

Bar Haven Suite

Josephine Rowe

BAR HAVEN IS an island in Newfoundland, Canada. In 1966 it was entirely depopulated, as were many outport communities like it, as part of a government scheme to modernise the flagging provincial economy. Families were paid \$1000 for their land and directed to designated growth areas on the mainland. Houses were lifted from foundations onto rafts made of birch logs and oil drums, then towed across Placentia Bay. It's an image you'll find on every other lounge room wall throughout Newfoundland – the double-storey weatherboard floating eerily in open water. On Bar Haven, all that was left behind were the cemetery and church, and the stone doorsteps to show where the houses had stood. For several decades the only residents were moose and caribou, the forest gradually erasing evidence of human inhabitants. But if you go there nowadays, in the summer months (piloting a boat from Swift Current through forty-five minutes of Atlantic fog) you'll likely find somebody at work; repairing the wharf, or putting the finishing touches on a cabin. The government never quite got around to transferring the land away, and those who were forced to leave half a century ago are slowly returning to the island of their childhood.

The Drowned House

Your father guiding the small boat
through thick salt fog, hands easy
on the wheel, his missing thumb
briefly obvious

(later you'll be surprised he told me
the real story

oil rig machinery; no
monstrous fish or tricks with knives).

Two-hundred feet beneath us
the double-storey weatherboard
settled on its side amongst rusted oil drums
skeleton of the birch raft it drowned inside

picture frames still wired into the
architraves, windows crowded with
broken crockery, blankets, boots

no, I could never imagine it empty.

Now thin boys skindive
from collapsing hand-wrought jetties

scrabbling at the seafloor like otters
to surface with medicine bottles
and carnival glass.

Whale Heart

An album of photocopies of photographs of
the ancestors. A woman whose face is always
scratched out. The interior of the once-beautiful
church. Young men on the deck of a whaling boat
cutting the tail and fins from a captive humpback;
a crude blade attached to a long wooden pole. The
whale still alive while this happens, though weak
enough to be lashed to the side of the boat. The
boys pose shirtless, triumphant around the immense
carcass, their lean arms around each other's shoulders.
We try to make out which organ lies at their feet.
How big is the heart of a whale? But nobody knows.

St Francis Xavier

When they came to burn the church
the paths were already grown over
left to the meanderings of moose and caribou
all the houses long since lifted
from foundations, coaxed across
Placentia Bay like rickety wooden
animals.
Nothing left here but the gravestones
jutting from the hill like broken teeth
the rotting nets tangled in the shoreline.
Flames reflected in the oil-black water.

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Bored kids in a borrowed skiff
admiring their work. Drinking Screech
in the quiet fiery harbour

smelling petrol on their fingers
each time they bring the bottle to their lips.

Small Archaeology

She unearths her own history, relics recovered
from the foundations of the ruined church;

string of rosary beads, a glass vase, a salt shaker,
Christ without the crucifix, the wood burned
away, the heat-warped saviour held in Bar Haven

silt for forty years, alongside anointing
bottles, part of a railing, shards of stained
glass worn smooth and harmless at the edges.

No one object more holy or precious than the others
none held for any longer in her hands.

Moose Nests

The old path opens into a clearing,
and in that clearing

loses itself
so that we too are lost

here the grass is flattened
in a dozen wide circles

where the moose have made their nests –

sleeping with their great shaggy faces
turned towards the ocean

keeping watch for lights
pricking the harbour

the memory of men distant
as a dream
but still flickering.

Doorstep

We kick through waist-high grass
on the western side of the island
feeling with our booted feet for the slab
of stone that was once the doorstep
to your mother's house.

Yes, we are very young. We are not
sure if the important things
have happened to us yet.