she has a love-hate relationship. There is this recurrent sense of wrestling with words, sometimes losing to the weight and inertia of accumulated meaning, sometimes managing to twist meanings her own way. But always there is the conviction, whether the poet can work them or not, that words are alive. They are sensuous bodies. This is especially so in memories of childhood, before the split of thinking and feeling, before time was thought of,<sup>27</sup> before *thought* showed up on the mind's agenda. This is the time of myth, of identity as harmony, a plentitude we're born to lose. Tim Lilburn calls

it “the old residue of Paradise, that amicable common life desire seems to remember, the old bone it never quits gnawing.”<sup>28</sup> If some of Agnes Walsh’s poems remember that plenitude it must be very tenacious indeed, because she just as often writes about loss, care, urgency, impatience, “aloneness.” The thing to watch, though, is the behaviour of the poems. Whatever overt theme they seem to be carrying, their language is instinct with shift. It won’t hold still. Far more significant than any assertion that Newfoundland history is being lost is the implicit demonstration of how it might be carried back into being: in language too much alive and present to be at the service of a mere message, in language whose physicality is that of a body.

That woman mumbling about Percy Janes at the end of Agnes Walsh’s poem — she’s a reader first, and only secondarily a writer. The plea for recognition is not self-interested. You sense from Agnes Walsh’s book that she would be happier simply *being*, as in “Angel’s Cove,” than being a spokesperson for her time and place, her culture. Self-appointed spokespersons tend not to be mumblers; they tend to be loud. Agnes Walsh does have her ranting voice. Reluctantly or not, she accepts a public role, speaking against ignorance of Newfoundland and setting her own remedial course. Newfoundlanders didn’t just mislay their own culture. That bus driver probably had no officially-sanctioned way of learning about Percy Janes. *In the Old Country of My Heart* opens naming the problem and closes still grappling with it. Both “The Time that Passes” and “Oderin,” the first poem and the last, are fierce laments for what is lost or being lost. Framing the volume, these poems place all the rest under suspicion of contributing to a politics, a cultural activism of retrieval.

“I hold onto before,” says the speaker of “The Time that Passes,”

before our  
tongues were twisted around corrected speech.

...  
I ranted that we’re educated into ignorance,  
but can get jobs on the mainland  
or at radio stations,  
our voices do sound so homogeneous now.<sup>29</sup>

The time in this poem is passing between mother and daughter. Their relationship is the main subject. Out of the honest edge in this mother-daughter relationship, both parties sharply inclined to speak their minds, comes first the rant and then the reply:

But you watch it, my mother said,  
it’s your tongue too that was dipped  
in the blue ink, and do go leaking iambs  
all the day long.<sup>30</sup>

Agnes Walsh Sr. has a point. Even in her daughter's rant about homogeneity, the only non-standard sentence is the one with an extra bit on the verb: "do sound." That mere touch of Newfoundland voice shows up in the mother's retort; "do," now in "do go," connects the generations. But the mother's words are the vivid ones. Her daughter admits as much in giving up the last word. That is both a silent acceptance of rebuke and an admission of the split in herself. Poems to come in the book are themselves open in that good humoured spirit. Tongue dipped in the blue ink? Leaking iambics? Phrases as intelligent as they are striking. Iambics, the basic feet of English speech, the tongue become a pen. This is a wonderful push into the poems to come, because the tongue as organ (of taste, of speech) will be wagging in it, and the poet's pen will be caught composing.

There's more to say about "The Time that Passes," especially about time and its passing in the poem, but a leap to "Oderin" shows Walsh still holding onto "before," the past of her immediate and extended family. Here is the last of four sections, the last words of *In the Old Country of My Heart*:

I sit on the fish stage at the splitting table  
 intent on writing, on making a history.  
 Young Phonse bounced up and said: Well, that's a first.  
 Writing on 200 years of fish guts, blood and guts,  
 guts and tears. No fish no more, my girl, my own.

Into the wind the anchor flies and sounds the deep.  
 A lonely fish eye gleams up,  
 meeting dreamy me still going backwards  
 into sunken oaken bottoms, into islands without end.

I tell you there is not enough time  
 to understand all I need to know.<sup>31</sup>

Time is not always gentle in its passing. Here and there in her book, Walsh seems comfortable *in* time, but never *with* time because of this sense of truncation, of loss, time passing without trace, without becoming history. The old ways and scenes are passing — as they will and must; change in itself is not the enemy — before finding a compromised permanence in writing.

The end of "Oderin" contains Newfoundland's most painful loss. Most Newfoundlanders know their colonial origin in cod, Giovanni Caboto having claimed the island for England because of it. They know of the time when the cod were so plentiful that it seemed you could walk on them. You had only to let down baskets off your ship and haul them in. The supply seemed inexhaustible well into the present century. Not that jigging and making the fish was easy: hauling those huge fish into and out of the boats, up to the splitting tables, splitting, salting, hauling out to the drying stages. Bernice Morgan's *Random Passage* eloquently dramatizes

this arduous business. Phonse's "blood and guts, guts and tears" appropriately links the fish with the people who laboured in the fishery.<sup>32</sup> When the federal government declared the moratorium on Northern Cod fishing on July 2, 1992, it was curtailing not just two hundred years of history on Oderin but at least five hundred years since Cabot, not to mention a Basque fishery stretching further back. Much more than jobs were lost. A way of life was lost, as on the western Plains when the buffalo disappeared.

The splitting table was never meant for a desk. It serves as a desk only when there are no more cod to split. "No fish no more, my girl, my own." As the book ends, it's clear both that writing is no substitute for a fishery and also that writing is crucial, a tool of understanding as well as recording. The last two lines reveal why the writer is so "intent" on her work. Especially if you arrive at this poem by way of all the others in the book, you feel that her writing is no indulgence; it's a thinking and a making, a dreaming backward that is personal and public at once. If the fishery is lost, if Walsh's own people are lost without record, the tragedy is double.

Is the poem we're reading what is being written on that splitting table? Possibly, though Agnes Walsh seems less to be "making a history" in the poem than remarking on the need for it. History as record of events is not Agnes Walsh's sphere. History as story is. With Paul Rowe she has written "Answer Me Home" (1999), and (on her own) "To The City of Point Lance" (2000), and "A Man You Don't Meet Every Day" (2000), yet-unpublished plays full of local stories drawing on her own research and that of others into Cape Shore history. She has encouraged Ernestine Power, the mayor of St. Bride's, to gather into the St. Bride's Library the scattered archive of Cape Shore oral history, and to re-establish the dormant folk arts association initially established in 1980. She has also initiated a series of performances involving Cape Shore and St. John's artists, to join outport and metropolitan centre as she links the present and the past. This is cultural work, and it's political in the ascription of depth and texture and worth — centrality — to an ostensibly out-of-the-way region of a so-called isolated island. Cultural activism is resistance: "I think through the past is how we learn to move ahead without snowballing, and getting so much into the technology that we forget where we came from and what we are."<sup>33</sup>

"Not enough time," "snowballing." Agnes Walsh may not be writing in "Oderin" about her writing of "Oderin," but the poetry as much as the drama is a project of planting Newfoundland's past in minds where it can grow and be carried into the future, as it is in novels like those of Halldór Laxness. If his characters are true to the people of modern Iceland, then those people are living the ancient sagas still — and the sagas are so real, if elliptical, that a couple of them map the way from Iceland to Newfoundland by way of Greenland and Labrador.

It's not History, capital H, that Agnes Walsh is writing about, but "a history." She is consistent in her use of the indefinite article before the word, as in "Night in



the Ashes” where “shell-shocked veterans” “twitched and stuttered a history.”<sup>34</sup> This is history as fragment, version, one voice in a polyphony. It’s the past as particular and plural, not general and definitive, certainly not “official.” She will write “a history,” and she will *make* it. The verb “making” carries the sense of creating, composing, rather than so-called objective recording (another layer: the splitting table will have been used in “making” the fish). Acknowledging her own effect on what she makes and the provisionality of the thing made, she is on common ground with theorists of history like Hayden White, who calls “historical narratives” “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those of the sciences.”<sup>35</sup>

But there is a difference between making and making it up. “Oderin” comes out of a sort of field trip into the past of the island settlement in Placentia Bay where Walsh’s mother was born. The search parallels Bernice Morgan’s for the personal Newfoundland past that poured into *Random Passage* and *Waiting for Time*. Not finding her own story anywhere, Morgan had to make it herself. But first she had to create for herself the very role of writer, having “grown up in a place where there weren’t writers. I didn’t know anyone who did it. None of the books I had read had been written by Newfoundlanders,”<sup>36</sup> Books like Margaret Duley’s, which Morgan might have read, get lost in a society uninteresting to others and uninterested in itself.

Vanished books don’t nourish literary culture. Margaret Laurence quotes “Roblin Mills Circa 1842,” Al Purdy’s poem about ancestors, as epigraph for *The Diviners*: “but they had their being once/ and left a place to stand on.”<sup>37</sup> This acknowledges both the pioneers behind the characters in Laurence’s novel and a pioneering writer. Life lived and then re-lived in art make a place to stand on with more than legs. Forgotten ancestors leave nothing. In the spirit of such dual homage, Agnes Walsh writes “Percy Janes Boarding the Bus” and “For Bernice Morgan After Reading *Random Passage* and *Waiting for Time*.”

The Morgan poem is about links to the past, some of which give Agnes Walsh new ways of seeing present-day St. John’s in terms of “a history” of its formation. Morgan’s novels also turn Walsh into her own past, her own links between now and then:

But even now the taste of moist blueberries  
cool in my mouth links me,  
and the odd turr smelling up the kitchen links me.  
And yes, some uppity merchant’s daughter,  
bragging and proud of her heritage, links me,  
in that it turns me —  
reminds me of how far we still have to go.<sup>38</sup>

That turn, that reminder, is torque. It powers the long journey ahead, paradoxically into the past, into what Patrick O’Flaherty calls “the real history, that of the common people.”<sup>39</sup> There is no privilege in Agnes Walsh’s background. In the Placentia of her youth, the way was always made smoother for the merchants’ children. Her own family’s circumstances were not desperate in the 1950s (her father had steady work at the American base), but the “link” through Bernice Morgan is with a history of real hardship, endurance and economic subservience. The people who settle at Cape Random (the characters in Morgan’s novels) live under the “truck” system by which the merchant exchanges the fish they make for credit at his store. It’s a system familiar to those who know the paternalistic, controlling role of the Hudson’s Bay Company in the lives of First Nations. The only reason the lives of Cape Random people aren’t more grinding is that the merchant’s local agent interprets his role liberally.

Reading Bernice Morgan is a pleasure, but it’s also a reveille for Agnes Walsh. The end of the Morgan poem is impatient, as restless as that of “Oderin.” So much history to absorb, so little time. Restlessness is in fact one of the key notes of *In The Old Country of My Heart*—restless seeking to understand and record a rapidly disappearing past, a seeking paradoxically crossed, especially in the love poems, with an embrace of solitude and a need to stay free of encumbrance. Like those she salutes, Walsh is an artist who has something to give her own people *because*, loving them or not, she keeps a distance. Threading “private” love poems through a book that all but announces a public or community mandate is itself an act of independence. This drive to privacy also places Walsh at the print end of a continuum between oral and literate culture, the communal and the private.

## 5

One of the epigraphs to Mary Dalton’s first book of poems, *The Time of Icicles* (from Harold Bloom’s *The Flight to Lucifer*) underlines the need for a propulsive Newfoundland history: “The aim must be to gain a past from which we might spring, rather than that from which we seemed to derive.”<sup>40</sup> The past is the past, so Bloom’s narrator must be thinking of the difference between passive and active approaches to it. An active approach would involve more than remembering; it might mean *making* history in art. “Before,” alive in words, can pivot a people into the future.

[T]he history of our writing and thought, fully as much as any other kind of history, must be claimed if it is not to be lost, and ... the only way to make that claim is to actively put that history to use. If as a culture, as a society, we find no consensus on a single tradition that marks our heritage and discloses our alignments and misalignments, then it is up to each of us — *bricoleurs* — to make our own; not, however, in

our own name but in the name of whatever socius for which we wish to stand. (Charles Bernstein on Stanley Cavell.)<sup>41</sup>

Newfoundland history has not been taught in high school for decades, and its rich folk culture has too often been patronized. There are obstacles to widespread claiming. Hence the need for passionate projects of recovery by artist and historian alike. The white-hot intensity that *makes* a history is both cause and by-product of any struggle for post-coloniality.

6

The obvious context for Agnes Walsh's work may not be Canadian writing, but her anger has echoes everywhere outside central Canada. I hear it in Rudy Wiebe, for example, a man who grew up in the Canadian West as ignorant of local history as anybody in Newfoundland. The history he speaks of in his essay "On the Trail of Big Bear," is that of the Cree who once occupied the land his father homesteaded:

Of course, thanks to our education system, I had been deprived of this knowledge when I was a child: we studied people with *history* — like Cromwell who removed a king's head, or Lincoln who freed slaves — but I can see now that this neglect contained an ambiguous good. For in forcing me to discover the past of my place on my own as an adult, my public school inadvertently roused an anger in me which has ever since given an impetus to my writing which I trust it will never lose. *All* people have history. The stories we tell of our past are by no means merely words: they are meaning and life to us as *people*, as a *particular* people; the stories are there, and if we do not know of them we are simply, like animals, memory ignorant, and the less are we people.<sup>42</sup>

Wiebe's anger has driven a distinguished career as writer, principally of fiction, much of it on aboriginal subjects. *The Temptations of Big Bear* is an historical epic, and an elegy which moves inexorably to this sentence about Big Bear, his nation and his people conquered: "[His] heart staggered for the great goodness now gone, gone altogether."<sup>43</sup> Big Bear's whole way of life, his very understanding of the world, all that he did, for good or ill, positive or negative, worthwhile or mediocre, has collided in Wiebe's novel with another way of life and the other way has prevailed. Since the other sees itself (without self-examination) as custodian of Truth, respectful coexistence was never an option. This is not the story of Newfoundland, though there is parallel enough to start the heart racing. History that *lives* will do that.

One of Dennis Lee's life-projects, as he puts it in a poem, "The Death of Harold Laddoo," has been to *make* a country out of Canada.<sup>44</sup> Of his time with Anansi Publishing House he writes,

For eight straight years of crud in public places  
We worked to incite a country to belong to.<sup>45</sup>

Canada had been a state for over a century by this time, so it's not the technicality of nationhood he has in mind; it's the soul. It's what Yeats wanted for Ireland. To catch a country's soul is to tell its stories, create its icons, and in enough versions to spark some fire of controversy, enough to reflect the fact that history and identity are braided of many strands.<sup>46</sup> The nation passes into art, layers of art. In ancient countries this process is gradual; in colonial countries it tends to need forcing.

"Civil Elegies," *pro patria*, is a long poem in nine parts that traces the movement of one man's mind from alienation in a country of unrooted ancestor-ghosts (Lee calls them "furies") to a tentative purchase on how to be, in himself and in his nation, his society, flawed though it is and will remain. The travel from alienation to identity, like the gap between Bloom's past as weight and past as propulsion, is at once minuscule and immense. The deepest answers often look simple once you've waded through a labyrinth to find them. "Civil Elegies" is a labyrinth of thought. Like *The Temptations of Big Bear*, it must be experienced whole for the gravity of its earned understanding to be felt, but the understanding does have a plain side: to lay those ghosts, to root those rootless ancestors, it's necessary to live their lives through to some sort of conclusion, to take them on, to *claim* them, the bad with the good. "And I must learn to live it all again," Lee writes, "depart again —

the storm-wracked crossing, the nervous descent, the barren wintry land,  
and clearing a life in the place where I belong, re-entry  
to bare familiar streets, first sight of coffee mugs,  
reconnaissance of trees, of jobs done well or badly,  
flashes of workaday people abusing their power,  
abusing their lives, hung up, sold out, wrenched out of whack  
by the steady brunt of the continental breakdown —  
finding a place among the ones who live  
on earth somehow, sustained in fits and starts  
by the deep ache and presence and sometimes the joy of what is.<sup>47</sup>

A writer claims his or her past by taking it on, moving it inside, "living it all again," turning it out in words. Accepting this creative role gives some grip on the past, some means of interweaving past and present, of hazarding continuity. But it's not as though a writer ever gets caught up. Time will not be obliging the hardworking

artist with a time-out. The present will always be leaking into the present. “Everywhere transience is plunging into the depths of Being,” says Rainer Maria Rilke.

It is our task to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again, “invisibly,” inside us. We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible.<sup>48</sup>

7

Agnes Walsh is collecting in “Oderin” and other poems, trying to slow the process that leads to “history flattened out.”<sup>49</sup> She means something literal by that in the homage to Bernice Morgan — the paving over St. John’s Water St. cobblestone and the disappearance of the finger piers that berthed so many ships in days of heavier marine traffic — but the phrase also catches loss of detail, homogenization of difference in voices, places, people and events once alive and potentially still so inside us. In “The Sky is Always Young,” it’s clear that yesterday is already history, and that we even have the dubious privilege of watching today vanish:

I flick the stopwatch,  
am horrified at what seconds mean,  
the tenderness of time clicking,  
slipping when I never said ...  
Never looked close enough:  
a problem common to dreamers.<sup>50</sup>

How pleasant to dream — “Weather Moving” has a sense of well-being that folds in the motion of time:

Every night the sound of cars  
climbing the Cape Shore road  
reminds me of the stillness,  
my aloneness, and time passing.

I could not have dreamt this better....<sup>51</sup>

And how frightening to be so drawn to dream when all we love and all we are is slipping away as now ticks into then. Occasions pass, everything passes, no one ever greets a moment fully. No one ever looks hard enough. No one stops time. “My father so tiny in the bed,” says Agnes Walsh in an elegy for her parent. “Time stealing him from me.”<sup>52</sup>

“Oderin” is about looking for the past and finding it unsettled and unsettling. One thing that comes home to Walsh on the island is her mother’s life-long pain — abandoned by her own mother after her father’s death, embarking without choice on a life of orphanage that makes the folk tales of evil step-parents look naturalistic.<sup>53</sup> Oderin is alive with ancestor-furies:

Can I walk anywhere without voices?  
Although it is the voices I came here for.  
Now they cut too near the bone,  
too much inside the soundbone  
thump thumping into the blood.

And that other balance upset by coming here,  
kicking at sleeping dogs, turning over tired bones.  
These goddamn ghosts rattling under broad daylight.  
Knowing summer is short they  
shake their fists both day and night.

The hot potato tossed  
from one generation to the next,  
burned holes in my palms, left shoulders aching.  
I watched tranced by the cult of blood.<sup>54</sup>

“Everything I am and was,” says José Saramago, “my very understanding of the world, all that I did, for good or ill, positive or negative, worthwhile or mediocre, was here.” And, he might have added, adapting Whitman, I contain multitudes. I am the generations that meet in me. A mixed blessing, if blessing it is. Digging in the past is no romp when it unearths such pain. So why bother? Why not let it lie?

Carmelita McGrath’s *To the New World* is a defiant assertion of continuity between past and present, “a long chain of life stretching/ endlessly back and ahead,”<sup>55</sup> against the blanks of women whose lives have gone unrecorded. McGrath’s book is another unflinching encounter with hardship and pain. Better that than nothing, though, because nothing, absence, will haunt you. Ask adoptees if they’re ever free of parents they never knew. Real pain is preferable to phantom pain. Real pain is compost. We passionately gather the generations in us, dark or bright, for the generations to come, ourselves in them. Whether they like it or not. Sitting beside her son in the Placentia Library, Agnes Walsh realizes that he is freer than she is:

For him this place has no history,  
he sees no ghosts, smells no fear;  
dinosaurs are more interesting  
than my old stories.<sup>56</sup>

He is free of the drag of her past. Good. Nobody wants kids growing up in fear. Mind you, if grownups could ever really pass their experience to their kids (try telling that Icarus anything!), there would soon be no more change. Under the weight of too much understanding, life would seize up. We are coded to learn fundamental things, if at all, the hard way: for ourselves. We never learn anything once and for all. No wonder "*we don't own what we know.*"<sup>57</sup> Rilke isn't kidding. It may be that superhuman efforts of attention merely graze what is as a falling leaf brushes a rock. Is it false hope of lighting the present with the past that urges us? Is all our cultural effort simply to hold what ground we've gained — if that?

I think we *can* stand on "nothing." I think it's okay to hope. I believe the dinosaurs might at some point come home with deeper meaning to Patrick Savard-Walsh. Gone, they are his kin. Time will steal his mother from him. He will eventually want something of her history to hold. When he does, because she paid her human dues in fierce attention, her words will be there to read. Her Newfoundland, part of his, will be embedded in them. In the meantime, call me his stand-in. That's me alongside Agnes Walsh in the Placentia Library. For me too that place "has no history." I mean my own history is elsewhere. And yet Agnes Walsh has seized my attention, almost my obsession. I've spent months thinking and writing about her work. Thus a good writer may colonize a critic, a Newfoundlander may colonize a Canadian.

## 8

How is the past moved inside a writer and transformed into a semblance of itself freestanding in words? There is a good answer in what Agnes Walsh does with words and what she says about them, foregrounding her own writing, its materials, its functions, its limitations. Her answer to a question she never overtly poses — *how to make a history* — is dispersed throughout her book in the self-reflexive moves of poems which have nothing explicit to do with method. The brief answer is that language is a body. Its organs and its senses meet and touch the physical world in interchange. Reciprocally, the body has its own language, its languages. This is one meaning of Walsh's metaphoric technique. One simple way to go deeper is to read what her words do as well as what they say.

I want to be taken literally. "The brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important," says H.D. in a sentence quoted by Daphne Marlatt as epigraph of her book of prose poems, *Touch To My Tongue*.<sup>58</sup> It's comfortable to take that metaphorically. It defuses the bomb of meaning. Do the impossible: take it literally. The power of poetry explodes inside a reader who doesn't confuse the living word with mere terminology.

The mind is a body, its parts analogous to its other parts. Hands are eyes, feet may hear, when touch has parity with other senses, sight especially, that have become primary. Gravity keeps the feet almost always in contact with something, hands manipulate things.<sup>59</sup> Ask an athlete or a pianist or a fisherman or a boatbuilder what hands and feet know.<sup>60</sup> Ask what your own body tells. In post-operative release, Agnes Walsh's fisherman-father remembers his past with arms and hands:

I had walked into the hospital ward  
as he was coming up from under the anaesthetic.  
His arms stretched over his head tracing  
swift, definite movements in the air.

A voice behind me said: "Don't worry, love.  
He's mending sails, and then he's tacking home."  
I sat down by his bed, tranced as he was,  
my eyes following the fragile web of his fingers.<sup>61</sup>

This man's body has a mind of its own. Under sedation it speaks its own memory, which is the memory of sea-going generations. There is something deeply moving in the interpretation of those movements: the ship of a lifetime is heading for harbour. "He's tacking home" carries just a hint of a moving line from another elegy. "Look homeward angel now," says the speaker of Milton's "Lycidas," "weep no more./ For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead ...."<sup>62</sup>

The voice, though Walsh doesn't make this explicit, is that of Jim Harris, a seaman with a second life in song, revered in the Walsh household as the best captain in Placentia Bay. Jim Harris would certainly recognize nautical motions. That he was present to do so is one of those synchronicities that feed a craving for order. "In ordinary life," says Northrop Frye, "a coincidence is a piece of design for which we can find no practical use."<sup>63</sup> Mr. Walsh was regaining consciousness after a kidney operation in the Grace Hospital in St. John's. He was in decline at the time but wasn't to die until over a year later.

## 9

Words are words in *In the Old Country of My Heart* and also something other or more than words. In the first poem, the way to meaning is through the senses — touch, in this case:

The time that passes between my mother and me  
is more measured in what's not said,  
and plain words are felt like samplings of fabrics.<sup>64</sup>



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Words that are to be touched have texture, physicality. Given what I've said about the body, it fits that the word to be felt here is "body":

Body, she said, we never said body then,  
it was too bold, we said system:  
tell the doctor what part of your system hurts.<sup>65</sup>

When an abstract word like "system" has to stand for the general but more physical "body," "body" is a four-letter word. The need for euphemism suggests a deep-seated modesty and also denial of the physical<sup>66</sup> by a generation not intimate with Eros, the "limb-loosener."<sup>67</sup> Time has passed between the currency of the one word, "system," and that of the other, "body," so in themselves the two words layer different eras at the opening of poem and book. But the speaker of this poem is not weighing or choosing this word, that word. She is listening with her sense of touch:

I linger,  
hold on to the feel,  
the rub in the mind.<sup>68</sup>

Words leave palpable traces in this mind; in another poem, ears all but hear traces of someone in a landscape merely traversed:

Because I believe we all leave echoes  
in comforting hills  
and over the sides of cliffs  
I walk in search of a trace or whisper  
of you on the downs.<sup>69</sup>

In senses so impossibly sharpened, perception is preternatural. This is reaching out to experience with everything a person has, and then with more.

That touch word, "rub," appears deeper in *Old Country*, in "Library at Coimbra," a poem about one of the suffocating spaces that the book ventilates. The Coimbra (Portugal) library is not functioning like the new one at Placentia where Agnes Walsh and her son work side by side in the poem already mentioned. It's "a museum, a coffin guarded by antiquarians."<sup>70</sup> In that mausoleum Walsh can't do what is her habit and joy to do with words.

My fingers long to touch, to rub the past,  
smell the musty histories,  
roll the Iberian words on my tongue.<sup>71</sup>

Touch, smell, taste: this reading with the body reminds me of the way Maurice Sendak approached his first book, Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Sendak set the book up and looked at it for a long time. He felt it all over. He smelled the paper and even tested the binding with his teeth. Eventually, he even read it. That sensual wholeness is still present in the books Sendak makes as an adult.

Is this wholeness childlike? Agnes Walsh remembers responding to her world (as a child of about eight) in the title poem of her book, which faces "Library at Coimbra." It's a poem about longing for words as wings, "wanting/ that other world where words entranced me." The other world is the world in and of books, I'd say, though Walsh was thinking particularly about poetry.<sup>72</sup> The word "entranced" joins with "dream" and "dreaming," words in other poems about delighted mental drifting (also, a little more ominously, "tranced," in the sense of transfixed). But there is something other than escape in this childhood rooted in place: words are hinges joining the physical world and dreamed or created worlds in this body/mind, where word and thing are not divorced.

The taste of salt was a word.  
I licked it, named it, rolled it over, loved it.  
Then wind, then my ocean, my sky.

I spoke the world for myself  
my secret.<sup>73</sup>

When the adult who was this child makes a book that rails against the assault on her native tongue, the child with wide-open senses is still wide awake in her. Only an adult thinks to use the phrase "child's-eye view" which appears in "Signal Hill Melting," but the adult who does so is seeing like a child.

In the love poem called "again," three words are emphasized with italics: "*again*," "*never*" and "*more*." These charged words set the speaker to resonating. Single words ungoverned by syntax, they would be called "parts of speech" if they depended for meaning on their position in a sentence. In their dictionary meanings, "again" and "never" resist each other like equal opposites. One says stop, the other go. Between them, the two words encapsulate a drama of tension near the heart of Walsh's *Heart*. In that tension or turmoil, spaces that enclose or forces that fix and halt are countered by open spaces and thrust into new possibilities. "Possibility," associated with process, "perpetual motion,"<sup>74</sup> life, is a key word in the book. "Again" is a possibility word.

You say *more* and it sounds like  
again (and again)  
tastes like cream, feels like suede,  
pulls like tides, circles like your arms<sup>75</sup>

When the again-never stalemate is broken in the poem, with “more” thrown in on the side of “again,” the speaker falls into synaesthetic ecstasy. “More,” sensuously redefined, multiplied, blossoms with meaning. It gathers new associations inside the poem. In the mouth of a lover, the word pulses with waves of possibility. It generates five similes linking sensuous nouns and verbs throbbing with erotic relationship. “When I make a word do a lot of work like that,” says Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty, that exponent of the arbitrariness of words, their capacity to float any meaning at all, “I always pay it extra.”<sup>76</sup> There should be a bonus for “more” in Walsh’s poem, for a lot of work beyond the call of dictionary duty, semantic limits ignored in favour of playful linguistic possibility.

The play of non-sense is anything but foolish. Words carrying shades and tints of meaning, with increments of meaning beyond the logical, words engaging body and mind at once — surely this layered largeness, this multiple, textured perception, creates a lift. Doesn’t it mitigate the blind rush of time by moving us inside the flow but *with* open eyes?

## 10

Expanded meaning, expanded space. Layers of physical and psychic space. When “again” inflates a word into a small sensory world, it illustrates the manipulation of space in the poem preceding it. (Thus, with poem elaborating poem, the book itself expands.) Here is the whole of “St. Denis & Sherbrooke (n’existe pas): Making Landscapes”:

I engage the people around me  
to enlarge our world  
I’m not manipulating them  
but encompassing them into us  
to make them happy like me

I pull the canopy of air  
draw the world in closer,  
feel the space we create with words  
our excitement pushing through  
to unfold us<sup>77</sup>

Punctuation at a minimum; this *looks breezy*. Spaces in *Old Country* are typically animate and variable, not neutral. They expand or contract to the emotional atmosphere in them, and according to the effect of words on that atmosphere — at least in human interiors; the space around the planet is another matter. In the very title

of “The Sky is Always Young,” space (sky) and time (youth) meet beyond the sphere of human influence.

One of Walsh’s telescoping interiors is a kitchen, large enough for two small women, entered by a three hundred pound boarder, a “whale in a rain puddle.”<sup>78</sup> He is big, but, along with Captain Morgan (rum), he’s such good company that he actually enlarges and enlivens the space he occupies: “Then Alfred talked. The walls expanded, puffed out, and then breathed in when he raised his glass to his lips.”<sup>79</sup> Such good company that when he leaves for a new job, the kitchen suddenly shrinks. The very contents of that space respond to the change, and this is normal in Walsh’s poetry (“Every object in this house haunts me,” she says in “Shoehorn”). Objects are animate in the variable-size room. When Alfred first enters, “our kitchen bulged and moaned and seemed to try and move over to make room. Our table dropped its lower lip and sighed.”<sup>80</sup> When he leaves, things are quite different:

Inside our kitchen, we cleaned up and sat down to look at each other. The walls moved in, the ceiling settled its shoulders upon our heads. The table shrank to a miniature night stand. Why didn’t everything expand? We wondered what to do with all the space that we could hold in our cupped hands.<sup>81</sup>

Talk expanded that space; silence contracts it now, smaller than it was before, because a possibility of companionship and narrative has been introduced and withdrawn. “Again” is a word these woman would like to hear, or else (without the erotic associations) “more.” More talk, or maybe a poem as Anne Sexton showed Agnes Walsh how to think of poems: as “the arrows/ piercing our limited space.”<sup>82</sup> Poems take you *out*.

Arrows appear again in the epigraph from a James Merrill poem that prefaces “Breathing Through Walls.” This begins with another closed interior:

The small square room whose space we fill  
is crammed with air and dust clinging to air,  
air we breathe, we must cling to.<sup>83</sup>

There is no Alfred to talk some space between the dust motes in this room that *feels* claustrophobic on this day, though its dust content on other, happier, more expansive, days is probably about the same. Today, though, the contrast between crammed, static interior and open, mobile exterior is keenly felt. Outside, the wind is moving the air, and the sun lights up the air as it falls on a daffodil. Why is that daffodil “heartbreakingly beautiful”? There seems to be something carried outside from inside — some intense emotion produced in that airborne interior wasteland, so poignantly opposite to the movement and colour outside. It charges the daffodil with emotion that would be wasted on a flower unless the environment has meaning in relation to us and us in relation to it.

“All the space we could hold in our cupped hands.” Alfred’s departure leaves this oxymoron of contained largeness. It’s not the only time this tactile (handling) figure appears. It keeps appearing in poems about Walsh’s coming of age as an artist, her awakening and apprenticeship to words. The poems in the book are not arranged to serve this sort of chronology. The pattern doesn’t begin where the book does, so it has extra flexibility in time. In fact any retrospective poem links at least two times, the past and the writer’s present. The title poem is such a retrospective, a beginning of sorts in the middle of the book. “Then” in the poem is childhood, vibrating to a largeness apprehended but not comprehended:

No, nothing came easy then  
 except there was a blind belief  
 a shimmering light keeping me breathless  
 a sense of the world quivering in my hands.<sup>84</sup>

This instinctive ecstatic sense of connection with the world of nature is matched with desire for another world, the parallel world of the imagination, “where words entranced me.” All of this was instinct and potential then, and private as well: “I spoke the world for myself/ my secret.” But the child knows instinctively what Blake meant by “a world in a grain of sand.” She all but cups a world in her hands.

Is it this world or the world of words that turns crazy in adolescence? Maybe both. Or maybe it’s just the privacy that gets to be too much.

“O Anne,” begins the poem for Anne Sexton,

I was a crazy adolescent  
 madly in love with a whole new world  
 I thought I’d invented.<sup>85</sup>

It must have helped to find a poet who knows how to voice madness, not a bad metaphor for adolescence. Sexton’s articulate angst reflects Walsh’s own private obsessions and shows that words can be the needed outlet, release into the wider world of “arrows/ piercing our limited space.” It’s important to learn that the world in here and the world out there may be linked, aligned. Words may fly between them. Words may concentrate the wide world in microcosm.

This concentrating power is not confined to a poetry elite. That is one thing suggested by Walsh’s poem “For Massimo Troisi After Seeing the Film *Il Postino*.” Troisi is the actor who plays Mario Ruoppolo, personal postman to the exiled Pablo Neruda in the film, eventually Neruda’s friend and apprentice poet. Unlike most of his fellow villagers, Mario is not illiterate, but he’s not schooled either. His initial interest in Neruda’s poetry is practical. Having seen a newsreel showing Neruda

swarmed by beautiful women, and aware that most of Neruda's mail comes from women, Mario thinks poetry is sexy. He wants a verbal aphrodisiac. Unexpectedly, he falls for words. One day, in this film that is itself a concentrated metaphor for a lifetime's apprenticeship to language, Neruda brings Mario to understand the principle of metaphor, the key to poetry. With words for his senses — poetry and ecology are intimates — Mario can name his beautiful world. He can love it articulately. His home now comes home to him as he names the sounds of the place he is recording to send to Neruda, after his return to Chile:

You held the world out, hands cupped,  
blowing on the foam of sea spray.  
you created a world in the most beautiful place  
gave it back to the poet saying

This is what you gave me, gave me mine.<sup>86</sup>

Walsh's poem celebrates poetry and Neruda as well as Troisi (himself a metaphor: he *is* Mario). I'd like to see such a friend of poetry riding the St. John's buses. Drivers who've come into their birthright of words couldn't possibly ignore Percy Janes.

But maybe we're already on the right track. On October 2, 2000, "MetroVerse" was launched in St. John's — Newfoundland poems for the bus-riding public. Too bad there wasn't space enough for the Percy Janes poem, but Walsh is represented with "where air freezes."<sup>87</sup>

## 12

Words can change the temperature, the purity, the density of an interior space. They can make the unlikeliest partners marry in metaphor. Words can do anything.

Wouldn't it be nice. Walsh's many homages salute others in the craft, but she herself doubts the very language she loves and presents herself as a very crude practitioner. This may be one reason why Ed Kavanagh of Killick Press had to drag a book out of her. Walsh is no postmodernist like the trickster Robert Kroetsch, who founds on linguistic uncertainty a whole anti-system of discontinuity and deconstruction,<sup>88</sup> but there is a small penumbra of overlap. In her book, skepticism about language and insecurity in her own relationship with it bespeak an honest self-reflexivity.

Words are approximate. Try to find *le mot juste* for any feeling. What about "love"? A very general word, when you come to think of it:

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love can't be what I mean  
it's too sweet a word for all I feel

love is no blanket against this calendar spring  
I cannot hold it, melt it into my palm.<sup>89</sup>

The metaphor of containing hands, believed in other poems, is questioned in this one; Walsh's thinking doesn't slide smoothly in self-created grooves.

The mood is upbeat in "Calendar Spring," even with doubt cast on the precision of the word "love." The mood is darker at other times. Love and language are often enough at odds. Either the words themselves are clumsy or the poet can't control them.

I know I make the air  
heavy with my words,  
but it's a weight born in me,  
and it's in you too.<sup>90</sup>

"The lightness of the body,/ the weight of the soul"<sup>91</sup> is another (paradoxical) way to put it. Too heavy, words don't always carry the freight. They don't always get across. (Metaphor: to transfer; to bear, carry.) In "White Afternoon" two people are tongue-tied, trying to "unleash words" by sipping mint tea, trying to thaw "frozen fingers, frozen tongues." Fingers? Yes, fingers were not only made before forks;

Fingertips are more advanced than brains.  
We humans are so foolish — always talking.  
Like ten-ton trucks on rotten bridges  
words crash through — fall into lips that  
think they know bodies of info about the heart,  
and how the heart affects the tongue.<sup>92</sup>

That old country, the heart, love puts it through such a lot. It's love, unspoken in the poem, that loads down the words — vehicles too heavy to make it over that bridge to speech, to saying what one feels. In the awkwardness of the moment, words that might touch do not. There is no literal touching either, but the advanced language of touch *might* succeed if, in the hyperbole of the poem, humans hadn't so confused their priorities as to privilege verbal over tactile language.

If words are in the way at times, so are books, as in the elegy "For I.S.," Ignatius Sullivan, a friend from Calvert on the Southern Shore. Academic life took this lover of the open to Montreal where he

holed up in a *pension* with one window,  
Foucault and Merleau-Ponty  
blocking the light.<sup>93</sup>

The window sill doubles as a bookshelf; the shelf of theory blocks a nature that lives naturally in “meadow and open water.” On his deathbed, he whispers that those books have to go back to the library.

I imagined them  
one by one pulled  
away from that window,

and you floating out away over the bay.<sup>94</sup>

This quiet consolation is a release into “extra-linguistic” life,<sup>95</sup> free of books and words.

Few of those who work with words, especially those bound to work them hard, will fail to appreciate Walsh’s occasional despair at their recalcitrance. “Stumbler after words,” she calls herself in a happy poem in which “English won’t kick in/ won’t break down the walls,”<sup>96</sup> in which she tries Portuguese and French alternatives. (The poem doesn’t pursue the dizzying implications of multiplying languages, but *olha* and *regarde* are not exact Portuguese and French equivalents of “see”; each word opens into a parallel reality.) “I stumble in a graveyard of words,” she says in another poem, this one about writing in the face of an ominously nihilistic something talking in the corner, “no mouth moving/ pretending there’s no point/ or what’s the point?”<sup>97</sup>

the jumble of letters move like  
the children’s alphabet on the fridge door  
I form them into sense  
feel them for the second time  
where for once  
love is the rear guard.<sup>98</sup>

This is just barely saving sanity — from chaos, from nothingness — retrieving it from a cemetery of sense. This is holding on by the fingernails, fending off despair by arranging letters (composing). Love, the troublous subject, isn’t even reached in this concentration on the raw materials of language. This struggle to make some sense would sound even more desperate if the word “feel” hadn’t gathered such positive associations in the book. Letters here are like those palpable thing-words in other poems, to be savoured in touch, first of chaos then of order. But groping



through the alphabet towards sense is a far cry from childhood words as wings. There's no soaring when sense itself scrambles under the weight of human being.

13

Walsh never speaks about her own book as a world you might hold in your hand, but it can be said — as long as a reader agrees to assist at the making. Since she is a true poet, her little poems are often much larger than they would be if their words did not resonate so. Good poems have this enlarging capacity. They bulge and release energy while you watch. Walsh's are often discontinuous, leaping. They don't come to rest. They are bodies with muscle and heart (both the pump and the symbol) and soul. Not that I've made the whole case for Agnes Walsh as a writer of leaping poetry. I've pulled out certain threads of poems in the interests of stressing what they make of Newfoundland culture and history. "Percy Janes Boarding the Bus" is Walsh's best-known poem because it touches a tender place of disappointment in the hearts of Newfoundland readers. I think what it does is important, but most of it comes across in one reading. That's not typical Walsh. Read "The Time That Passes" whole, for instance, rather than strand by strand as I have: stanza-to-stanza layering makes the reading an experience of continual readjustment. If I were to start over with *Old Country* I'd go for the love poems. To bridge that possible labour of love and the present one, I would open with Walsh's metaphor of speed-reading by a ravenous lover. Loving at a distance accelerates attention — painfully, to be sure, and yet think of the potential in unrequitement for harvesting time as it passes:

In the room someone moves, leans forward.  
Like a speed reader, I devour all I can  
of your face in the fraction of a second.<sup>99</sup>

There is another way to start, though, and I'll end with it. The conversation about Halldór Laxness recounted in Section I might after all be matched with a balancing discussion of "When I Married Halldór Laxness," my favourite piece in *Old Country*. It stands out from everything else in Walsh's book except in its leaping.

14

Beyond the title of "When I Married Halldór Laxness" is dream, or a conception dreamlike in its rapid shifts of territory, time and place, its compelling oddities.

This piece shifts as seamlessly as dream, as a slightly hallucinatory folktale. It's the most gorgeous piece in the book and the most difficult to write about because it lacks entirely the "huffing puffing engine of thought" that Hugh Kenner says "English readers expect."<sup>100</sup> It's completely uncompromising in its abrupt shifts and in the discrete bits of information it expects the reader to absorb. None of the other homages in the book (to Bernice Morgan, Percy Janes, Massimo Troisi, Anne Sexton, José Saramago) are this indirect. None of the others is so obviously *all* poem; each of the others has the appearance of saying something or describing something, and might be approximated by paraphrase. Then here is the hermetic "When I Married Halldór Laxness." What to say about this complete free-standing, independent piece that won't seem irrelevant to it?

First: accept no substitutes; read the piece.

When I Married Halldór Laxness  
(for Sam B.)

I watched the froth go down and the yellow liquid rise to meet it. I twisted the glass around and it tipped over and spilled on his arthritic knee. I looked to the side and didn't apologize. His beautiful bony fingers flicked off the foam in separate particles as if it was incidental lint he had finally noticed.

*The decision is yours now.*

He rubbed the liquid into his pant leg. I sighed. Either decision I make will kill something.

*And so, you want to hang in this ether land forever?*

Yes.

*And if I pulled your hair?  
And if I scalded your mouth?  
And if I made a teepee of birch billets with you in the centre?*

*Look at me.*

No.  
He went away.

Next night the phone rang.  
*I'll meet you at Glacier and First Point. You must be exact.  
I'll be there for three evenings.*

For three nights I wore myself ragged but couldn't find where.

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Friday evening the doorbell rang. He handed me two books by Aksel Sandemose. I put my fingers exactly where his warm fingerprints still lingered on the top book and closed the door. I read and waited.

(There was a tidal wave and a woman went from window to window with a candle in her hand as her house floated out the bay. They rescued her in St. Lawrence.)

*When you are ready, if ever, light your own candle.*

Two years later, my hand shook as I held the match. His hair had greyed around the temples and he crippled shyly.

Five years later, two babies look hauntingly like him. He is chopping wood in the backyard. He stops.

*Look at me. I fooled you years ago. Glacier is in Iceland and I tore out all the pages where it was written in that book. Do you regret that we called the babies Abstract and Zero? Come feel Aunt Hilda and Didymus under my fingernails.*

*His gentle laugh ripped the night sky, and I got pregnant again.*<sup>101</sup>

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What does all this mean? I always hear that question in the voice of the bewildered witness to a metaphysical gunfight in Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger*. The gun "occurs" in the Slinger's hand and with it he "describes" his opponent:

What does the foregoing mean?

I asked. Mean?

My gunslinger laughed

*Mean?*

Questioner, you got some strange  
obsessions, you want to know  
what something *means* after you've  
seen it, after you've *been* there  
or were you *out* during  
that time?<sup>102</sup>

The gunslinger is nothing if not hip. He's a hip intellectual cowboy demi-god, so he isn't going to be down on interpretation. I think the person who wrote him is saddling "I" with the common paralysis of a mind stormed with experience not immediately intelligible. Jesus, Slinger might say, is that all you can think to ask?

That is the *first* thing you want to know? You can't just go with it for a spell? You want a fucking paraphrase?

Well, it doesn't really do to sneer at the uncomprehending, seeing that it's you and I. And we do want to know. We'd rather understand than be hip. We might begin by improving the question. What's *going on* in the above? Let's ask that. It frees us right away to think about genre and technique.

First, a catalogue of the obvious — which immediately changes the genre, from poem into story. "When I Married Halldór Laxness" looks like a poem (and Walsh thinks of it as such; prose poem — no line breaks) because the narrative is so stark, but the piece has narration and dialogue and the bones of a plot. At the centre of the plot (so reduced as to be almost *all* centre) is a January-May pair of characters, first attracted but at odds, who move closer to each other in the course of the story. The time scheme is linear. It spans seven years of the relationship. After the first scene, we jump into the next night, then to the next week, then two years later, five years later. The final scene is the first one given in the present tense; that shift in tense reveals a present from which the rest of the (past tense) tale is retrospectively told.

The most dreamlike least developed aspect of narrative technique is setting. When the woman spills beer on the pant leg of a man, she presumably does it in a room. The room is in *her* house, presumably, since he's the one who leaves. The phone, the doorbell, the door: these bare details also imply a house. Seven years later, a house (the same one?) is implied by its back yard. And that's it. "Glacier is in Iceland" gives no clue as to where the house might be, since the woman has been fooled into thinking she can reach it from where she lives, which may be but is not identifiable as Newfoundland. (Glacier is *not* in Iceland, not on the map anyway — though glaciers are; rather, it's a fictional place in Laxness's allegorical novel, *Christianity in Glacier*). Nor is the parenthesis (containing a scene from the aftermath of the 1929 Newfoundland tidal wave) locational, since that woman in the dislodged floating house has no obvious connection with the two characters. This two-sentence parenthetical unit has as much setting as the rest of the piece, however: a house, a bay, a town — St. Lawrence at the extremity of the Burin Peninsula.

The narrator is a young(ish?) woman involved in a strange, arbitrary relationship with an older man, perhaps even an aged man who yet has the potency to father children — though in a manner comic and more of myth than biology (the third pregnancy is caused by a laugh). The story opens at a moment of crisis, of decision. Tension between the two characters is established by a bit of aggressive play with a glass of beer. He has most of the speech. She sighs once, but otherwise speaks only two words, "Yes" and "No." Reticence aside, she is not passive. She is unapologetic about spilling beer on him; she decides immediately to "hang in this ether land," though she knows the decision will cost her; she refuses to look at him when he commands her to. (He seems to be raising obstacles, testing her. Will your

decision stand if you know in advance that I'll mistreat you, and unpredictably?) Yet she is obsessed with him. She attempts to find the impossible rendezvous he appoints; she has a lover's reaction to the gift of Aksel Sandemose's books,<sup>103</sup> matching her fingers to his prints on the top one. None of the riddling deters her; she doesn't give up on him.

The turning point, the moment of mutual commitment, seems to come in the section beginning "two years later." Two sentences carry the bones of a (marriage?) ceremony, perhaps involving a candle. There is a match in her trembling hand, and she may be lighting the candle that signals her readiness. (Only adjacency connects this candle with the one carried from window to window of the floating house.) Possibly she is now repeating the "Yes" she offered two years ago, though it would be stretching to identify readiness to "hang in this ether land" with readiness to marry. The adverb "shyly," though strange modifying "crippled" (a verb here, usually a noun) suggests a change in him, a mellowing.

Five years later, the two of them are (still?) together, if we can go by the babies and his back yard chopping, signs of domestic arrangement. His conversation is as enigmatic as ever. Since he's clearly the guy for her, she must absolutely *love* non sequitur. He still demands her attention, her gaze at least, and he reminds her (as the story flashes back) of a command that he now reveals to have been a joke: he lured her to a rendezvous that he made sure she couldn't locate. Were those torn-out pages from a guide book or a novel? Is that "ether land" fiction? If I didn't know Walsh to be a devoted reader of Halldór Laxness, would it occur to me to wonder if the marriage has to do with the relationship between fiction and a loving reader?

In a tale so curtailed, little becomes much. Climax and denouement require a single sentence. "Gentle laugh," added to "shyly," suggests either that he has mellowed or that all his earlier threats were a front to discourage too easy involvement in an inappropriate and bumpy relationship. A few facts can be established about the story, then, but I've had to be very tentative and ask a lot of questions. There are further questions: Abstract and Zero? These are likely names for babies neither in real life (with apologies to Zero Mostel) nor in any fiction with pretensions to realism. The names do frame the whole gamut of alphabet, A to Z, and they might tease certain minds towards philosophy and mathematics. Didymus? The Greek name ('twin') of St. Thomas, the doubter who needed and received physical evidence of Christ's resurrection. "Under my fingernails?" Some things will have to be left hanging in the ether. But then I don't expect the piece as a whole to mean. The whole thing is dreamlike, riddling, nonsensical. It teeters on an edge between the ominous and the humorous. In it there is this sense of a woman prepared to sacrifice something in order to remain in a (metaphorical) land presided over by an unintelligible but compelling man with the almost godlike power of creating life by laughing.

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If the foregoing has any use it's to show that conventional literary analysis will get you somewhere with "When I Married Halldór Laxness." The terms that work best were shaped to discuss fiction, which means either that what I first took to be a poem should be reclassified as a story or that, at a certain degree of truncation, story becomes poem.

All that's clearly missing from what I've said so far is everything, the spirit of the piece. Or am I approaching that with my hunch that the dreamlike story is a transmutation of Walsh's relationship with Laxness's books? That impregnating laugh, for instance: mythic, yes, and with the feel of heroic Laxnessian hyperbole. "And Geiri of Midhouses laughed — that laugh that would suffice to build a cathedral, even on the summit of Mount Hekla."<sup>104</sup>

One of Mario's Ruoppolo's questions for Pablo Neruda is left unanswered in *Il Postino*: "The whole world is a metaphor for something else?" Neruda takes the question seriously, but he wants to sleep on it and it's easy to see why. Life in the film moves on and the question never comes up again. I wonder if a similar question should be asked of "When I Married Halldór Laxness," since it's both compelling and enigmatic from one end to the other: is the poem a metaphor for something else in its entirety? I think there's a roundabout way of answering by way of material that might even have been presented first except that it fell beyond the reach of unaided interpretation. Only when my own thinking and researching has been exhausted would I consider asking the writer anything about her text. I don't want any approach foreclosed by deference to the writer. A critic in the pocket of a writer is a puppet or a parrot — though a critic with *nothing* to offer the writer is in the wrong line of work. But it would be silly to ignore unsolicited aid, background information provoked merely by praising "When I Married Halldór Laxness" to Agnes Walsh. What came out had nothing to do with Laxness; it was the identity of Sam B.

Not all dedications help with interpretation. The gift of a poem is often just that, a gift, and the occasion of it private between giver and receiver. Knowing who Sam B. is and a little of what he has been to Agnes Walsh makes for no change in what I've written, just some additions.

Agnes Walsh was in her late twenties, divorced from her first husband, returned from the States, and Sam Bambrick was in his late fifties when he began regularly to visit the Walsh household in Placentia. He kept showing up even though Agnes Walsh's mother, in front of her daughter, regularly denounced the inappropriateness of his interest, and not only for the gulf in age; Bambrick is Walsh's cousin on her father's side. Knowing perfectly well that two is company, the chaperone seldom left the room. So the mild eroticism of "When I Married Halldór Laxness" owes as much to the person of Sam Bambrick as to anything in Laxness's books. Maybe the birch billets do too, not being Icelandic. "Chunks of firewood in

Newfoundland are junks, unless they happen to be *birch* junks, when they become billets.”<sup>105</sup> Before “When I Married Halldór Laxness” could be written, there had to be another marriage or merging of two affections: Sam Bambrick and Halldór Laxness. Whatever Laxness and his books contributed to the writing, Sam lent his attention, his body past its prime and perhaps a single Newfoundland word. Knowing this only confirms something unsurprising: the poem is an invention.

A further conversation with Walsh, this time about Laxness’ *The Atom Station* (which I read on her recommendation) produced another stray piece of information — First Point is in Placentia. I had planned to exhaust Halldór Laxness’ books searching for First Point and was both relieved and disappointed to have the location handed to me. Never mind. Knowing it and knowing what to do with it are two different things. The first thing that comes to mind (besides more Newfoundland content) is the outrage to logic in the challenge to coordinate an actual place in one country with a fictional place in another. The poem/story is built on such wonderful outrages, so that’s nothing new. What is new is the thought, if we step away from the literal, that readers *do* leap effortlessly from life to fiction, and do it all the time. Fixed in *this* country, we travel in *that* one; from any actual place we travel widely in the realms of gold. Placentia, Newfoundland meets Glacier, Iceland, as Agnes Walsh meets Halldór Laxness (and Laxness meets Sam B.), and they all coexist agreeably in a reader. I may have been on to something with my thought that the piece is indirectly about reading, that it pays tribute to fiction so strong as to invade one’s very life. What could be a more potent salute to life-changing writing than a piece of writing-in-return that dissolves the boundary between life and literature, superimposing one on the other? I’m still asking, but I’ve thought my way around to this question: is the meaning of the piece this delighted and delightful doubling — as life and literature impossibly and decisively occupy the same dream?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Agnes Walsh’s generous cooperation is acknowledged at various points in this essay — permission to use material from conversations and e-mail. Walsh also responded to a draft of the whole essay, kindly correcting factual errors and expanding on backgrounds to certain poems. Information not otherwise sourced comes from this session, October 27, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000), 79.

<sup>3</sup>Ann Carson. *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos With Paul Celan)*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), viii.

<sup>4</sup>Jeannette Lynes, ed. *Words Out There: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada*. Foreword by Gwendolyn Davies. Lockeport, NS: Roseway, 1999, 154.

<sup>5</sup>*Words Out There*, 154.

<sup>6</sup>Wayne Johnston. *Baltimore’s Mansion: A Memoir*. (Toronto: Knopf, 1999), 236.

<sup>7</sup>*Baltimore’s Mansion*, 123.

<sup>8</sup>There is a small literature of mainlanders getting the picture — the hard way. One piece, in John Steffler's *The Grey Islands; a Journey*, would surely ring a bell with Johnston and his father. Why *not* plant maple trees on the west coast of Newfoundland:

Only Patey told me outright they wouldn't grow, the ground too stony everywhere. "And how do you know?" I asked. "Has anybody tried before?" And that shut them up, none of them wanting to be a hick or advocate of ugliness. And I went ahead and spent — God even now it makes me blush — fourteen thousand dollars just on digging holes, and had two hundred eight-foot maple trees shipped in. The cost! The cost of that in a place that only two years earlier had finished getting water lines put in. I had no *notion* of the waste and the stupidity, striding up and down seeing how the work was getting on. Milliken Harbour: twin city of Niagara-on-the-lake. What surprises me now looking back is how many people went along with me, eager to share my vision of a genteel town, eager to have faith in what I knew. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), 90; (London, Ontario: Brick Books, 2000), 94.

There's more, but you can tell from the tone of this how the experiment turned out.

<sup>9</sup>*Baltimore's Mansion*, 123.

<sup>10</sup>Agnes Walsh, Letter to the Author, March 19, 2000.

<sup>11</sup>Percy Janes, *House of Hate* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970; St. John's: Breakwater, 1992), 319.

<sup>12</sup>*House of Hate*, 36. "Their tongues speak [a] polyglot of English and Irish and thieves' Latin," says the narrator of Patrick Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails* (Dunvegan, ON: Cormorant, 1996), 140.

<sup>13</sup>Agnes Walsh. *In the Old Country of My Heart*. (St. John's: Killick, 1996), 32-3. There was a time in Canada when it was rare for an artist to be a household word, part of the conversation of telephone operators. One way to deal with neglect was in fact to make artistic capital of it. So you have compelling images of new world artists struggling for listeners and lamenting lost centrality:

O, he who unrolled our culture from his scroll —  
 the prince's quote, the rostrum-rounding roar —  
 who under one name made articulate  
 heaven, and under another the seven-circled air,  
 is, if he is at all, a number, an x,  
 a Mr. Smith in a hotel register,—  
 incognito, lost, lacunal. (A.M. Klein. "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape."  
*The Rocking Chair*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1947), 50.

The Canadian poet in 1962 was not much better off, judging by Earle Birney's "Cartagena de Indias." Birney writes as a tourist from a rich country, Canada, and as a poet "seldom read by my townsmen." So he envies Luis Lopez, the poet of a poor country, Colombia, whose countrymen have saluted him with a statue of a pair of old shoes. Old shoes? Yes, and ten feet long. A taxi driver interprets these shoes for the bewildered Birney:

*Si señor Luis Lopez el poeta*  
 Here is his book  
 Unamuno praised it *si si*  
 You have seen *los zapatas*? Ah?  
 But they are us, *senor*  
 It was about us he wrote



about Cartagena where he was born  
 and died See here this sonnet  
 always he made hard words  
 Said we were lazy except to make noise  
 we only shout to get money  
 ugly too, backward ... why not?  
 It is for the poet to write these things  
 Also *plena* — how to say it? —  
*plena de rancio desalino*

Full of rancid disarray!

*Si si* but look, at the end, when old  
 he come to say one nice thing  
 only one ever about us  
 He say that we inspire that love a man has  
 for his old shoes — *Entonces*  
 we give him a monument to the shoes

*Selected Poems.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), 62.

Luis Lopez makes a career of denouncing his countrymen and they love him anyway. It's not that they're masochistic. A poet is not expected to be a boomer for his country. Voicing or depicting culture, as distinct from selling it, is not a mere matter of dispensing positive images.

The Canadian poet in 2000? Not a household word. "After I came to Canada," says Goran Simic, "it didn't take too long to realize that poetry would not pay my bills. Moreover, judging by the public attention it received, poetry seemed like an unwanted pregnancy in the marriage between publishers and readers. 'You're a poet, fine, but what's your real job?' I heard." "What I Didn't Say to my Father," *PEN Canada Newsletter* (Spring 2000), 8.

<sup>14</sup>Richard Gwyn, *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary*, 437.

<sup>15</sup>*Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary*, 446.

<sup>16</sup>Walsh found this passage in Marion Kaplan's *The Portuguese: The Land and its People* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1991), where it's the first of two epigraphs.

If Portugal's situation in Europe were less like Newfoundland's in Canada — marginalized, undervalued — Saramago would not have been impelled to write *A Jangada de Pedra* (*The Stone Raft*), an allegory which floats the Iberian Peninsula away from Europe. "I took with me in this unprecedented migration the whole of my native Portugal ...," Saramago says. "I was certainly leaving Europe behind for ever more, but the essential fabric of the immense craft transporting me continued to nourish the roots of my own identity and of my collective heritage." This voyage is a message to hegemonic Europe, but there are many other places where it might be taken to heart:

No country, no matter how rich and powerful it may be, should be allowed to speak louder than the rest. And, speaking of cultures, no country or group of countries, no treaty or agreement, should set itself up as the mentor or guide of the others. It is time Europe started to recognize and to go on recognizing, that cultures are not superior or inferior, richer or poorer; happily, they are simply different. And so they make use of each other: it is only by acknowledging or emphasizing their differences, that they will feel justified. There does not exist, and we hope there never will exist, one

universal culture. The Earth, I concede, is one, but not man. Each culture is, in itself, a communicating universe: the space that separates each one from the other is the same space that links them, just as the sea here on earth separates and links continents. "A Country Adrift," *Times Literary Supplement* (December 9-15, 1988), 1370.

<sup>17</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 45.

<sup>18</sup>Halldór Laxness, *The Atom Station*, trans. Magnus Magnusson (Reykjavik: Helgafell, 1972), 38.

<sup>19</sup>Buddy Wasisname & The Other Fellers, *Pop the Rivets*. Gander, NF: Third Wave Productions, 1997.

<sup>20</sup>In an essay entitled "To Capture the Sound of Water: Some Thoughts on a Language Denied," Bernice Lever, ed. *Language(s) / prison(s)* (League of Canadian Poets Living Archives Series, 1999), 60, Mary Dalton quotes the Métis poet Marilyn Dumont:

the Great White Way could silence us all  
if we let it  
it's had its hand over my mouth since the first day of school  
since Dick and Jane, ABC's and fingernail checks.

"I read that poem of hers, 'The Devil's Language,'" Dalton says, "with a shudder of recognition."

<sup>21</sup>Robert Bringhurst. *A Story Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999), 133.

<sup>22</sup>John Steffler. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 154-5.

<sup>23</sup>"When We Lost the Cod," Second Prize in the Traditional Ballad category, Fish and Brewis for Solomon Gosse Competition. *TickleAce* 33 (Spring/Summer 1997), 92-3.

<sup>24</sup>Mary Dalton. "A Book to Break Spells." (*muse*)*Letters: A Journal of the League of Canadian Poets*. (Summer 1998), 33.

<sup>25</sup>"A Book to Break Spells," 34.

<sup>26</sup>Two "Songs from the Newfoundland Dictionary," published in *Allowing the Light* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1993), have grown to many in a yet-unpublished manuscript called "The Tall World of Their Torn Stories."

Touring her book of stories, *Stranger Things Have Happened*, Carmelita McGrath recently found herself following Donna Morrissey (*Kit's Law*) on the mainland circuit. Morrissey's Newfoundland accent, especially when she reads, is much more pronounced than that of McGrath, who was peeved to be asked why she didn't sound like a Newfoundlander. Newfoundlanders are actually allowed to write and sound any way they like. A real Newfoundlander might not even write about Newfoundland. But stereotypes die hard.

<sup>27</sup>*Time Before Thought* is the title of a play collectively written by Agnes Walsh, Mercedes Barry and Andy Jones. Helen Peters, ed. *Stars in the sky morning: Collective Plays of Newfoundland and Labrador*. (St. John's: Killick, 1996).

<sup>28</sup>Tim Lilburn. "How To Be Here." *Living In The World As If It Were Home*. (Dunvegan, ON: Cormorant, 1999), 4.

<sup>29</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 1.

<sup>30</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 1.

<sup>31</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 64.

<sup>32</sup>This identification is begun in Section II where "voices" of ancestors "cut too near the bone,/ too much inside the soundbone," 63. That soundbone is a metaphor for some

acoustic receiver of ghostly voices, but it's literally the "backbone of a cod-fish, to which the air bladder is attached." Story, G.M., W.J., Kirwin, J.D.A. Widdowson, eds. *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. 2nd ed. With supplement (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 505.

<sup>33</sup>John Cheeseman. "Keeping the past for the future: Area residents compiling history of the Cape Shore." *The Charter* (January 17, 2000), 8.

<sup>34</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 3.

<sup>35</sup>Hayden White. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1973), 82.

<sup>36</sup>Bruce Porter. "Interview With Bernice Morgan." *TickleAce* 30 (Fall/Winter 1995), 13.

<sup>37</sup>Al Purdy. *The Collected Poems*. Russell Brown, ed. Afterword by Dennis Lee. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), 132.

<sup>38</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 50.

<sup>39</sup>Patrick O'Flaherty. *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 68.

<sup>40</sup>Harold Bloom. *The Flight to Lucifer: a Gnostic Fantasy*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Girous, 1971), 193. This futuristic novel is a different sort of text than Dalton's excerpt would indicate, so I think she is stressing the particular words rather than the whole.

<sup>41</sup>Charles Bernstein. *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*. (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1986), 169.

<sup>42</sup>Rudy Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear." W.J. Keith, ed. *A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe*. (Edmonton: NeWest, 1981), 134.

<sup>43</sup>Rudy Wiebe. *The Temptations of Big Bear*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), 397.

<sup>44</sup>Dennis Lee. "Civil Elegies." *Nightwatch: New and Selected Poems 1968-1996*. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996), 397. Speaking from and for Canada, and central Canada at that—the geographical core of "Civil Elegies" is Nathan Philips Square, Toronto—Lee may sound irrelevant in Newfoundland. But his project parallels that of Agnes Walsh. "Civil Elegies" (1972) was written before the diverse nations of Canada, Quebec excepted, had begun to find their voices, when the stress was more on making a whole nation and less on recognizing claims of its parts, some of them nations, so the poem is relatively innocent of rifts in the whole. But Lee spells out what Canada is "for me." *For you*, the implication is, it may be something else. Same shoe, different style:

To be our own men! In dread to live  
 the land, our own harsh country, beloved, the prairie, the foothills —  
 and for me it is lake by rapids by stream-fed lake, threading  
 north through the terminal vistas of black spruce, in a  
 bitter, cherished land it is farm after  
 farm in the waste of the continental outcrop —  
 for me it is Shield but wherever terrain informs our lives and claims us;  
 and then, no longer haunted by  
 unlive presence, to live the cities:  
 to furnish, out of the traffic and smog and the shambles of dead precursors,  
 a civil habitation that is  
 human, and our own. (*Nightwatch*, 16).

“Our own harsh country, beloved”: For Agnes Walsh it’s The Cape Shore, two hours from St. John’s, which has her “stomached” (*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 10) every time she sees it.

<sup>45</sup>Dennis Lee. “The Death of Harold Laddoo.” *Nightwatch*, 51.

<sup>46</sup>Until Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995) appeared, for example, I thought of the persecuted Japanese in wartime British Columbia through Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981), itself an important story of a black episode in the history of Canada. But in Choy’s Romeo and Juliet story of a Japanese Canadian man in love with a Chinese Canadian woman during the same era, Japanese persecution of Chinese people thickens the sense of complexity.

Introducing Joey Smallwood in his biography of Newfoundland’s “Father of Confederation,” Richard Gwyn says, “In life as in art, a clown is the most complex of characters: a buffoon who laughs to keep from crying, a political propagandist who cloaks his message with humour, a freak who has turned a physical defect into a livelihood” (*Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary*, vii). One might choose to sum up Smallwood in some other way, but there is no other way that explains all the twists and turns of his character and his actions. The man is a puzzle, a natural for myth. Mythic people proliferate, and Smallwood has multiplied in autobiography, biography, fiction, drama, film.

<sup>47</sup>*Nightwatch*, 41.

<sup>48</sup>Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Selected Poetry*, Stephen Mitchell ed. and trans. Intro. Robert Hass. (New York: Vintage, 1984), 316.

<sup>49</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 50.

<sup>50</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 51.

<sup>51</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 38.

<sup>52</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 60.

<sup>53</sup>Mrs. Walsh’s story is too overwhelming to be told fully in a poem with larger concerns. Here is part of it, from an interview conducted by her daughter:

I was brought into the world by Mrs. Clare Jarvis, a midwife in Oderin at the time. My father was a fisherman who fished from his own schooner. He was building a house for the family to move into when he died. I remember him laying on the daybed in the kitchen as he was dying. The lace was blowing in and out of the window behind his head. He asked me to play a song on the accordion that my mother used to play and then he was gone, the blood pouring out from the side of his mouth.

My world fell apart after that. I can say there was hardly anything good anymore in my life after that. I was five years old and my mother put me in to live with my father’s sister. Then, I was put out into a foster home in Rushoon, on the Burin Peninsula. Put in with two foolish people. She didn’t know a five cents from a ten and he, well, he chased after me. “Interview with Agnes Walsh [Sr],” Marion Frances White, *A Woman’s Almanac: Voices from Atlantic Canada* (St. John’s: Creative, 1994), 130.

<sup>54</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 63.

<sup>55</sup>Carmelita McGrath. *To the New World*. (St. John’s: Killick, 1997), 49.

<sup>56</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 58.

<sup>57</sup>Don McKay. “Remembering Apparatus.” *Queen’s Quarterly* 106/3 (Fall 1999), 400.

<sup>58</sup>Daphne Marlatt. *Touch to My Tongue*. (Edmonton: Longspoon, 1984.)

<sup>59</sup>Robert Bringhurst is another writer whose work inter-animates words and the physical senses. Not surprisingly, in the Foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995), 13, he also celebrates the power of words to hold ancestors:

The dead, in my experience, are indispensable too, especially when they are silent, watching and listening as they do in the land, the air and us. I don't suppose the dead are reading books, yet they seem present far more palpably in books, where we read them, than they do in magazine racks or in stadiums, gymnasiums and classrooms, where the living crowd them out. Some books, at any rate, seem able to desegregate the living and the dead — and that is the only kind of book I have ever wanted to read or write.

Such desegregation is everywhere in Agnes Walsh's poetry, though most explicit in "All Souls Day, Nazaré [Portugal]," which ends with "all souls" "going to meet their dead" (*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 21). Bringhurst reaches out to the dead from a present he takes pains to clear of inessentials. He repudiates the present that has lost touch with the deepest roots of meaning in all the senses.

We have barely stopped binding the feet  
of the women, toad. Is it true we ought to be binding  
the hands of the men? Or weighting them  
back into frequent touch with the ground?  
Like eyes, the hands open and close, squeeze and release.  
The feet, like the ears, are always wide open. ("Conversations With a Toad," *The Calling*, 23)

<sup>60</sup>Michael Crummey's *Hard Light* (London, ON: Brick Books, 1998) is another recovery project which explicitly enters the past through the physical. The book opens this way:

The boy watches his father's hands. The faint blue line of veins rivered across the  
backs, the knuckles like tiny furrowed hills on a plain. A moon rising at the tip of  
each finger.

Distance. Other worlds.

They have a history the boy knows nothing of, another life they have left behind.  
Twine knitted to mend the traps, the bodies of codfish opened with a blade, the red  
tangle of life pulled from their bellies. Motion and rhythms repeated to the point of  
thoughtlessness, map of a gone world etched into the unconscious life of his hands  
by daily necessities, the habits of generations. 9

<sup>61</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 60.

<sup>62</sup>John Milton. *Complete Shorter Poems*. John Carey, ed. (London & New York: Longman, 1997), 255.

<sup>63</sup>Northrop Frye. *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*. The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 47.

<sup>64</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 1.

<sup>65</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 1.

<sup>66</sup>When the body is a system, who gets sex education? Not the Agnes in the autobiographical play, *Time Before Thought*, 343. Her wedding night is a painful surprise: "It hurt, goddamn it," she says to her new husband, "What if I hit you over the head with a

baseball bat or stuck a stick up your hole and said you'll get used to it? What would you say?" Actually, she keeps that and much more to herself: "But of course I didn't say any of that. How could I? Back then young girls might have thought that but they certainly didn't say it."

<sup>67</sup> Ann Carson. *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>68</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> "Out of the Rustling of Tall Grass," *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> And more particularly of the poetry (Shakespeare's sonnets, Wordsworth, Keats, Emily Dickinson) she found in an anthology of poetry in the Placentia Library, then attached to the Star of the Sea Hall. She had the sense that the anthology was meant for her alone. At the age of thirteen, Walsh started a poetry club. She recalls challenging its other members to give her a word, any word, and she would make a poem out of it. "I never failed," she says.

<sup>73</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 25.

<sup>75</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 29.

<sup>76</sup> Lewis Carroll. *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*. With an Introduction by Alexander Woolcott and illustrations by John Tenniel. (New York: Random House, 1976), 214.

<sup>77</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 12.

<sup>79</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 12.

<sup>81</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 13-14.

<sup>82</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 9.

<sup>83</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 43.

<sup>84</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 23.

<sup>85</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 35.

<sup>87</sup> For details see "MetroVerse Launch" in *Word* 11, 5 (September 2000), newsletter of the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador.

<sup>88</sup> The trope of choice for Canadian postmodernists is more likely to be metonymy than metaphor — not so much the figure itself — "the literal term for one thing ... applied to another with which it is closely associated, because of contiguity in common experience." M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Sixth Edition. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1993, 68-9) — as a way of thinking and composing that places things side by side, discretely, rather than merging them in a containing figure like metaphor. Metonymy sponsors a compositional method rich in discontinuity. It's a talisman for writers who subvert forms of literary composition they see as completed and closed, like fictional realism and historical narrative. These are writers — Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, Fred Wah and others — who were formed on the western edge of the country, far from the centre of power and the centralist, winner's history it produced. In "A Great Northern Darkness: The Attack on History in Recent Canadian Fiction," *Imaginary Hand: Essays* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1988),

I, Bowering includes Leonard Cohen (*Beautiful Losers*) and Michael Ondaatje (*In the Skin of a Lion*) as writers who “write books against the obscurity” of Canadian lives, knowing “how critical it is to make us visible to each other, to ourselves.”

Hence a writer such as Robert Kroetsch replaces history’s paradigm with that of archaeology, an account made by the seeker who has found the story in place, and in fragments that encourage the seeker to dig and see the pieces and the gaps between the pieces together. In this model no reader need expect to be treated as victim or passive recipient of history. 14

Metonymy explodes into subversive poetics and politics. But so may metaphor, which has its own partisans. See for example, Don McKay, “Remembering Apparatus: Poetry and the Visibility of Tools.”

<sup>89</sup>“Calendar Spring,” *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 30.

<sup>90</sup>“The Sky is Always Young,” *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 51.

<sup>91</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 51.

<sup>92</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 48.

<sup>93</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 57.

<sup>94</sup>*In the Old Country of the Heart*, 57.

<sup>95</sup>Don McKay. “Baler Twine: Thoughts on Ravens, Home and Nature Poetry.” Tim Lilburn, ed. *Poetry and Knowing*. (Kingston, ON: Quarry, 1995), 24.

<sup>96</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 10.

<sup>97</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 47.

<sup>98</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 47.

<sup>99</sup>“What is this Air,” *In the Old Country of My Heart*, 49.

<sup>100</sup>Hugh Kenner. *A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers*. (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1988), 103.

<sup>101</sup>*In the Old Country of My Heart*, 53-4.

<sup>102</sup>Ed Dorn. *Slinger*. (Berkeley: Wingbow, 1975), np.

<sup>103</sup>Sandemose is a Danish-Norwegian novelist, part of a Scandinavian literary nexus that is a natural context for Laxness — and even Walsh. Her own forebears are Irish, but she lives on an island first “discovered” by Vikings 1000 years ago. There has been enough publicity about the Norse settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows to draw the southern Newfoundland mind northward up the Great Northern Peninsula to its tip where Leif Eriksson landed, from there to Greenland, Iceland, Norway; from those places into Icelandic literature, especially the sagas.

<sup>104</sup>*The Atom Station*, 143.

<sup>105</sup>Harold Horwood, quoted in *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, 43.