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Hove To: Missing the Storm in the Lee of Life

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INTRODUCTION

> *Why did he love storms, what was the meaning of his excitement when the door sprang open and the rain wind fled rudely up the stairs, why had the simple task, of shutting the windows of an old house seemed fitting and urgent, why did the first watery notes of a storm wind have for him the unmistakable sound of good news, cheer, glad tidings?*
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> - John Cheever, *The Swimmer*

The seas heaved, so that the vibrant coloured kayaks that surrounded my own were momentarily obscured by liquid walls that fell away and pushed us onto precarious summits of foaming white. The student in the bow seat let out an awkward laugh/shriek and I couldn't erase the smile from my own face.

It was a cold, wet June day in the outport[1] community of Cape Broyle on Newfoundland's Souther Shore. A long strip of coastline descending south from St. John's pointing like a rocky finger towards the Grand Banks, inundated by long-fingered fjords, towering cliffs of imposing granite, and wind-scoured forests it is renowned for some of the worst weather to be found south of the Arctic. The lash of rain is followed by the swirl of snow, and more often than not the world is shrouded in fog so thick that even a known, familiar community can become obscured, wrapped in mystery.

The air hissed with wet- not rain, really, but more substantial than fog. A *smirr*[2] of moisture that was impossible to escape. The seas, even in the relative shelter of the inner harbour before the narrows that widened out into the open seas still five miles beyond were in a state of uproar. Slate grey waves rose and fell in a steady undulation punctuated by cresting whitecaps. The clouds hung heavy in the bowl of the valley round which the community huddled, so that one could just discern the outline of houses, the rise of woodsmoke from blackened chimneys that

1 An outport, or outharbour is a term used in Newfoundland to differentiate St. John's, the principal port and political centre from outlying communities.

[2] A Scottish word in origin, meaning a fine rain or drizzle. Used here to suggest a similarity in weather, brought on by the North Atlantic, between Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula and Scotland.

spoke of warmth. Into this wet murk we paddled, mostly keen.

However, as we left the relative safety of the hugged coastline into the open maw of the narrows, side on to the strength of gusting westerlies, we began a mild roller coaster ride. As a former kayak guide I recognized that the danger was slight, the thrill total. The waves were large enough to instill a momentary quickening of the heart, a thrum of blood through muscles that sought to regain calmer seas. Once reached, however, one recalled the rush of wind across one's face, the unnerving comfort of a boat riding over waves, at once powered by their strokes and yet helpless before the wind and waves.

So it took me some time to recognize that the awkward laugh/shriek from my bowmate was not a laugh, but a barely contained scream of fear. Real tears fell and he had stopped paddling. The joy of paddling a small craft on the open ocean in seas just beginning to rise before a wind is not everyones.

NECESSITY OF THE TEMPEST

"Are you going in *this*?"

Anyone who spends serious time in the outdoors is prepared for the unpredictability of the weather. If you're on the island of Newfoundland, all the more so. Grey, leaden skies and high winds are a seasonal norm much of the year, and sudden storms have caught many fishermen and travellers unaware. Often to their death.[3] The shores of the Newfoundland coastline are pocked with the graves of boats wrecked upon shoals, ice or just the vengeance of the seas before a storm. For as long as people have plied these waters, life has been taken in hand when venturing out into the seas.

But the fishery isn't what it was. And because they no longer have to, many Newfoundlanders aren't spending as many hours outside.

As a teacher interested in bringing students out into the world, to extend the classroom curriculum but also share a love of this place, this reality has profound implications. Students may know the variables of our unpredictable and volatile weather. However, they don't have the skills to survive its onslaught. Worse, perhaps, they shy away from an intimate connection with the world when conditions are less than ideal.

[3] In the summer of 2010 two paddlers from Michigan were caught in a sudden and violent storm that resulted in one of the kayaks capsizing, its occupant drowned. June 28, 2010. Accessed from www.thetelegram.ca

"Then, just after noon, a big storm caught me. Yellow sun-flare, dulling to sepia. Rain drilling the earth. The path a river, gathering the water into a torrent that rinsed the chalk white again," writes Robert MacFarlane in *The Old Ways* (2011, 308). One can almost smell the air, sweet and warm, undercut by that unmistakable scent of rain. These are the moments we need to celebrate. They help us all appreciate the connection between ourselves and the world we share. The sudden rush of cold on a hot day that presages a towering thunderstorm, with rain and wind and sometimes hail. The bite of snow like gravel, scouring across exposed flesh before winds that radiate from the North Pole itself. The creak and groan of trees doing contortions in hurricane-force winds, the air alive with leaves and matter too light to be held down. The sudden silence that can follow a storm, sun glinting off sculpted snowscapes, or the dapple of clouds and seas still scuttling before unseen forces along a rudely altered and mesmerizing beachscape. To borrow from the late naturalist and writer Roger Deakin weather can make for great copy (2008, 165). However, if such moments are remarked upon now it is in the abstract. We have, like a lot of Western society moved away from a felt, intimate relationship with our lived world.

In my own life I have been shaped, figuratively and literally by the passage of weather and storms. They have informed my sense of place, my connections to the natural world. My last hours as a treeplanter were spent soaking, my feet encased in an Alberta mud so pervasive that it proved impossible to wash off. But what really got me was the snatch and pull of wind that tore my brothers tent fly away into the night and he laughed, a sound worthy of a Victorian asylum as the rain splashed down unimpeded upon him. We found it the next day in the snarl of boreal that surrounded our camp. Storms bring out something primal in us, that speaks to a time when we were just another species. The air smells of something one can't quite pin down, your senses heightened by forces beyond yourself. In this, The Age of the Anthropocene, considerations of the natural world and its processes are themselves important. They ground us as a species within nature (Abbey 1968, 85).

I received the last email at a quarter to eight, just as I was heading out the door.

"Given the extreme cold I presume the trip will be cancelled..."

The mercury was stuck on minus ten. It had been a winter of fluctuating extremes. December had blown in wintry until the snows piled eight and ten feet high in places. Great columns of ice held tenuously from my roofline to the ground, and I eyed them warily. Just as I was sure winter could bring no more surprises January came warm. Rains lashed, the sun shone bright and warm and green grass emerged from beneath the snows that scurried to wooded recesses. Just as quickly as the warmth came, it was taken away. Late February brought another onslaught of storms that piled the snow back up. And in their wake the cold stayed.

Hoping to push my class to better understand life, in all its forms in outport Newfoundland we walked into an abandoned community just beyond the pall of St. John's. Although once home to nearly seventy souls, plus animals and all the infrastructure a fishing community would need including stages, wharves, houses, outhouses, barns, haying fields, fences, root cellars it is now hard to tell where the community was. The forests of spruce and larch, birch and alder have sprung back to reclaim what was theirs. All that speaks to the past is a couple of apple trees, denuded of leaves and fruit in the depths of winter, and the stone walls of a foundation, buried in snow.

In the end, all of the students showed up. They came buried in fleece and Gore-Tex and wool, and their breath plumed and hung quietly in the air. The snow squeaked beneath our feet and often we stepped off the path into drifts that were taller than we were. Hare tracks and moose prints abounded, and the scurry of birds in the shadowed recesses of the trees was just obvious. We walked into Freshwater Bay and attempted to discern what we could about life in an outport in winter.

The cold settled around us like a yoke. It was an unstated undercurrent. We cut firewood and huddled in the lee of some rocks, our voices raspy and our eyes watering with the fickle direction of the smoke. Students took pictures and tried to imagine life in a community there. Then, with the shadows lengthening in the late winter sky we trudged back up the trail we'd cut to the waiting warmth of the bus, smelling of woodsmoke.

But no one had complained of the cold.

WEATHER MAKES THE PLACE

> *"When we were perhaps three miles distant, a band of rain swept in from the east, bringing with it a mist that occluded both coastlines... for half an hour we passed over grey waters in a grey mist, and it felt like we might be sailing towards a mythic archipelago, a scatter of Hy-Brazils..."*
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> -Robert MacFarlane, *The Old Ways* (2011, 105)

My contention here is that if we are going to know this world, to know our lived places we must experience the world in *all* its manifestations. We need to be unsettled by the vicissitudes of weather to truly love our surroundings. In *Last Child In The Woods* Richard Louv makes that point that human beings have to be in the world to develop fully (2005, 185). We need to feel the sun across our brows, the wind against our backs, to climb trees and skip rocks through streams. They are implicit to our development as human beings. Yvon Chouinard, founder of

Patagonia notes that a childhood without scrapes and bruises is missing the roughhousing that informs what one is capable of *in* the world (2005, 175). Put in the words of Norwegian teacher Aage Jensen we need to "tumble and fumble". This experience of the world "when we were roving around in the woods, wandering in the mountains, skiing or skating, this was our way of life" (2007, 103). We cannot know our limits and potential without being outside in the world in all types of weather. Such experiences teach us to *know* a lived place. The Arctic Inuit are well-known for their ability to read their surroundings. They know the varieties of ice and which is good for hunting. They can see the approach of a storm in the direction of the clouds and wind. And even though this generational knowledge is being undermined by the effects of global warming they still grapple with finding its patterns and rhythms. Because therein lies the secret to successfully navigating their world. Place, for them is their teacher. Their lives and stories for most of their history has been an extended apprenticeship herein (Wattchow 2007, 236).

Barry Lopez in his essay *American Geographies* notes that our lived places, where we reside and raise our children, where we know sadness and great joy are, at best, "selectively known". By which he means we haven't explored the "incomprehensible depth and complexity" of *this* place- let along others (1998, 133). Instead, we've gathered pieces of places together in a jumble that passes for Newfoundland, or Canada. Weather has much to inform to and of our sense of a place.

To the question, "Are you going in *this*?" the answer is yes. In a place like Newfoundland, ideal weather is a notion, an aberration. If the romanticized fishermen of old had waited for sunny skies and the winds to die down they would have long ago left for somewhere else. And if we wait for the sun to shine to teach our young people about this place their opportunities to love it will be greatly diminished.

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