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“Every Sea-Surrounded Hour”: The Margin in Maritime Poetry

WANDA CAMPBELL

Margin: An edge, a border, the ground immediately adjacent to a body of water; a shore, et cetera.¹

THE SEA HAS LONG BEEN A THEME of Maritime poetry, and “the salt raw scent of the margin” (Roberts 79) is at the heart of many of the region’s most famous poems. Both sea and shore and the lover’s quarrel between them emerge in the work of Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Milton Acorn, John Thompson, and many other Maritime poets. As Elizabeth Brewster puts it in her poem “Where I Come From,” “People are made of places” (37), and, as the name “Maritime” suggests, this particular bioregion is defined by the sea that surrounds it. For those of us who live on the margin, the sea inspires a kind of lyrical intensity that fuels my argument that the contemporary context of ecological crisis has given a new urgency and importance to this attachment.

That the ocean would endure as a powerful image in the region’s literature is not surprising given the fact that Nova Scotia alone has some seven thousand kilometres of coastline, and nowhere in the province is farther than fifty-five kilometres from saltwater. The sea still defines the lives of those who inhabit its shores, as Hurricane Juan made clear for Nova Scotians in 2003. In his introduction to *The Coastline of Forgetting*, a collection of poems inspired by the eastern shore of Nova Scotia, Lesley Choyce writes,

You can suffer from the delusion that this is a world made up mostly of land — of soil and gravel and rock — when, in fact, these are minor components compared to the great over-indulgence of water. From the air, the shards of land here look like something added as an afterthought to break up the monotony of all that sea and lake. (11)

If, as David M. Jordan argues in his book *New World Regionalism: Literature in the Americas*, a crucial aspect of regionalism is its marginality (8), sea poetry is the quintessential marginal poetry. Jordan contends that “borders that define difference” can be geographical, epistemological, cultural, and aesthetic (10), and all of these terms provide a context for examining contemporary Maritime poetry of sea and shore. Shifts in regional socio-economics reinforce the notion of marginality as a disadvantaged condition fraught with nostalgia, but that negative position can be redemptively reconfigured as a more complex and cautionary ecopoetic that actively opposes contemporary consumer culture. Janice Kulyk Keefer points out that Maritime writers articulate “a far less polarized vision of the relationship between human beings and nature” than elsewhere in Canada and that they share a “perception that [the] sea is not menacingly, metaphysically ‘other’ but rather, an integral, unavoidable part of [their] daily lives” (27-28). In *Atlantic Outposts*, Harry Thurston claims that, even though most Maritimers now live in cities, we should not “forget that in the outposts people maintain a working relationship with their environment. To lose that vital connection and the wisdom it confers seems folly for us all” (191). In *Nova Scotia: Shaped by the Sea*, Choyce argues that “we cannot afford to let drift the spiritual link to the sea that sustains who we are” (296).

Nonetheless, many writers from the region have moved away from such traditional associations. Atlantic writing has come of age, argues Lynn Coady, because it exists “in the here and now” (3) rather than just “following the over-trod paths hacked out for us in days gone by — paths that served their purpose at one time, but have since been made redundant by the advent of planes, trains and automobiles” (4-5). Critics such as David Creelman have rejected essentialist definitions of Maritimers as those “linked together by their mystical bond to the ocean waters” (6) in favour of a more complex portrait: “The region is distinguished by its balance between hesitation about the future and its memory of the past and this fragile equilibrium is at the root of its distinct style” (14). Memories of a way of life tied more closely to the land and the sea go hand in hand with a hesitation born of “repeated disappointments and frustrations in the industrial sector” (12).

In addition to reflecting the new, largely urban realities of Maritime life, a shift away from imagery of nature and the sea seems designed to fend off charges of neoromanticism and antimodernism. In *The*

Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia, Ian McKay has argued that ocean imagery is part of a larger myth of innocence constructed throughout the twentieth century to disguise capitalist underdevelopment of the region while shielding from criticism those responsible for serious economic, social, and environmental crises (295). By aggressively marketing the “ocean playground” as a therapeutic space and promoting a commercial and gendered antimodernism, those in power were able to direct attention away from the many serious consequences of economic decline, including out-migration, cultural appropriation and commodification, and an uncertain future for many in the now marginalized region. We cannot, argues McKay, afford such an ideology of innocence that “excludes at the outset a critical dialogue with the past and a realistic grasp of the present” (295) and is particularly worrisome because it contains little that “subaltern groups could requisition as a means of understanding and countering the daily injustices they confront” (296). Images of “muscle-bound masculinity” pitted against an omnipresent sea (32) leave little room for realistic explorations of less romanticized and rewarded segments of the population, including working women and the rural poor. Yet, while proving that this paradigm of East Coast culture is both prevalent and problematic, McKay holds out some hope for those who see Maritime life as complex rather than simple. Among those who have grasped this “moment of opportunity for creative cultural opposition” (308) are those who write of the old subjects in new ways, arriving at new mythologies, fresh indicators of human transience, and a complex understanding of the role of memory in averting ecological catastrophe.

Infused with an environmental awareness that moves beyond the traditional ocean imagery of man at the mercy of a perilous sea, the poetry of the Maritime margin offers a complex challenge to a purely human agenda. Why, we might ask with ecocritic Glen A. Love, does the poetry of nature and place that appears to have little to do with the urban existence of the majority continue to flourish “even as it is ignored or denigrated by most contemporary criticism?” (237). There is, Love argues, “a widely shared sense — outside the literary establishment — that the current ideology which separates human beings from their environment is demonstrably and dangerously reductionist” (237). The natural world and its many specific bioregions deserve to

be experienced, studied, and creatively articulated not as commercialized antimodernism but as intelligent reflections upon our place on this planet that demand “erudition and engagement” from both writer and reader (Tallmadge 291). “I am not advocating some kind of neo-romanticism,” writes Neil Evernden, “but rather an open endorsement of the value of the experience of landscape to counteract the prevailing attitude favoring only the consumption of landscape as a commodity” (102). While the role of the sea in the daily lives of Maritimers has changed drastically with the decline of the fisheries, the sea as both a literal and symbolic presence still wields enormous power in the poetry for what it reveals about the margin, not just the margin between land and sea, but also the margin between myth and reality, mortality and survival, memory and forgetting.

The sea is a particularly kinetic presence in the poetry of four contemporary Maritime poets: Deirdre Dwyer, who grew up in Musquodoboit Harbour and still lives in Nova Scotia; Harry Thurston, born in Yarmouth, raised on Saltwater Farm and now living in Tidnish Bridge, Nova Scotia; Lesley Choyce, once of rural New Jersey but now of Lawrencetown Beach, Nova Scotia; and Anne Compton, now of Saint John, New Brunswick, but originally from Prince Edward Island. Of fellow islander Milton Acorn, Compton writes, “Mindful of, even preoccupied with, the sea, Acorn leads the reader again and again to the perimeter” (Preface 15). Dwyer, Thurston, Choyce, and Compton also lead readers again and again to the ever-shifting perimeters of their provinces by the sea. The understanding that the ocean offers appears in poems sprinkled throughout their oeuvres but is especially strong in four collections of poetry: Choyce’s *The Coastline of Forgetting* (1995), Compton’s *Opening the Island* (2002), Dwyer’s *Going to the Eyestone* (2002), and Thurston’s *If Men Lived on Earth* (2000). It would be misleading to suggest that the sea is their only subject. Nor could one argue, as David G. Pitt does of Newfoundland’s E.J. Pratt, that “the sea is a primary source of imagery, symbol and figure of speech in [their] poetry, often when it isn’t even on a maritime subject” (160), yet the sea appears sufficiently often in their work to demand attention and analysis as a significant site of the creative equilibrium between hesitation over an uncertain future and memory of a more powerful past that Creelman sees as a defining characteristic of the literature of the region.

In an article on E.J. Pratt, Pitt argues that Pratt's experience of the tragedy wreaked upon human lives off the coast of Newfoundland "impressed upon his mind and imagination the notion of the sea as widow-and-orphan maker, of the sea as a predator and destroyer, of the sea as antagonist" (160). In contrast, Choyce, Compton, Dwyer, and Thurston offer a more sympathetic portrait of the sea. According to Pitt, Pratt "does not celebrate the sea; he is not its advocate or spokesman; he does not sing to it or sing about it; he does not love it" (162), but these Maritime poets clearly do "love" the sea and the lessons that it teaches, which are different from those that Pratt learned nearly a century earlier. All four have travelled the world but chosen the margin and have sufficient education and resources to live that choice. In *Atlantic Outposts*, Thurston confesses to "an almost congenital attraction to this place washed by the sea, which may explain why like many other Atlantic-Canadians I simply could never bring myself to leave" (5). Compton refers to herself as "a descendant-poet of the island" and points out that the "edge of home" is "a phenomenological as well as a physical place" (Preface 20, 18). Dwyer, too, sees the margin as a portable state of mind as well as a fixed geographical reality: "We'll make beaches everywhere we go" ("Blomidon"). She insists that, despite extensive travelling, she is always returning to the home place of her childhood for inspiration: "Just looking at nature closely is completely surprising" ("Deirdre" 212). The same can be said of Choyce, although he is not a native Maritimer. "I live here quite simply because *this* is a sane, beautiful place. Arriving here as an immigrant, it felt like I was, in fact, returning home for the first time in a long while" (*Avalanche* 8). Choyce's use of "beautiful" might be dismissed as mere romantic sentimentality if it were not paired with "sane," which suggests that there are places in the world that are "insane" in their aspirations and their expenditures of the Earth's wealth.

Choyce is one of a variety of "experts" called upon to help explain the perplexing kinship that humans feel with the sea, despite its obvious dangers, in a newspaper article by Tod Mohamed entitled "Water Is a Powerful Draw." According to Mohamed, some describe this seemingly innate attraction as "evolutionary coding" because of water's ancient role in human survival, while others see its power as "a spiritual cleanser" or a way to commune with nature, but for Choyce coastal life is a kind of antidote to the preoccupations of modern life. "Living by the ocean

makes me feel small and for some reason I find that reassuring. It takes away some of the madness of career and money” (qtd. in Mohamed). In *The Coasts of Canada: A History*, Choyce writes, “For once, let the mid-continental tales of Canada be relatively mute, and let the narrative of a coastal people reshape our vision of who we are[:] . . . steadfast, hardy souls who persevere in difficult realms, who live with the companionship of sea things, whose lives may be marginal figuratively as well as literally” (18). To be marginal in a literal sense is to live at the edge of a continent, but to be figuratively marginal is a more complex condition. According to Wolfgang Hochbruck, Atlantic Canada has long been “one of the involuntary margins of the British Empire, the American market economy and the Canadian nation state” (19), but its poets appear to have found ways to embrace rather than mourn the margin. For them, the sea is no longer a resource that they must exploit for their living but a dynamic site of reflection on mythology, mortality, and memory.

* * *

Myth: a traditional story that embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something, such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.

Mythologies of sea and shore as they appear in these poems reach back into history but are also reinvented. For Dwyer, the mythologies of the margin are manifold. “Because I live near the water,” she says in an interview with Jeanette Lynes, “I see many different waterscapes, and it seems to me that each day the water is saying something different” (“Deirdre” 214). Lynes observes that, in some of Dwyer’s poems, “water seems to be almost a language of its own” (214). This language allows Dwyer to speak to subjects that have been minimized or devalued by our culture: “women’s subjects” and the body, the spiritual world and the environment.

In her poem “To Find Us,” Dwyer invites us to “look out / over the water, to hear whatever gods you will / in the hum” (61). The poem begins with an epigraph that has been slightly altered from the original lines that appear in Philip Larkin’s 1954 poem “Water”: “If I were called in / To construct a religion / I should make use of water” (93). Larkin’s poem both draws upon and diverges from Christianity’s sacramental vision of living water as a cleansing and healing force, but Dwyer’s

divinity indwells the entire ocean. This tidal hum off the eastern shore resembles “the hum / Of mighty workings” that appears in John Keats’s sonnet addressed to artist Benjamin Haydon, which begins “Great spirits now on earth are sojourning,” spirits that “will give the world another heart, / And other pulses” (68), yet the winged sources of inspiration in Dwyer’s poem are indigenous rather than imported. The poet’s newly chosen crest is decorated with cormorant, heron, seagull, and sea crow, birds that rely on the margin for their sustenance and form a heraldic signification of unity and interdependence rather than separation and supremacy.

When asked by Lynes “How is the Atlantic milieu, natural or cultural, important to you?” Dwyer responds, “Place is very important. It’s our connection to nature that feeds us, gives us that sense of surprise. There’s a whole mythology connected to place, too. When we were children, going to Blomidon, we were read the stories of Glooscap. And I felt privileged to be in that place; it felt like a spiritual place” (“Deirdre” 212). For the poet of the margin, the sea is at once spiritual and storied. According to Dwyer, in her poem “Legend,” mythologies old and new lurk beneath the mutability and mystery of the water’s surface, “the long neck of a sea serpent, / a priestess dressed in seaweed robes, / or an arm holding a sword or a key” (*Going* 91). What emerges from the waves may be dangerous, or it may be edifying; one can never know, so the poet returns again and again to this risky munificence with certainty of reward, “to find the tide a full bowl / and brimming” (91). In “Waiting for the Storm,” Dwyer reiterates the sea’s generosity: “The tide generous / bringing me things / wrapped in water” (47). A poet cannot resist such bounty, however double-edged, because the place where shore meets sea is one of epiphany and revelation. In her poem “The Day You Saw the World,” Dwyer describes a Blakean encounter with the world in the sandy margin “where the houses end” and “water begins” (77), an encounter that is at once mythical and intimate:

For the first time you see the world
is a mermaid who’s not afraid
of nakedness, the simplicity of skin. . . .
She is more agile than we know.
And more loving. (77)

In his long poem “Atlantic Elegy,” Harry Thurston admits that the North Atlantic is not for everyone:

perhaps only a poet
 could love the Atlantic’s somber palette;
 shale grey, bilge green, milt blue; the blood-red
 of sky in the sailor’s rhyme. (*If* 131)

Yet for some the lure is impossible to resist. Like the foghorn in “Atlantic Elegy,” described as “the mythic half-human, half-animal, / a Minotaur tethered at land’s end, bellowing day and night” (131), those who live by the sea are both enmeshed and amazed. Positioned at the margin, they speak of safe passage where ordinary vision may be rendered useless by bad weather or darkness. At the edge of the sea, the senses that one counted on can become confused, but inherited orality, the sounded stories, can save, just as the lighthouse guides the ship away from the rocks. In the poem “Figurehead,” Thurston, in tones reminiscent of James Joyce and Dylan Thomas, describes the sea as a kind of leviathan with immense transforming power:

the scaley, phosphorescent,
 milk green, eternal sea
 of winds, fathoms, waves,
 frothing about us, making marble. (*If* 115)

The mythical sea has the strength to recombine raw ingredients into an intricate mosaic of grains that other sculptors will wish to carve into other works of art. There are, Thurston argues in “Atlantic Elegy,” whole “sagas lost in the landwash” (136), legends that guide the poet across a territory that is at once ancient and new.

Trained in both biology and literature, Thurston is uniquely equipped to read the layered chronicles of humanity and of the natural world that we count on for survival. Throughout his poetry, we are repeatedly invited to listen to the tales told by both sea and land, learning from the myths and miracles that they offer. In his work, the traditional image of the sea as muse is overlaid with a contemporary ecological ethic. We are encouraged to engage with the environment, to piece together what Thurston calls “the jigsaw of our blue geography” (*If* 132). In “Breathing Books, Deranged Bodies,” the only full-length article on Thurston’s poetry to date, Lance La Rocque maintains that Thurston both defamiliarizes and enlivens the natural world. “Nature

holds a radiant textuality, filled with letters, archives, hieroglyphics" (133), all of which we must learn to read before they are effaced by time and other tragedies. To decipher nature is to be spurred to action.

Like Thurston, Choyce seeks to decipher the mythologies of coastline. In his poem "Lawrencetown River," he writes,

Here, fresh water
heaves against the salt,
revises sand into erotic shapes,
with lusty hieroglyphs on the shoreline.
With the proper codebook
I could read these tracks. (*Coastline* 19)

"Hieroglyph," as we know, means "sacred carving" and is a Greek translation of the Egyptian phrase "the god's words," and indeed there is a holiness to the pictorial symbols and sounds left by the ebb and flow. This is, after all, as Choyce says in "A Retreat to Tender Traps," God's own, uncharted clam bed, / untouched by all the diggers of the world" (*Coastline* 37), a sacred place worth fighting for both in literature and in life.

The mysterious margin between mythology and the mundane, past and present, is also a central concern for Anne Compton. Of Milton Acorn, Compton writes, "his intimate relationship with Island landscapes shaped his perceptual and linguistic habits" (Preface 16), and the same could be said of her own work. "Yet," maintains Brent MacLaine, "as becomes a pattern in Compton's poetry, the departures to islands of the past, of the future, or of the otherworldly are never uncomplicated or without contradiction" (87). For Compton, it is the spectral voices of "the Island women of long ago" that we can hear "in the interval of the wave" (*Opening* 3). In "North Shore, PEI," Compton speaks with onomatopoeic sibilance of sleepers who are "solaced by the sea-sounding speech of women naming men" (3). Their spoken mythologies are an antidote to oblivion: "The story as they tell it defies / the tumbled silence of stone" (3). Every narrative is a prayer against the void and "what they know must be as limitless as the sea" (3).

These voices of the past speak to and for the dead, yet even the living find on Abegweit, cradled by the waves, a mythology that heals and renews. "Such places," says Compton, "are prologue to a tale"(6). Tourists are forever attempting to match mythologies to their island experience.

On the return ferry, the visitors say, it reminded me
 so much of Ireland, the lowlands, Camelot, some place
 I've been or dream I've been
 [silted in memory, insinuated in books, ancestral]
 lending library to the restive, hospitable to loss
 open, an opening. (6)

The mythologies of the margin are not always obvious but silted, insinuated, covered over, conveyed covertly, speaking softly from the past. Yet they seem somehow hospitable and generous. Why, we might ask, is the sea “an opening” for so many? As Compton says in her discussion of Acorn’s poetics, the ocean has “always represented those larger experiences. . . . Departure by way of the ‘wave-lined edge,’ into liminal space will do that — disturb certainties” (Preface 37-38). Contemporary representations of the ocean thus become not antimodern but postmodern, occupied not with authentic essence but with liminal uncertainty, an uncertainty that undermines human notions of dominance and control.

* * *

Mortality: the condition of being subject to death; mortal nature or existence.

When coastal dwellers depended more directly on the sea for their livelihood, reminders of mortality were constant, but even now the sea has the power to undermine human certitude. Part of this uncertainty is a humbling recognition of our own transience, a central theme of Compton’s poem “Plotted,” from which the title of this paper is taken. The unique position of the islander is made clear in the opening line of the poem: “Here is a place you live on / [everywhere else you live in]” (*Opening* 5). This “unfamiliar” locution positions the poet not only geographically but also in relation to eternity. “Every sea-surrounded hour,” writes Compton, is “reminder enough / of how temporary / habitation here” (5). As the title of the poem suggests, we may believe that our land is plotted like a garden or that our history is plotted like a novel, but such assumptions are largely erroneous. The sea is the destabilizing edge where multiple erosions are always under way:

Should illusion of permanence beset you some late spring day while
 they’re setting out the bedding plants, looking

forward, a few steps to the shore will remind you
 how brief, fugitive, the spell of weather here. (5)

Then, in one of the many sudden shifts in perception that Compton is so skilled in rendering, she continues with an interpolation offered in square brackets almost as if it were an emendation or addition by another hand: “[also, the opposite is true / Here they live on — into a future unguessed]” (5). Here on the coast, anything and its opposite can both be true. Often it is in this shifting space between mythology and reality, mortality and endurance, memory and forgetting that art is born.

Another poem of Compton’s that explores the complex connection between the natural world and human intervention in relation to mortality and mutability is “Going over the Sand Dunes.” To understand the opening word, “shame,” one must understand the context as illuminated by this passage on sand dune preservation from the Parks Canada website for Prince Edward Island National Park:

Even the more stable dunes are fragile and easily damaged. Walking on dunes eliminates the protective plant cover. Studies have shown that it can take as few as 10 footsteps through the same area to destroy a marram grass colony. Once the grass is gone, the wind blows away the exposed sand and carves small depressions into giant holes called blowouts. Blowouts turn stable dunes into constantly shifting hills, unable to support vegetation or wildlife.

In his prose poem entitled “Marram,” written on Sable Island, Thurston celebrates the unique ecological role of this grass, which defends the “new religion” of land:

Grasses do not grow upon the world but lift it up into being with their deep thin muscles. The wind and the seas could care less whether there was any such thing as land. They would circulate and eddy endlessly without ever missing the land, or wanting to invent it, except perhaps to batter it, for amusement only. The grasses feel differently. (*If*34)

In Compton’s poem, marram grass strikes back against those who would harm it: “Hurt, as you have hurt, said the marram grass, spiky / and deep-rooted on the dune. A pity / about your bleeding feet, but you knew the path” (*Opening* 16). The human being has strayed from the designated path and brought injury to the marram grass so central

to combatting erosion. By implication, she has also brought injury to herself, both in the immediate and in the long-range senses. “Great has been the devastation caused by sand-storms where the grasses have been removed,” explains Compton in her preface to *The Edge of Home: Milton Acorn from the Island* (15), in which she equates Acorn’s poetry with marram grass. Where it has been protected, the marram grass prevents drifting and resists “the action of waves and winds that wage unceasing warfare on the land” (15). In the poem “Going over the Sand Dunes,” the sea takes back its own, chews away at the land, and carries off its cargo to the deep, all the while intoning, “All will be well, well” (*Opening* 16). From an ecological perspective, the situation may be able to right itself eventually, but the implication of the last two stanzas of Compton’s poem is that the price to humans will be high. The phrase “Not a soul on the shore” (16) is, in one sense, just a colloquial way of saying that the beach is empty, but it also suggests that just this kind of soulless ignorance of and injury to the natural world will have dire consequences. The final italicized line of Compton’s poem is also the final line of the ancient Scottish ballad “The Twa Corbies,” about two ravens that discuss the dead body of a newly slain knight who has been abandoned by his hound, his hawk, and his lady fair. The ravens pick out his eyes and thatch their nest with his golden hair:

Mony a one for him makes mane,
 But nane sall ken where he is gane;
 O’er his white banes, when they are bare,
 The wind sall blaw for evermair.

Compton’s chilling allusion to the macabre task of the two ravens makes her poem a lament for the dunes, for the earth, and for the human beings whose very survival is inextricably tied to the planet that they inhabit and exploit. The poem itself becomes a vital protection against dissolution and disappearance. Compton says that Acorn’s poetry “— fiercely attached to its place — is the work of a warrior who would shore up the edge of home” (Preface 15), and this claim, which both alludes to and extends Eliot’s statement in *The Waste Land*, could be extended to all coastal poets: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (20). Their poems, at once fragile and tough like the marram grass, guard against complete erasure.

Choyce’s struggle with mortality emerges most pointedly in his poem “Remembering Summer,” in which he recounts his attempt to rescue a

drowning woman, who is, we find out elsewhere, “the mother of four kids, including a one-year old” (*Transcendental* 60). For Choyce, it was a life-changing experience. “The sea, once my good friend and ally — the very reason I moved to Nova Scotia and lived by Lawrencetown Beach — had turned against me” (61). That the rescue was unsuccessful and that the woman’s “heart became another cold stone on / this cluttered coast” (*Coastline* 22) taught Choyce that “you can’t change some things, that death, if not something worse, is just around the bend in the channel to lure you into deeper waters when you least expect it” (*Transcendental* 68). Although he felt betrayed by his beloved, he was nonetheless drawn to the ocean because, as he states in the final line of the final poem of the collection, “For everything I’ve now become / I owe more than I own” (87). As Thurston puts it in his poem “Fathoms,” we are all “sluiced from salt waters” at the start, and to return to the sea is to become aware of “the depths of [our] days” (*If* 143).

* * *

Memory: the capacity for retaining, perpetuating, or reviving the thought of things past.

Memory may be our most successful way to fight mortalities that menace and guard mythologies that sustain. Mortality may threaten both human beings and the planet that we have endangered, but memory is a conservationist impulse. We owe it to the dead to remember, but with truth not nostalgia, acknowledging that there is more to mourn than human loss. In her poem “Island Going,” Dwyer looks “at the other side of memories / as if the tide washes and cleans them” (*Going* 67), but in Thurston’s “Atlantic Elegy,” originally commissioned by *Canadian Geographic*, there is no escape from the dark implications of the past. Thurston opens section three of the poem entitled “Black Hull” with the line “The sea is memory” (*If* 134), a line influenced by Derek Walcott’s poem “The Sea Is History.” In this poem, which appeared in Walcott’s 1979 collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, Walcott asks, “Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, / in that grey vault. The sea” (364). Beginning with the dark genesis of the explorers and continuing with the even darker exodus of “the packed cries / the shit, the moaning” (364), Walcott traces the history of a people carried over the ocean against their will. The sea drowns but

does not diminish the grief of the middle passage. Nova Scotia's history is also defined by the sea. "The process of modernization has taken its toll on the culture, for the locally based, labour-intensive, inshore fishery . . . has all but disappeared" (Creelman 9). Thurston's use of the word "black" in the title sets up a funereal tone of despair that gathers force throughout the section. Once, writes Thurston, "Every mud creek bed cradled a keel, / every ocean hailed a bluenose captain," but now "names old as the continent disappear" (*If* 134). All that remains is "remembrance, rust, and rot" (135). Thurston's skilful use of anaphora, alliteration, and the *ubi sunt* motif helps to trace a trajectory of change that leaves the reader feeling bereft. The association between remembrance and the process of decomposition and decay leaves a sense of *tristesse* if not outright tragedy. Everywhere there is absence as well as presence.

"In Thurston's poetry," writes La Rocque, "memory exists in the body and the landscape itself, as the artifacts embedded there by past and present cultures. Memory exists in the forms mapped out by the sciences and in nature's own dialects" (116). The margins where land meets sea are particularly active sites of dialogue between cultural artifacts and natural dialects and are therefore dynamic repositories of memory. Thurston begins the final section of "Atlantic Elegy" with the line "The sea remembers her dead" (*If* 136). The sobering inventory that follows includes both the names of animals that humans have driven to extinction and the names of ships, including the *Titanic* and the *Bluenose*, that symbolize humans' search for dominance brought low. The sea has its task, and so, it would seem, do we. "It is for us," Thurston writes, "to remember the living" (136). Past practice has made this into a long and challenging chore. After prodigal centuries, all of us — people and poets, fishers and environmentalists — now have no choice but to "wait for the seas to fill again" (136). In poems such as "Dragging Bottom," Thurston grieves the greed that has brought us to this emptiness, the greed that scours the ocean floor until nothing remains: "This is our shame, repeated again and again. / What we cannot sell, we kill or leave to die" (*If* 120). The poet finds this unacceptable and seeks alternatives to such horrific waste. As elements of the natural world are eradicated, memory assumes an increasingly significant role. What is gone, argues the poet, must not be forgotten. "The trick," writes Choyce in his poem "Return from Rudey Head,"

is just to let things go before they die,
to capture, release,
capture, release. (*Coastline* 60)

For Thurston the sea is memory, but for Choyce the coastline is forgetting. The eastern shore of Nova Scotia, he writes,

is a place of memory loss. It's a forgotten coast, one of the final stretches of Atlantic coastline to find its way into the twentieth century — and grudgingly at that. The sea forgets its own power here. . . . And the land, always shrinking back, forgets itself, loses ground, gives way to the sea as it is erased or re-arranged. The land forgets itself eventually and becomes sea. (*Coastline* 13)

In the poem “Retreat from Rat Rock,” Choyce describes the process that E.J. Pratt made so memorable seventy-five years earlier in his poem “Erosion” —

It took the sea an hour one night,
An hour of storm to place
The sculpture of these granite seams
Upon a woman's face —

but it is not the fate of one widow whom Choyce describes but that of the whole human enterprise:

Soon the stones will tumble down
in boiling seas and subtle storms,
designed, no doubt, to undermine
all the politics of permanence. (57)

In poem after poem throughout his collection *The Coastline of Forgetting*, Choyce explores the many ways in which the hungry sea devours whatever comes its way, whether it is the soft body of a swimmer or the hard stones of the shoreline. In “Lawrencetown Headland,” he writes that

the sea claws at the roots of land,
giving back daylight to buried stones,
washing away brown mud, like sin,
out to an all-accepting sea. (23)

In “Terminal Beach,” he admits that “nothing stays the same on this coast / without help” (29). At last, after circumnavigating the coastline, the poet ends where he began. In the penultimate poem in the collec-

tion, Choyce arrives again at “this place, this coast, this sea of flux, / this perfect map of change / that forgets the names of man” (84), a chastening and humbling experience that serves to undermine any sense of manifest destiny that might fuel continued expansion regardless of environmental cost.

The place of memory is equally complicated in Compton’s poetry, perhaps because she includes herself among “expatriate Islanders who want the Island to be just as we left it” (Preface 16). MacLaine, in an article about Compton aptly titled “The Poet in the Landscape Is Made by the Landscape,” states, “No doubt it is this banishment to the present, the difficulty and, in truth, the impossibility (except through memory) of regaining the past, that accounts for the speaker’s complex relationship with her home and family” (85). Yet memory, like an ocean wave washing over a rock, has the power to remake and renew, as Compton explains in her discussion of A.J.M. Smith’s poem “Sea Cliff”:

The second seeing of the elements contains the first, the memory of the first; the rock is what it was and also new. Mind moves with the thing in time, incorporating what is new within what abides, within the very substance of what abides. As objective as the scientist who discriminates layers of fossilized rock, the poet notes the layers of then and now. (*A.J.M. Smith* 188)

In her poem “Waking,” Compton wrestles with memories of a vigil for the dead. The title works in at least three directions, suggesting a preburial wake, an awakening, and a smooth track left on the water’s surface by a ship. She and her siblings are “like swimmers through the mourning tide / six foot high human wave churning the blasphemous sea” (*Opening* 84). Over and through the proceedings, she hears “your name gusting over the riptide” (84). The riptide — defined as “an intermittent, strong, narrow current on or near the surface of the sea, flowing directly out from the shore and acting to remove water which has been brought to the shore by waves and wind” (*OED*) — is an ideal metaphor to express the powerful and perilous passage from life to death. Yet there is hope, both in the suggestion of awakening in the title and in the overarching theme of transformation implied by the epigraph to the final section of *Opening the Island*, which contains this poem, “When I meet you again, I’ll be all light” (77). The closing lines of John Thompson’s “Ghazal XVIII” continue “all dark, all dark” (124), but Compton stops short of darkness, positing a world where “arrival is already” (*Opening*

85) and the tide forever returns. Paradoxically, to inhabit a coastline of forgetting is to remember our true selves, both vulnerable and victorious. We are forever reminded of our own mortality, our right place in the universe, our own transience in the face of eternity, ancient themes that have acquired new resonance at the end of a century of consumption more rapid and voracious than any other in human history.

To participate in what Choyce calls “an act of margins” (*Coastline* 65) is to be at once reminded and renewed. In his poem “Stoney Island,” Thurston summarizes the commitment inherent in all poems that return us to the sea: “We wish to reclaim what we have never possessed / what other men believe is not worth having” (*Clouds* 10). To reclaim and redeem, to preserve and persist, these are the human tasks explored in the poetry of the Maritime margin. Because they inhabit the margin, these poets possess a unique duality of vision and oppositional worldview from which we can all learn. The Maritimes have often been characterized as a “have-not” region with a long-standing resentment toward central Canada (Creelman 308), but the poems of sea and shore reveal a subversive sense of treasure and truth. To be eccentric is to see the centre more clearly and resist the most negative aspects of progress and industrialization. In her essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” African American theorist bell hooks reflects on the merits of marginality. “Living as we did — on the edge — we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out” (150). Although her comments obviously emerge from a very different cultural and historical context, they are sufficiently relevant to Maritime “marginality” to be quoted at length:

These statements identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation; in fact I was saying just the opposite, that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose — to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center — but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds. (150-51)

This poetry of the margin is not commercialized antimodernism that embraces a myth of innocence and simplicity in order to fuel tourism and disguise economic decline but a more complex and radical vision that incorporates the feminine, the spiritual, and the subaltern within a sustained environmental attentiveness. In these poems, human beings are anything but innocent in their relations with the natural world. Choyce, Compton, Dwyer, and Thurston offer a generously creative vision that resists the desire to exploit and consume. Their poems of the sea offer both aetiology and antidote. In *An Avalanche of Ocean*, Choyce writes, “In some inexplicable way, I know *who* I am because I can look out my window every day and see where the land ends and where the ocean begins” (8). The majority of Canadians may not live on the margin, but Robert Kern suggests that “*all* places, urban, rural or wilderness, have essences that can potentially provide identity and continuity to those who dwell in them” (277-78). The statements that Kern makes about Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry could apply just as well to the Maritime poets whom we have been exploring: “What [these poets] offer us, beyond awakening our admiration for *their* places, is a model of what authentic relationship to place, *any* place, might be and an example of how to achieve it. . . . What we need is not an escape from culture to nature (even if it were possible) but precisely a productive recognition of their entanglement” (278). While providing a sobering record of how this “entanglement” has sometimes harmed both the natural world and those who live in it, poets of the Maritime margin have also shown how the sea can be a source of spiritual and creative enrichment as well as a reminder of our vulnerability and interconnectedness. Inland, nature is so tethered and tamed that human beings can believe that they have the right to dominate, but the ocean is still big enough and strong enough to occasionally find us forgettable. The sea, like all the bioregions encountered by humans, truly puts us in our place, a place we must learn to love if we are to endure.

NOTE

¹ Definitions in the epigraphs come from *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

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