

# Outport Shadows

Meredith Hall

I forget that I am fifty-five years old until I look in the mirror. An average, lumpy, middle-aged woman, I move in the world in another body, my younger body, a body I lived in sometime in the past. I haven't forgotten that home. I know it and love it. It is fluid and agile and smooth. Busy. Graceful, I remember. Strong. It loves work. It loves to heap the wheelbarrow with steaming sheep manure and wheel it down the hill to the garden. To dump the load, which requires all its strength. To grab the spade and spread the manure over the soil, load after load, in the hot sun. This body I know loves to lie stretched on its side, reading, my hand—this hand, if I don't look down—absent-mindedly stroking up and over its tight ribs, its bony hip, its long smooth thigh. This body I live inside loves to burst into a sprint to retrieve my wallet from the car. To tease the dog with a romp. To dance when no one is home, the childhood ballet poses—arabesques, pirouettes, fifth position. To make love in the light of winter sun, goose-fleshed and generous. This body catches the eye. Its clothes hang easily, comfortably. Its skin is stretched tight. Its hair swishes heavily in a long blond ponytail. This remembered body I live inside moves large in the world, visible, watched, wanted.

But the mirror reminds me I am a middle-aged woman. I have grown invisible in the world. I am shocked by this shift every single day. I walk table to table at a bookstore, moving around other shoppers, picking up books, reading back covers, author's introductions. A young man with soft black curls and gentle eyes steps in tight beside me and reaches across for a best-selling novel. I smile, move farther down, and say, "Sorry, I'm in your way." He glances at me, through me, and goes on reading. No one looks up.

I stand in front of my college class, a room packed full of hormones and smooth flesh. We are talking about Tim O'Brien, Viet Nam. I tell them that, when I was their age, we marched against the war in the streets of Cambridge, that we were chased by cops in riot gear, that we believed we were changing the world. Jessica, a favorite student I know from other classes, says, "It's just so hard for us to imagine you our age. I mean, that you were young and did all these things. That you were ever like us." Twenty young faces nod.

I resist this invisibility. Sometimes the protest is silly: I resent the confident young clerk at the grocery store, her shine and elasticity, her belief that she is here, like this, forever. Sometimes I pity her, her failure to foresee her own inevitable fading. Sometimes I foolishly compete, counting calories and walking extra miles, pretending I'm regaining a few years. Mostly, I'm careful not to look at my reflection in the store window as I walk back out to my car.

But I understand that what I am resisting is not just the inevitability of becoming no longer seen, no longer watched, a giving up of that physicality the world once noticed. What I fight is this certainty: I am slipping along toward erasure, toward no-body. I will die. Once, I was young and vibrant; now, I am in the middle and eclipsed; soon, I will be old, and then I will be gone. Every time I walk unnoted among people, every time I glance in the mirror, every time I look down and see the ropey veins of my hands, I have to tangle, in a quiet, stunned moment, with this underlying truth: I am far along the path.

My mother died before she was old. The mother I remember from my childhood was a miracle of perpetual motion. On two pots of percolated coffee and a pack of Winstons, my mother went to work and came home and cleaned and gardened and cooked her way through each day and long into the night, singing George Gershwin and Ella Fitzgerald tunes. She waxed the floors on her hands and knees with Butcher's Wax, then put her old wool socks on my feet and told me to skate

until the floors shined. She changed the wallpaper or made new curtains on a bored Saturday. Sometimes we would come out of our rooms early in the morning to find the couch reupholstered in red or green or gold. “Do you like it?” she would beam at us. She stripped and refinished chairs and dressers and beds. She sewed clothes for herself and my sister and me, pleated wool skirts and jumpers and sundresses from curtains she had taken down the month before. She cleaned the chimney and kept red paint on the clapboards and replaced wiring in old lamps and helped Sandy build pens in the garage for her sheep. We wore her knitted mittens and sweaters when it snowed. An insomniac, she read in the long quiet of the sleeping house. The next morning, we would hear her singing as she met the new day head on.

She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when she was fifty-two, close to the age I am now. Multiple sclerosis, we read again and again as we searched for hope, is an incurable, progressive disease of the central nervous system. It is an autoimmune disease in which the body itself attacks the myelin sheath which surrounds and protects the nerves in the brain and spinal cord. My mother’s body did not recognize itself, and we were faced with the horror that, cell by cell, it was eating itself to death.

Multiple sclerosis is not a kind disease. What we did not yet understand was that, before she could die, my mother would have to say goodbye to her hands, her feet, her arms, her legs; to living her days without pain; to her sight, her bladder, her bowels; to her speech. She was blessed, in the end, because the nerves in her brain outlasted the rest of her and she did not, as she feared, go crazy.

She was brave. She figured out how to get hand controls in her car, how to cook sitting down, how to visit her mother as if she were still the child, second in line to die, how to call me when she needed bread or milk or my voice to calm the panic, how to think about her past without crying, how to think about her future without crying, how to hold grandchildren in her lap and read quietly when she was tired, how to dress without falling over, how to find clothes with no buttons,

how to make it to the bathroom on time, how to wash out her panties when she didn't and hang them out of sight to dry, how to allow us to empty the urine bag once she was permanently catheterized. Worst of all the rapid changes was the wheelchair, emblem of an end, of losing the fight, of complete and irreversible helplessness. Mum started to have bad dreams: fallen beside her wheelchair, screaming, she was helpless while the house burned down around her. I carry those dreams with me still, her dreams of fiery erasure.

I remember her two bodies. One is young, thin and strong, tanned. In pictures of her when she was about the age of my own remembered self, my imagined body, my mother is at ease, confident, graceful. She is leaning against the kitchen door frame, her gabardine slacks and blouse draping loosely on her strong thin arms and legs. Her eyes flash. She smiles. Her other body is just as vivid: white, her spine collapsed, her hands heavy lumps in her lap, her eyes masked. A long skirt drapes her heavy, shiny legs and hides the urine bag strapped to her calf. Backless, the skirt allows us to change her diapers more easily. This body lies as it is put, a stiff swollen case that holds my mother.

But there is actually a third body I carry with me every day, still: her perfectly beautiful, translucent body transformed in death. She died on a starry December night. I sat with her for many hours after she died, stroking her face, her arms, her hands. I expected to be stunned with grief. I was not. Instead, as my mother's body cooled, I watched a great and mysterious transformation. The devastation from the illness receded, as if time were in rapid reverse. Her skin smoothed. Her arms and legs and hands thinned, as if muscle again held flesh to bone. Her paunchy belly flattened. The etchings of courage against such fear, of effort and grit, left her face. As her body receded into death, I watched its return to the remembered body, to the life she imagined, to the promise and hope, slipping back and back, an erasing of all the years of struggle. And then she was gone. On the bed lay a pure and perfect—sublime—casting of a woman's form, my mother's body.

Each glance in the mirror startles me not only because I am suddenly a middle-aged woman, but because I am so much my mother, before the disease started to claim her body. Here is her smile, lines creasing her cheeks. Thick hair going gray. The sloping nose with the little ball at the end. Mostly the eyes, my mother's eyes which stare back out at me from a life lived and ended.

Sometimes when I laugh I hear my mother's soft, ready laugh. When I sit, curling one foot under me on the chair, I am settling my mother's strong legs. I read, my thumb and little finger holding the book open in my lap, and I am my mother reading. My mother's body is remembered in me, like an echo rising from the past and carrying toward the future. In the mirror, her eyes speak to me from before those years of illness. Middle-aged woman, she is a shadow moving just ahead of me, calling back with the news.

I am memory. Everything I have been is carried here in my body. I am written, the pain and the great love, the surprises, the losses and the findings. The young woman's body I live inside still, that unforgotten home, is a text. It is engraved with memory, my life. Psychologists believe that grief and trauma are taken up by our bodies and held, that we envelope the memory and build it into ourselves, make it part of us, write it into our cells. We think we have mostly forgotten, but our bodies do not. And we remember love. I have often wished that my children could remember all the tender, floating hours of being nursed, of being held into my heart, stroked and safe. Maybe they do remember, maybe their bodies know love and safety. If this is true, then I, also, must carry my mother's love, my father's. Whatever else may have gone wrong, whatever of grief and loss is carried by each of us, so too is love. Nothing is lost.

The wind whips in from the southwest across the icy water of the Strait of Belle Isle. My tent leans and thunders like a sail. Surf crashes on the shore just below. The stars are out, millions of

them, silent and calm in their dome, and a quarter moon silvers the wave crests. This is not a storm. It is always windy in Newfoundland.

I am fifty-three, seeking solitude on this wild and haunting coast. My tent is crouched up against one of the old houses where I have tried to find protection from the ceaseless southwest wind. There is no one here but me. There are six houses, all of them abandoned. They cling to the steep, rocky hill rising from the bay, as if they themselves are boulders that are slipping into the sea. The bright and cheerful paints of the old Newfoundland—red, blue, yellow, ochre, turquoise—have been worn away over the years; the narrow clapboards are soft gray, black where water has entered the wood and started the slow process of rotting. The houses are square, two-storied, practical cubes of hard work and determination. Their hip roofs, nearly flat, are designed to take as little wind as possible. They needn't carry a snow-load; the wind whips it off as it flies. Three of the houses list heavily downhill, like stooped old women. The doors have popped out of their frames from the pressure. Outhouses stand askew. Below, along the shore, several fish sheds ride just above the high water, tilting seaward on rotting pilings. Meadow grass grows high between the houses, but the old paths show clearly still, purposeful paths winding house to house, house to stream, fish-store to cod-stage, cod-stage to shore. In the luminous glow of the night I can see white lace curtains in the windows, tidy remnants of the lives once lived here.

This is Upward Cove, an outpost on Baie Verte on the northern coast. It was abandoned in 1967 when the Canadian government “resettled” Newfoundland’s population, forcibly moving families and clans from their ancestral homes in dozens of remote outposts into population centers where the benefits of modern life—schools, electricity, medical care, plowed roads—could be delivered more economically. This is a ghostly place. I am drawn here. I sit awake in the night watching the sea roil, listening to the stones roll in the surf, longing to move into one of these lonely

houses. The sadness of the place rides on the wind, heavy and unanswerable. All across Newfoundland, the empty outports cling stoically to their mountainsides, resisting the inevitable.

The beauty is so large and so lonely—the green rocky mountains dropping into the sea, the incessant wind, the hushed village—I am content to sit in the lee and watch, all day, all night. Mostly, I listen for the voices that murmur from so many years ago, asking for borrowed butter, reminding about auntie’s bulkhead door, calling the child to her afternoon chores. Someone laughs. Then an answering laugh. Men call up from the fish stage. A boy sings as he stretches a net on the hillside to dry. I remember things I never knew.

The sun rises sharp and clear and warm. The wind dies down, the sea flattens. I sit in the sun in front of one of the old houses, listening to the rich everyday murmur of life, to its thread back in time to other voices that haunt this village. Shadows of its inhabitants slip through the grass, coming and going. The curtains hang white in the morning sun.

In the early afternoon, a woman comes in a rumbling old Ford sedan. I am happy for the company. I smile my greeting as she stops in front of one of the houses that still stands fairly straight. She waves and calls out hello as she stretches. She is about my age, middle-aged. Like most Newfoundland women, she is sturdy and strong-shouldered. There is a perfect practicality to her body and her clothing—a cotton skirt and blouse, sneakers.

“Hello, I’m Carolyn,” she says easily, barely looking at me. “I’m coming to check on me mother’s house.” She pulls a dry mop and plastic bucket filled with rags and sponges from the back seat. “Would you like to come in?”

I am always astonished at the matter of fact welcome in Newfoundland. “Okay,” I say, “if it’s alright. I’d like that. My name is Meredith. I’m camping beside that lower house. I hope that’s okay.”

“Oh, yes,” she says, “yes.” There is a soft, drawn-out patience to her vowels. “No one here to complain anyway, is there now. You’re not hurting anything.”

Carolyn carries her cleaning supplies to the old door, fishes for a key in her pocket and pushes the door open. I’m curious but don’t want Carolyn to know that. I have tried to peer in the windows of all the houses, but the curtains let me see just shadowy shapes. I have imagined broken furniture and boxes, discarded shoes and worn-down hair brushes—what was too old or too useless to make the move to the modern world nearly forty years before—lying about on crumbling linoleum rugs, the molding newspaper underlayment showing at the edges. We enter a front hall with steep stairs rising to the bedrooms above. It is surprisingly bright inside, the afternoon sun filtering through the thin curtains in a pleasant glow. The wallpaper, soft pink roses on trellises, is faded but in perfect condition. The banister and newel post are smooth dark wood, polished smooth and bright. The air is musty. That is the only part of this I expected. I am stunned by the hominess of this decrepit old house. It feels as if its family has been away for a few weeks and is home now to air it out and get back to the rhythms of their daily life. Carolyn stops still, her hands hanging at her sides. I understand in a rush that she stops like this every time she comes here, shocked herself at the life, which still breathes in her childhood home.

“Yes,” she finally says quietly. “Yes, lovey. This is always harder than I think it’s going to be.” She looks to her right into a front room, to the left, lifts her eyes up the stairs, then walks toward the back. “Want to see the kitchen then? Me mother kept a beautiful kitchen, she did. Seven of us kids, five boys, and my mother kept a beautiful home. I wanted her to come out today from town but she says she can’t do it anymore. Me sister doesn’t want to come so it’s just me now.”

I follow Carolyn into the square kitchen. The chrome trim on the green cookstove gleams. The table and chairs and sag-bottomed rocking chair and tin-covered kitchen counter are spotless. Glasses and flowered plates lie on the pantry shelves. A young man in uniform gazes softly from a



framed photograph hanging over the wood box. The door to the ice-box is held open with a wooden spoon. Carolyn bursts into tears. I touch her arm and look away.

The dining room and parlor and four low-ceilinged bedrooms upstairs are time capsules of an old-fashioned life still working in 1967. A sweater hangs on a hook beside a crucifix. The beds are made. Small rugs, braided and hooked, cover the painted floors. “Grammy made these for Mum,” Carolyn says. “She made so many rugs we all have them in our houses.” Water stains course down the corners of several rooms. Except for those terrible reminders that this house is sinking into the ground, that its roof is rotting, its sills, its window frames, the house seems ready for a homecoming. Carolyn moves slowly room to room, opening windows, fingering curtains and bedspreads. “This was my parents’ room,” she says. She opens a drawer in a small table and pulls out a sewing kit bound in frayed pink ribbon. She opens it, lays it on the bed, then closes it again and ties the ribbon carefully. She shuts the drawer again slowly. “It took the longest time for us to believe we were never coming back,” she says. “We packed as if we were going for a month. I was seventeen. I thought someday I would live here, just like me mother did. I thought I was going to get married here and dry the fish and have me children here. Some people tried to stay. But the Government cut the electric and closed the school. They stopped plowing the road and sending in the nurse once a month and people got scared. That was it. Everyone’s scattered now. It’s not like it was. That’s all gone forever.”

Carolyn sits down on her mother’s old bed and stares out the window. She looks older now, as if memory is a weight. As if these sun-filled rooms, waiting for an impossible future, tick along in time, vessels carrying Carolyn toward her own mortality. I think I hear a voice below, and an answer. The white curtains flutter in the summer breeze. I walk back down the stairs and out the front door. Below me, stretching to the shores of Ireland and Scotland and England and France, the sea sparkles in the dispassionate sun. The houses lean toward their own disappearance. They will become heaps

of the past, archeological relics of lives erased. Carolyn picks up her dust mop and bucket, resisting. Someone laughs next door. Shadows slip along the paths in the overgrown grass. I sit by the shore, tossing rocks into the water. The sun creeps across the afternoon, and my shadow follows it. A shadow-arm lifts, throws. Carolyn's mother calls from her kitchen. Carolyn answers, "I'm coming."

As night comes, the wind rises again. I sit in the door of my tent watching the sea slip from blue to purple to black. The shadows fade. The forms of the houses disappear, and I feel a sudden moment of fear, as if I, too, am being erased. I touch my fingers to my face. I am here. I still have time.

The larvae of some insects carry "imaginal cells" which hold the blueprint of certain organs in the mature insect. We know that blueprints are carried in DNA. But it has been a surprise that cells themselves can carry as memory their future form, separate from DNA. Only a very few of these cells, sometimes called "imaginal primordia," initially live among the larval cells. They are quiet during most of the larva's life, patient repositories of eons of evolution, nests of memory of what the insect will become. When the larva has matured and is ready to transform into its adult form, the imaginal cells start to cluster, and then to organize into strings of potential. Head structures, legs, internal organs arise from these masses of imaginal cells. For members of the *Papilio* genus of butterflies, this means that the imaginal cells abide quietly in the soup of the chrysalis, knowing all along just what they will become: fluted wings, legs, haired antennae. The mystery of this metamorphosis becomes more astonishing. Memory of the very form itself is carried in these cells, memory of all past generations, transmitters into the future. Clusters of reassurance binding past and future.

Among my mother's old papers, I find a small photograph of a young child. She is

wearing a red corduroy jacket with a peaked hood. Her small fingers hold the end of the hood's cord in her mouth. Nearly-white hair slips from under the hood. Her head is tilted and she stares straight at the camera with a wide, soft, trusting gaze. The irises of her eyes are so large they make her eyes look black with a thin halo of deep, deep blue. Her eyes catch me: a child so ready, unmasked, unguarded. I am this child. There is my hand, my chin, one ear.

There is another photograph: an eleven-year-old girl in a yellow dress she has sewn herself, with buttons from the hem to the throat, a softly gathered skirt and narrow belt. She is barefoot, leaning against a tree. Her arms and legs are smooth and boneless like a young child's, but small breasts press at the buttoned dress. Her hands are clasped around the tree behind her, leaving her exposed to the camera, but her eyes are shadowed from the bright summer light. I am this girl, these eyes, these legs and arms, this thick hair in the same ponytail I wear now. I remember this day, this time of coming to my new body, of the dawning awareness that I lived in the world, that I had a past, and that a future was coming which I could not imagine.

I am this child. Sometimes I glance in the mirror as I brush my hair back in an elastic band, and there I am: still those girls gazing back at the world with the same blue eyes. We all recognize each other, the child and the woman we could not yet imagine.

The human body absorbs minerals from the soil in whatever area we grow up in. These minerals bind with our teeth and bones, and bind us to the earth itself. Otzi, the Neolithic "Iceman" found mummified in the permafrost of Austria's mountains, actually grew up in a valley in northern Italy. We know this because his teeth carry molecules of specific minerals—lead and strontium—in a chemical signature unique to that valley. My teeth and bones must carry isotopes—iron? magnesium? selenium?—from the soils of southern New Hampshire, from a small town on the beautiful, rich marshes of the coastal plain. I will die somewhere else. When I die, the minerals that

have become me will be released into the soil—in Maine or Newfoundland or maybe even Turkey—and will rebind with indigenous minerals in the soil, microscopic testaments to a life. Another girl, there, will eat her carrots, drink her milk, absorb the minerals of her native soil, and carry me in her teeth and in her bones.

The stream roars its steady rhythms as I paint my cabin. A family of otters, two adults and a baby, fish at the old beaver dam where the stream leaves my little pond. The only sounds I have heard since I arrived three days ago are the eagle screaming from the sentinel pines ringing the pond and a pair of loons who fly over at dawn, calling in their wild, warbling voice. I am in the middle of Maine's northern wilderness, seven miles from the nearest electric pole and three from the closest hunting camp. I lug my water from the pond, and read by lantern light.

My sons, Alex and Benjamin and Paul, helped me build the cabin two years ago. It's small, sixteen feet by twenty. It was hard, hard work. Every single piece of lumber had to be carried three hundred yards down a steep hill on a very rough moose path. I lost weight, became muscle again, slept deeply in the old square tent we lived in for the summer.

I got to know the land. Just behind where the cabin was rising, I found the remnants of an old logging camp where men had worked the forest with horses and waited for the spring melt to run their winter's work down the rushing stream to the lakes. The bunk house, small barn and cook camp are piles of rotten logs and broken windows; mature trees are rooted in the rich humus of the decaying logs. The old cookstove, rusted, its parts strewn over ten feet, lies hidden under a stand of moose maple. Orange and red and brilliant yellow mushrooms erupt each summer in the camp remains. When the six or seven feet of standing snow melts in the late-spring, I find more bottles—whiskey, liniment, vinegar—thrust up through the moss by the frost.

We cleared just enough of the white cedar and hemlock trees to tuck the little building into the woods at the edge of the pond. After emptying the new load of lumber and materials from the trailer and lugging it down the path on our shoulders, we spent long days making our way through the piles of new lumber. We laid the ribbons and joists, insulated the box and stapled hardware cloth and screening to keep mice and burrowing insects out of the insulation. Then we raised the first floor walls, the upper and lower plates and studs, framing out the rough openings looking out on the pond. We decked the second floor and raised the bedroom walls. Then hair-raising days of setting the ridge and rafters, and sheathing and shingling the steep roof. Windows next, a lot of them because I love the light. Then the doors. Outside trim and clapboards. Insulation. We nailed pine boards horizontally on the inside walls, laid the floors and built a little kitchen with an old slate sink and gas stove. My sons managed to bring an old iron bathtub for sponge baths and a new woodstove down the path, and winter came. In the end, it took seventeen trailer-loads of tools, lumber, shingles, nails, insulation, windows and doors, brought from home four hours away and then carried down the moose path on our shoulders, to put together this little cabin. We built it to last. My sons and their children will come to this wild place, listen to the loons on the pond in the night and eat good food at the table we built.

Today I am staining the clapboards a second coat. The late-summer day is cool and breezy. The pond shimmers with sunlight. A kingfisher sits in her favorite cedar snag at the edge of the pond and cackles. Below me, a wild garden of ferns and bunchberry and bead lily spreads in the moss. One sprig of brilliant red maple leaves, the herald of winter coming, catches the light like a gem. I climb down the ladder and move it over four feet, climb back up and work under the eaves with my brush. The wind sighs in the pines and spruces over my head.

The world outside feels chaotic to me. Here, in short respites, I find myself. I remember a slow-motion calm. There is a perfect system here of evolution, the universe silently revolving,

expanding. Rhythms of light and dark, warmth and cold, abundance and need, growth and decay. I enter and feel the reassurance that I am part of that perfect order. Invisible in the busy world, an aging woman beyond the pulse of making and doing, here I participate in the fecundity and beneficence of earth and water. I come back to myself. I am beautiful, strong, bursting with life.

I catch my reflection in the window as I paint: the middle-aged face, mine, stretching back to that gazing child, and my mother—fading blue eyes, squint lines, jowls forming. My hands as I paint are my mother's, the extra skin and thickened knuckles. Signs of arthritis, I'm sure, an old woman's condition. But here, my small life is measured against such an enormity of time I don't panic. I will die. Mystery and no mystery. The pond will reflect sunlight and ice over and melt and rush the two hundred miles to sea. The moss will die in drought summers and glow like jewels in wet seasons. The bear who leaves muddy paw prints on my outhouse will be another bear. Venus will dominate the evening and predawn skies. No need to panic.

This is a sturdy cabin. It will hold. Carolyn's house in Upward Cove and the remains of the bunkhouse rotting back to soil behind my cabin keep me from the conceit that it is forever. But as I stain the clapboards and sashes, laid up by my hands in lovely square and true, I am at ease. The day is long. I have a lot of work to do. Then ripe tomatoes for my supper. Later, I will sit by the shore as the light seeps slowly from the pond. My shadow will float among those lengthening on the water. I will rise and make my way back into the cabin's soft glow, part of the world.

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