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# "There Are Things You Don't Get Over"
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Caitlin Charman

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# "There Are Things You Don't Get Over": Resistant Mourning in Lisa Moore's *February*

Caitlin Charman

> One must wonder how a technology that protects man as he ventures to the moon and back cannot protect him from his ancient enemy, the sea. The answer lies not in logic, but in the modern science of economics. Drilling rigs could indeed be fabricated to resist any environmental force known to man; but so to construct them would render the venture that they are designed to service economically unfeasible. Thus the sea continues to claim its toll in lives, and those who seek to diminish that toll recognize that any progress that they make will merely be relative to the higher costs that might have been.
> — Royal Commission on the *Ocean Ranger* Marine Disaster, *Report Two* (21)

In an attempt to stem the rising tide of panic among Louisiana's restaurateurs, who, in the midst of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, were worried that they would be unable to serve local shellfish, British Petroleum representative Randy Prescott famously said that "Louisiana isn't the only place that has shrimp" (qtd. in Gadbois). In addition to being one of the worst public relations gaffes in recent memory, Prescott's comment reveals the tendency of the oil industry to treat local places as homogeneous sites that can be exchanged with one another, with little or no consequence, and illustrates the industry's belief that local communities should heal quickly from the traumas caused by oil rig disasters. It is this neoliberal rhetoric of exchange that Lisa Moore's novel *February* critiques in its portrayal of the sinking of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger* off the coast of Newfoundland in 1982.[1]

As *February* demonstrates, the same mentality that treats places solely as sites for resource extraction also treats people as exchangeable and dispensable. Perhaps more importantly, though, the novel shows how Helen's refusal to simply *get over* the death of her husband resists

the kind of corporate amnesia that treats people and places as easily replaceable. In her work on modernism and the elegy, Patricia Rae contends that an increasing body of scholarship recognizes the political and ethical potential of refusing to complete the "work" of mourning:

> At the heart of what has been called a "depathologizing" of melancholia, a movement whose recommendations extend to struggles with the loss of places, abstractions, and ideals, even with "the past" as a broad abstraction, has been a sense that such "work" amounts to a forgetting of, or an abdication of responsibility for, what has been lost, and that this amnesia has been too often demanded and paid in the interests of preserving the *status quo*. (18)

As I argue in this essay, in their rhetoric of efficiency, profit, and risk assessment, oil companies and governments tend to treat both people and places as abstractions. But in her insistence that the loss of her husband is irrevocable, that her memory can provide only a fragmentary and incomplete re-creation of his life, and that her mourning will last for decades, Helen resists the status quo. Her prolonged grief suggests that "resistant mourning," a concept advocated by proponents such as Jacques Derrida and R. Clifton Spargo, might offer the possibility of an ethical response to the tragedies caused by resource extraction.

**Drowning in Memory**

In their analyses of Newfoundland history and culture, scholars have long been concerned with the extent to which Newfoundlanders have been shaped by a series of devastating losses. According to Paul Chafe, Newfoundlanders are haunted by the "loss of independence, the loss of the cod fishery, the loss of countless lives to the sea, and the loss of opportunity," and he suggests that these losses have "forged the collective psyche of Newfoundlanders and left a distinctive trace on their art and literature" (93). The "distinctive trace" left by loss has not necessarily been viewed in a positive light, however. Scholars have argued that Newfoundlanders' preoccupation with and interpretation of history are at best overly sentimental and nostalgic and at worst a pathological, melancholic, and distorted fixation.

In the field of literary criticism, this tendency to treat Newfoundlanders' preoccupation with the past as a pathological

obsession began with Patrick O'Flaherty's *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (1979), the most influential and comprehensive "survey of literary responses to Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders over the centuries" (ix). O'Flaherty identifies two predominant responses to loss and environment in Newfoundland writing. In his insightful review of *The Rock Observed*, Terry Whalen characterizes these opposing traditions as the Romantic, or "socially rebellious," and the stoic (35). According to Whalen, whereas the works that O'Flaherty admires possess "a quality of strong and humble stoicism in both the land and mindscape, a subdued and at the same time epic tenacity," O'Flaherty shows "little willingness . . . to learn from the Romantic tradition of Newfoundland writing or from its socially rebellious one. Both of these other traditions (very often related) are evoked only for quick dismissal" (35).

The reception of *February* has resparked this discussion on the value of the "Romantic tradition of Newfoundland writing" (Whalen 35).[2] Like O'Flaherty, *February*'s detractors have treated any trace of sentimentality in the novel with skepticism and derision. The most prominent debate took place in the pages of the *National Post* in July 2009, when columnist Barbara Kay (who, incidentally, had not read the novel at the time) was inexplicably incensed by Katherine Laidlaw's "'gushy' profile of Moore" (Woods) and was inspired to write a vociferous response, "Unreadably Canadian." Perhaps not surprisingly, given that Kay was writing in a national newspaper, she suggests that *February*'s preoccupation with the past is not a Newfoundland trait but a *Canadian* one; moreover, for Kay, as the title of her editorial indicates, the adjective "Canadian" does not evoke positive connotations: "I'm chary about experimenting with any Canadian author who gets a good review, especially for a novel that's up for the Giller Prize. I've been burned several times by Giller-endorsed, but virtually unreadable CanLit. They're all jumbled together in memory as feminized paeans to a sepulchral past, mired in poetically lyrical, but navel-gazing narrative stasis." Perhaps more disturbing than her pretensions to review a novel that she has not read, and to assess the politics of literary prize giving and canon making based partially on that novel, is the barely concealed misogynistic undertone of her piece; according to her logic, CanLit is "unreadable" because it is fixated on the past, a feminine (read boring and unworthy) topic for literature.

For Kay, the masculine adventure novel is a more fitting genre for a disaster such as the *Ocean Ranger*: "Such a disaster is a natural fictional platform for an enthralling blockbuster along the lines of Sebastian Junger's 1997 book *The Perfect Storm*." Unfortunately, says Kay, "In *February*, typically, it serves instead as background for the novel's actual subject: the feelings generated by the tragedy in the male victim's relations." She refers to Helen, the widowed protagonist, as a "surrogate victim" whom she says Moore employs to "deflect . . . attention from the tragedy and its male victim," and she asks us to "imagine if, instead of narrating the actual drama of the 1917 Halifax explosion in his riveting 1941 novel, *Barometer Rising*, Hugh MacLennan had chosen to focus, as we are told *February* does, on the 'swelling loneliness and eventual letting-go' of one woman bereft of a beloved husband in the conflagration. Zzzzzz."[3]

In sum, though Kay does not employ the word, her criticism of *February* is that it — and by extension all CanLit — is not *stoic* enough: "CanLit . . . it's all about nobly suffering women or feminized men: men immobilized in situations of physical, physiological or economic impotence (that is when they're not falling through ice and nearly drowning), rather than demonstrating manly courage in risk-taking or heroic mode." Instead of the novel that Moore did write, Kay would rather read "a sympathetic narration focused on the 'lonely and terrifying deaths' of strong, psychologically unconflicted men nobly attending to work no woman would do, the appalling cataclysm of the oil rig's collapse, an exploration of the individual lives that were cut short so horrifically and, *of course last and least*, the impact of their loss on survivors" (emphasis added). As Woods suggests, "it's impossible to take seriously a critic whose pre-judgements are so ingrained and politically charged," and that is true: Kay's analysis would be easily dismissed as uninformed, polemical tripe except that, in her tendency to privilege the stoic, and in her insinuation that the victims should just *get over it already*, her rhetoric echoes — and is echoed by — both popular and literary critics (and bears an unsettling similarity to British Petroleum's response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill not long after).

In *Canadian Notes and Queries*, for example, Nathan Whitlock acknowledges "that 'feminized' is a bit of a giveaway that Kay had more on her agenda than mere literary engagement, and indeed Kay's hobbyhorse rocks furiously into action," and he contends that her article

"makes you wonder if Kay sees *MacGyver* novelizations as the apex of literary achievement." Yet he too asks, "must every single character be so drowned in memory? Must every scene be so thoroughly haunted by the past?" Like Kay, Whitlock maintains that *February* is just too emotional, and because of the abundance of emotion he concludes that it is a "Highbrow Harlequin": "*February* is a deeply sentimental, even corny novel at its heart. You should never judge a novel by its bare plot, but Moore can't quite conceal the fact that her novel is about a widow who learns to accept her husband's death — and even finds new love!" Even some of the novel's admirers accept the terms of the debate. In her praise of the novel, for example, Carla Maria Lucchetta says that "Loneliness is hard to write about without becom[ing] maudlin or clichéd. But Moore never errs on the side of sentimentality." And Herb Wyile, who eloquently praises *February*'s "incisive understanding of the political and economic tensions of the province's position in a neoliberal, globalized economic order," sees Helen as a "beleaguered but stoic amputee" (56, 58).[4]

In part, this shockingly callous dismissal of "a widow who learns to accept her husband's death" — and the implication that Moore should try to "conceal" this plot line (Whitlock) — are unfortunate continuations of the tradition of disparaging "female" subject matter by suggesting that it is just *too emotional* to be great literature. However, our discomfort with death and prolonged public mourning is also part of a larger cultural shift in Western society. According to Meghan O'Rourke, "Until the twentieth century, private grief and public mourning were allied in most cultures." Citing the work of Philippe Ariès, she notes that, "Even at the turn of the twentieth century, 'the death of a man still solemnly altered the space and time of a social group that could be extended to include the entire community.'" But shortly thereafter, "mourning rituals in the West began to disappear, for reasons that were not entirely evident." Peter Homans attributes this decline to the deterioration of community and to increasing "*privatization, individualization*, and *psychologization*" (6).

Kay's and Whitlock's claim that *February* is *just* a boring story about a widow — a "surrogate victim" to use Kay's phrase — and Kay's insistence on establishing a rigid hierarchy of victimization reflect this cultural shift toward the privatization and individualization of mourning. In itself, her championing of the masculine adventure tale is not

particularly problematic — rollicking adventure stories do have their merits, after all, but Kay's desire to isolate victims from survivors is based on the faulty assumption that we are separate from place, and disconnected from each other, and that therefore when we lose someone in the community we should be able to detach ourselves and move on with our lives quite easily.

As Moore argues in an interview with Suzannah Showler, however, a tragedy of this scope is imprinted in place, and its ramifications last "for generations": "I wanted to show that this is not the kind of disaster that just hits the headlines and then goes away. This is the kind of thing that continues to affect people who are left behind for generations. It wasn't just the loss of those men, awful as that was, it was also that their families were scarred. In fact, the whole province was" ("Once Moore"). As a result, *February* does not just focus on "female grief and loss" (Kay) in isolation but also alternates between Helen's grief and that of her son, John, and shows the ripple effects of the tragedy throughout the community.

The impetus to treat the *Ocean Ranger* disaster with stoic acceptance is also tied to the fear that if it becomes "a debilitating psychic wound" — Brian Peckford's expression for Newfoundland's obsession with the past (Bannister 132) — it will impede future economic development and progress. As sociologist Douglas House suggests, once the Royal Commission reports were finished, and once the legal settlements were concluded, both governments and corporations expected closure: "They saw the *Ocean Ranger* disaster as extremely unfortunate but, like any other crisis, it was something that had to be dealt with and put out of the way. It was a chapter to be closed" (88). In turn, many families felt that the federal and provincial governments, along with Mobil and ODECO (the Ocean Drilling & Exploration Company), treated them as an inconvenience to be dealt with efficiently and expediently so that business could continue as usual.

Over two decades later, efforts to "close" the "chapter" on the *Ocean Ranger* disaster have proven, unfortunately, to be rather successful. As Moore notes, "When I went to research the book there was very little material information available. There was almost nothing written: just the Royal Commission and a few books and documentaries" ("Once Moore"). Two major works have appeared since Moore began researching her novel, Mike Heffernan's oral history of the disaster (2009) and

Susan Dodd's *The* Ocean Ranger*: Remaking the Promise of Oil* (2012). Yet too often the disaster seems to be largely absent from discussions of the offshore oil industry's safety record in Canada. In a lengthy front-page *Globe and Mail* column following the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, for example, Shawn McCarthy quoted Max Ruelokke, then chair of the Canada-Newfoundland Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board. Ruelokke tried to distinguish BP's actions in the United States from the practices of offshore drilling in Canada: "[I]t appears BP employed questionable drilling methods that would not be condoned in the Canadian offshore," he remarked, maintaining that in Canada "the sector has an outstanding safety record"; however, he did not mention the number of injuries sustained since offshore drilling began, the deaths of the men on *Cougar* Flight 491 in 2009, or the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy. Moreover, there is a great deal of speculation about whether the industry does have a good safety record and about whether it is prepared to prevent future disasters. Although Ruelokke claimed that Canadian regulations are far stronger than American ones, according to Thomas Walkom, "American regulation of the offshore oil industry has been revealed as a sham. Our regulation of drilling in the far harsher North Atlantic and Arctic is said by experts to be even weaker." Such claims raise questions about the continued safety of both people and place in the current regulatory environment.

## Going Overboard

Wendell Berry argues that there is an explicit link between treating places primarily as sites for resource extraction and treating people like exchangeable parts. This kind of "commodified speech," says Berry, is the "chief instrument of economic and political power," and it is problematic because it skews our values:

> As [American writer] Guy Davenport saw it, nothing now exists that is so valuable as whatever theoretically might replace it. Every place must anticipate the approach of the bulldozer. No place is free of the threat implied in such phrases as "economic growth," "job creation," "natural resources," "human capital," "bringing in industry," even "bringing in culture" — as if every place is adequately identified as "the environment" and its people as readily replaceable parts of a machine. ("American Imagination" 21)

Of course, speaking in generalizations and abstractions is not inherently a bad thing. But for Berry, generalization *without* particularization is unethical: "But generalization alone, without the countervailing, particularizing power of imagination, is dehumanizing and destructive" (33). In *February*, Helen's response to inquiries about her compensation for her husband's death is a poignant reminder of the "dehumanizing" potential of "commodified speech" and of the violence of a rhetoric of abstraction not balanced by particularization:

> People who want to know about the settlement seem to think a life has a figure attached to it. A leg is worth what? An arm? A torso? What if you lose a whole husband? What kind of money do you get for that? They think a husband amounts to a sum. A dead husband does not add up to an amount, Helen is tempted to tell these people. (20)

These graphic images of dismemberment make it clear that people are not the sum of their parts and that to speak of people as "readily replaceable parts of a machine" is morally repugnant.

However, the idea that people and places are exchangeable, like parts of a machine, has become common in an age when we prioritize efficiency and profit. The subordination of place to time and space led to what Bill McKibben refers to as "the efficiency revolution" (7) or what Janice Stein calls "the cult of efficiency" (7). Stein maintains that "efficiency, when it is understood correctly as the best possible use of scarce resources to achieve a valued end, is undoubtedly important" (6). The problem with current discussions of efficiency, however, is that they treat it as "an end in itself, a value often more important than others" (3).

Stein argues that this transformation of efficiency from a means to an end "misuses language," transforms efficiency into a cult, and affects how we imagine "public life" (3, 4). Moreover, the "misuse" of language has a moral component; to put it in Berry's words, "the reclassification of the world from creature to machine must involve at least a perilous reduction of moral complexity" (*Life* 8). Moore, in her tongue-in-cheek portrayal of John's interview with Shoreline Group, "an efficiency agency" that works for corporations such as Shell and Mobil (*February* 136), satirizes the tendency of the oil industry to treat efficiency with a cult-like reverence, and she critiques the "perilous reduc-

tion of moral complexity" that results from its "misuse" of language: "Shoreline Group specialized in risk assessment, organizational restructuring. They specialized in all the touchy-feely stuff from the 1980s: lateral thinking, creativity in the workplace, psychological support during downsizing or natural disaster, pink slips, sweater-vests and distressed denim, a bold new self-generating speak that boiled over and reduced to a single, perfect word: *efficiency*" (130). Although the "sweater vests," "distressed denim," and "touchy-feely stuff" are supposed to convey a sense of humanity, they really amount to corporate speak for one value and one value only: efficiency.

Stein contends that, in recent years, this rhetoric of efficiency has been increasingly used "to promote values that lie largely outside the parameters of the market," and this shift has profoundly altered our notion of community (13). Whereas efficiency was once understood as a means to achieve community, the logic has been reversed — community is now perceived as a means to achieve efficiency (14). It is this perversion of logic that Helen questions in her critique of the oil companies' rhetoric of "risk assessment" and "the public good":

> The oil companies were all about acceptable levels of risk and they always had been. They spoke of possible faults in the system and how to avoid them.
>
> . . . They asked the public to consider the overall good to be achieved when we do take risks. They spoke in that back-assed way and what they meant was: If you don't do the job, we'll give it to someone who will.
>
> They meant: There's money to be made.
>
> They meant: We will develop the economy.
>
> They meant there isn't any risk, so shut the fuck up about it. Except they didn't say *fuck*, they said: Consider the overall public good. (118)

Moore's use of *apophasis* — listing what the companies do not say — and her repetition of "they meant" emphasize the discrepancy between what the oil companies say and what their sanitized speech actually signifies. In their discussion of "public good," the oil companies are speaking not "the language of community" but "the language of the market," which means that, in reality, their rhetoric has nothing to do with the public or with the good (Stein 14). For oil companies, "public good" equals profit, and this rhetoric of profit reinforces their cult-like

dogma of economic growth as an end in itself. Moreover, their calculations of "acceptable levels of risk" are based on the arrogant assumption that we can determine the value of human life — an assumption that amounts to the "perilous reduction of moral complexity" of which Berry speaks (*Life* 8).

This passage is followed by Helen's memory of discovering her pregnancy, described, ironically, using the language of "risk assessment":

> Helen had not for a minute thought she was pregnant. She hardly knew Cal (although she knew everything important). She hadn't thought it was at all probable that she would fall in love. Love was a fault she could easily have avoided if she (1) hadn't been tipsy; (2) knew about risk assessment then and all the ways to avoid risk; (3) wasn't in love already. (118-19)

Such a jarring juxtaposition between the language of love and the language of efficiency emphasizes the inappropriateness of using "the language of the market" outside the marketplace and leads us to question whether this type of rhetoric ought to be used "to promote values that lie largely outside the parameters of the market" (Stein 13). Furthermore, it compels us to ask what it is that we value, and it suggests (to borrow the words of Edward Luttwak) that "because everything that we value in human life is within the realm of inefficiency — love, family, attachment, community, culture, old habits, comfortable old shoes" — we really "ought to have only as much market efficiency as [we] need" (qtd. in Stein 1).

In addition to changing the way in which we perceive ourselves and our relationships with others, the "mechanical worldview" also profoundly changed our relationship with place: "The development and refinement of machines extended the horizon of human possibilities, first to control and then to master nature, and enabled a discussion of efficiency as increasing productivity, as an almost limitless capacity to produce more and more at the same cost" (Stein 18). John's comparison between Shoreline Group and his previous employer, an oil industry sales company, highlights the connection among the "mechanical worldview," the desire to dominate nature, and the incessant drive to maximize efficiency and minimize cost. In his previous job, "John had sold a shitload of drill bits, and the line his company gave was all about penetration. The terminology was sexual and violent: The bits were hard

and the sea floor was wet and it resisted and finally gave, and there was nothing a good bit couldn't penetrate" (139). As ecofeminists such as Annette Kolodny argue, "gendering the land as feminine" (8) allowed early American colonists "to experience the New World landscape" as "an object of domination" (5), and it was one way of making the land less "threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating" (9). Likewise, the oil industry's rapacious rhetoric of violent penetration represents an attempt to dominate and subdue the newest frontier of exploration: the seascape.

For Berry, "the idea that the world, its creatures, and all the parts of its creatures are machines" is problematic precisely because it "institutionalizes the human wish, or the sin of wishing, that life might be, or might be made to be, predictable" (*Life* 6). And, as the loss of life and limb on the oil rigs in *February* illustrates, our belief that we can manage nature efficiently, or make it "predictable," is hubris. As John observes during his helicopter crash simulation, even with the advances in technology and safety training since the *Ocean Ranger* disaster, working on an oil rig in the middle of the ocean, and travelling to get there, are still incredibly perilous: "No man would ever survive the North Atlantic for more than five minutes without a survival suit that fit properly, even if he could swim. And the chances of surviving a helicopter crash, even with the suit, were next to nothing. Every man knew that" (185). The real-life crash of *Cougar* Flight 491 on 12 March 2009 while on its way to the Hibernia platform, which resulted in the deaths of seventeen men (all but one of the men onboard), was an unfortunate reminder of the truth of this sentiment.

This illusion of mastery over nature is predicated on the faulty notion that we are separate from environment, and, according to Arnold Berleant, our false perception that we are detached from place leads to the "domination and exploitation" of environment (5).[5] Moreover, this false perception influences not just our treatment of environment but also our treatment of each other: "Because of the central place of the human factor, an aesthetics of environment profoundly affects our moral understanding of human relationships and our social ethics" (12-13). In other words, our ethical treatment of each other is grounded in our *implacement*, to use philosopher Edward Casey's expression.

The idea that ethics are grounded in place is not a new one, Casey argues: "Both 'politics' and 'ethics' go back to Greek words that signify

place: *polis* and *ethea*, 'city-state' and 'habitats,' respectively. The very word 'society' stems from *socius*, signifying 'sharing' — and sharing is done in a common place" (*Fate* xiv). In its original conception, *efficiency*, along with its ethical foundation, was also rooted in place and community. Tracing the etymology of the word back to the ancient Greeks, and to Plato's belief that the ideal state was achieved by a division of labour that enabled each citizen to "perform . . . the most efficient role in society," Stein contends that accountability, "of citizens to the polis . . . and of the *polis* to its citizens," is a crucial aspect of the Platonic model of efficiency (17). In other words, for Plato, efficiency was predicated on place attachment and on the idea that we are connected to one another *in place*.

Oil corporations are as obsessed with efficiency as were the governments of Plato's day, but unlike the *polis*, which was accountable to its citizens, multinational corporations have no local place attachment, and as a result they lack a sense of reciprocity with and accountability to local citizens. That the oil industry's lack of place attachment "profoundly impacts" its "moral understanding of human relationships and social ethics" and disrupts its sense of accountability can be seen in Moore's portrayal of how "the families were informed" — or rather *not* informed — of the deaths of their loved ones on the *Ocean Ranger*:

> That's the way the families were informed: It's on the radio. Turn on the radio. Nobody from the oil company called.
>
> What must have happened was this: the men had not been dead an hour and the company had public relations on it. They had lawyers. Helen can imagine the meeting in the boardroom. Or maybe it happened all on the phone. She can imagine the kind of language employed.
>
> Or there was horror. Of course there was horror and it had numbed them. When did words like *situation* enter the vocabulary? Because Helen believes they thought of it that way. She believes they all wanted to *manage the situation*. (*February* 268)

Helen tries to imagine various reasons why the company failed to inform the families personally, but each time she is stumped:

> But Helen can get no further. Because how did they get to the idea *Let's not phone the families*.
>
> How did they come up with that?

> And further: How was such an idea spoken aloud, given form, enunciated? (269).

That the company made no effort at personal contact with the families — and that it dealt with the deaths of its employees at arm's length through lawyers, public relations people, and management rhetoric — are so appalling to Helen that she cannot fathom such an approach.

One of the novel's main criticisms of the oil industry, and the economy on which it is based, is that they disrupt genuine human attachments to place. The trauma of losing her husband, for example, causes Helen to feel displaced and exiled within her own home: "She was outside. The best way to describe what she felt: She was banished. Banished from everyone, and from herself" (13). In the midst of her grief, she feels detached and disconnected from "the world": "By *outside* Helen meant that there was a transparent wall, a partition between her and the world" (20). Despite her grief, however, she makes every effort to maintain a normal home for her children and to mitigate their feelings of grief and displacement:

> Helen wanted the children to think she was on the inside, with them. The outside was an ugly truth she planned to keep to herself.
>
> It was an elaborate piece of theatre, this lying about the true state of where she was: outside.
>
> She pretended by making breakfast and supper (though she often relied on chicken nuggets and frozen pizza) and she did the children's homework with them. (13-14)

For all her best efforts, however, Helen is unable to keep the "ugly truth" of "the outside" all "to herself"; her children, to varying degrees, reveal signs that they too feel displaced by the loss of their father.

Although Helen tries to provide a stable home for the children, Cal's death has a profound effect on John, and, not surprisingly, it disrupts his sense of order and stability. He is haunted by nightmares (92); he suffers from chronic stomach aches (17-18); he develops nervous habits (14); and, at the tender age of ten, he believes that he needs to become the man of the house (16). Perhaps even more devastating, though, is the effect that Cal's death has on John's ability to form romantic attachments in his adult life. Having witnessed his mother's grief following the loss of her husband, John believes that allowing himself to fall in love is too dangerous: "How foolish his parents were to love like

that. How foolish to have so many children. They had no money. He wants to ask his mother, What were you thinking? . . . Why did you love each other so much? It destroyed you. Don't give that much, he wants to say. People don't have to give that much" (107). John thinks of romantic love in terms of risk assessment and is so devoted to the idea of averting heartache and remaining in control of his emotions that he dodges fatherhood like the plague: "John has avoided being a father all his adult life. . . . He has practised withdrawal. He has kept what he wants, what he *actually* wants for his life, in the centre of his thoughts even while in the throes of orgasm. He's kept a tight fist on the reins of himself" (238). That, while on a business trip to Iceland, he impregnates a graduate student named Jane (who, ironically, studies homelessness) illustrates that the "withdrawal" method is as ineffective a model for human relationships as it is a form of birth control. And the idea that we can master and control nature is proven yet again to be an illusion.

**The Wall of Water**

As I have argued, the actions of the oil industry are unethical not only because they lead to displacement and detachment among people, and between people and place, but also because they disregard the *particularities* of people and place. For Berry, ethics are grounded not just in place but also in the recognition that people, places, and events are unique and non-exchangeable ("American Imagination" 32-33). Belief in the uniqueness of people and places is also one of the key justifications for what Spargo variously refers to as "a resistant strain of mourning" (6), "unresolved mourning" (6), or "melancholia" (11), and it forms the basis of Helen's ethics of mourning in *February*. Spargo's writings, says Rae, are part of a body of scholarship that contests Freud's pathologization of melancholia, which stems back to his influential essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917). In this essay, Freud attempts to describe melancholia, the phenomenon that we might now call depression, by comparing it to the "normal affect of mourning" (243). According to Freud, the symptoms of both mourning and melancholia are *almost* identical; both entail "profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, and inhibition of all activity" (244). However, there are some key differences between mourning and melancholia: whereas mourners complete the "work of mourning" (244) over a period of time, by detaching their "libido" from

the lost beloved so that their ego becomes free to love other people or things (244-45), in melancholics the detachment process goes awry. Rather than "displac[ing]" their libido onto something new, they "establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (249). Such an identification accounts for the melancholic's prolonged feelings of worthlessness, a symptom not present in mourners (244, 249). In later work, Freud revised this model of mourning, which he admitted was based on limited evidence and which he had actually cautioned against using to make general conclusions (243). In "The Ego and the Id" (1923), for example, Freud argues that normal mourning might include the continued identification of the ego with lost objects (in a process that he calls "introjection"), and he suggests that it is precisely this identification with those whom we have lost that plays a key role in forming our individual characters (3962). Nevertheless, for nearly a century, his initial model of healthy mourning, predicated on "the detachment of libidinal ties from the deceased love object," has predominated among psychologists (Baker 55).

Although Freud's "naturalization of melancholia implicitly challenges [his] initial program for healthy mourning by rendering it impossible," proponents of the resistant strain of mourning, such as Spargo, argue that this challenge does not go far enough (Rae 18, 16). Rather than acknowledge that in the grieving process there will be "inevitable lacks," they make "a deliberate decision about how not to respond to loss" (16). In other words, says Rae, their work "might be characterized, in general, as a resistance to reconciliation, full stop: a refusal to accept the acceptance of loss" (16-17). Building on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Bernard Williams, Spargo contends that the refusal to complete the work of mourning — whether in literary representations or in real life — demonstrates an ethical concern for others. We feel pathos when we see or read about another's death, says Spargo, because we imagine that we might have done something to prevent it (3). In this sense, our prolonged grief can "function . . . as a belated act of protection," in which we develop "a fantasy about agency": had we only known what was going to happen, "and achieved a proper state of preparedness, harm might never have come to the other" (25).

In her obsessive recitation of the events leading up to the sinking of the oil rig, Helen demonstrates this "belated" "fantasy about agency" and "preparedness." She repeatedly imagines what happened the night

of the disaster: "A wave of ice hit the window and it smashed. The metal lid had not been drawn shut over the glass, as it should have been, and the window smashed and water got over the electric panel and short-circuited it. The men had to operate the ballast doors manually and they didn't know how" (148-49). But Helen also repeatedly envisions what *might* have happened to Cal and the other men on board had things been done differently: "Helen has memorized the ifs and she can rhyme them off like the rosary. If the men had the information they needed, if they had lowered the deadlight, if the water hadn't short-circuited the control panel, if Cal had had another shift, if Cal had never gotten the job in the first place" (293-94).

Moore's complex narrative technique also compels readers to picture alternative scenarios and draws them into Helen's "fantasy about agency" (Spargo 25). Moore alternates between a third-person, limited-omniscient narrative — focalized through Helen's eyes — and a disarmingly direct, second-person narrative also focalized through Helen. After recounting the sequence of events the night of the disaster, for example, Helen asks us to envision that one of the operators was going to read the manual and thus would have known what to do when the portal smashed:

> Imagine instead a man with his feet up — for the sake of argument — and a cup of coffee cradled near his crotch, and maybe he's reading the manual. For the sake of argument: he has a manual open on his lap, and he's going to place a call later to his wife, and he's also got a book. It's a long shift. Later on he will read the book. (149)

By addressing the reader directly, and by continually demanding that "we" need to reconstruct the disaster — "Do *we* know what they had on the rig for supper that night?"; "*we* should think about the manual. *We* should think about the portal" — Moore encourages us to assume collective responsibility for the disaster and for imagining alternative possibilities (149; emphasis added).

Yet Moore also makes it clear that, no matter how many alternative scenarios we might imagine along with Helen, we cannot save the men on the *Ocean Ranger* or prevent the negligence that has already occurred:

> The man in the control room has got the cup of instant coffee and he's reading the manual, but here's the thing: the manual didn't say how to control the ballast if there was an electrical malfunction.
>
> So he can read the manual all he wants.
>
> He can read it backwards if he wants. Or he can read it in Japanese. It's never going to tell him what to do.
>
> And so the water from the broken portal hits the electrical panel and short-circuits it. (152)

That we acknowledge the limitations of the fantasy is important, because it is impossible to bring the men back from the dead. As Spargo suggests, the elegy portrays a "mission of impossible protectiveness" (13). Nevertheless, the failed fantasy is "meaningful" and ethical "because it typically persists beyond this case to analogous cases in the future: it translates into a commitment to preventing others from meeting a similar fate" (Rae 18).

In her dedication to reading the Royal Commission reports, and to memorizing where the brass rods go, Helen illustrates how the "fantasy of retroactive agency" might "translate . . . into a commitment to preventing others from meeting a similar fate" even though it is "unrealistic" (Rae 18):

> Those brass rods. Nobody knew how to use the brass rods. If they'd known, the rig wouldn't have sunk. She has learned. Helen has read the reports; she has studied the diagrams; she knows where the rods go and why and how. Because those men didn't know and they didn't know, they didn't know, and it could happen to any one of us.
>
> You might get attacked by a fist through a window and you can bet Helen is ready. (Moore, *February* 152)

Her preparation is hypothetical, "of course," since it is highly unlikely that she will ever find herself on a sinking oil rig and since — even if she did — the odds that it would sink in the same way are slim to nil. But her "fantasy" serves an important rhetorical function nevertheless; Spargo argues that the "unrealistic response of the mourner who refuses to accept the other's death stands for an ethical protest against a dominant cultural pathology that trivializes death" (21). Likewise, Helen's efforts to imagine a different ending to the *Ocean Ranger* disaster amount to "an ethical protest" against an industry — and an

economy — that treat people and places as objects that can be valued and exchanged.

Whereas Spargo urges us to be wary of the societal imperative to get over loss quickly, because it also entails relinquishing the fantasy that we are responsible for, and might have prevented — or might still prevent — the death of another (37), Derrida challenges Freud's model of mourning, "including the line of thinking that accepts and affirms the introjection of lost loved ones," because he sees it as "a failure to respect what death really means" (Rae 17). Although we might find it comforting to imagine that the dead have become a part of us, ultimately Derrida sees it as "unfaithful" to fool ourselves "into believing that the other living *in us* is living in himself" (qtd. in Rae 17). In order to remain faithful to the dearly departed, we must acknowledge the impossibility of fully "interioriz[ing] the other," even as we try to "bear" the other "*in us*"; this impossibility means that, paradoxically, failed interiorization is actually a success (Derrida 35). So, while we might hold the memory of lost loved ones close to us, ethical mourning, says Derrida, requires "an aborted interiorization," "a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us" (35). The process of Helen's incomplete mourning, which begins with her attempts to "interiorize" Cal and ends in "an aborted interiorization," reflects this kind of successful failure. Moreover, in her stubborn assertion, "Let me tell you something: There are things you don't get over" (Moore, *February* 68), her mourning might be characterized as resistant in the Derridean sense.

Unlike many of the family members of the *Ocean Ranger* victims, Helen believes her husband to be dead as soon as she learns that the oil rig sank: "It took three days to be certain the men were all dead. People hoped for three days. Some people did. Not Helen. She knew they were gone, and it wasn't fair that she knew" (7). She cannot stay at the community mass, which "they didn't call . . . a memorial service" and at which "no reference was made to the men being dead" (7), because she cannot bear to be around the hopes of the other families, which she believes to be delusional: "Here's why Helen left the church in the middle of the mass: Some of those people were full of hope. Insane with it, and the lore is that hope can bring lost sailors home. That's the lore. Hope can raise the dead if you have enough of it" (13).

Although Helen rejects the notion that "hope can raise the dead," and although she believes in the "finality of" (Derrida 35) Cal's death, she remains devoted to Cal and his memory: "That must be part of what they decided: If Cal died out there on the rig, Helen would never forget him. That was the promise. She will never forget him" (Moore, *February* 302). This devotion manifests itself in two key ways: first, in a desire to recover his body: "She wanted his body. She remembers that. She knew he was dead and how badly she wanted his body" (13); second, in a recurring desire to embody Cal during the disaster: "But she wants to be in Cal's skin when the rig is sinking. She wants to be there with him" (70). In a slight twist on Derrida's idea that, when we lose somebody, "we grieve for him and bear him *in us*" (35), Helen imagines herself becoming *a part* of Cal, but she also imagines that his fear while the rig was going down has become *a part* of her: "Helen is in his skin. She is Cal and she lives through this every night, or sometimes in an instant as she cleans the dishes. . . . [I]t is an absolute terror that she wakes to every night. A terror that has invested itself in the microfilaments of her being, in every strand and particle of thought" (300). In embodying his fear, Helen "bears the other and constitutes him in" her (Derrida 35). However, her attempts to "interiorize" Cal, to carry him within her, ultimately end in the "sort of tender rejection" of which Derrida speaks (35). Although Helen believes that she "is in his skin" (300), and although "she lives through the disaster every night of her life" (70), she realizes that, paradoxically, she "is there with him. But she is not there, because nobody can be there" (300). For Helen, that Cal was alone when he died is the most difficult thing to accept:

> What Helen cannot fathom or forgive: We are alone in death. Of course we are alone. It is a solitude so refined we cannot experience it while we are alive; it is too rarefied, too potent. It is a drug, that solitude, an immediate addiction. A profound selfishness, so full of self it is an immolation of all that came before. Cal was alone in that cold. Utterly alone, and that was death. That, finally, was death. (292)

For Derrida, though, it is this "movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us" (35) that — to borrow Rae's words — "fuses a sense of intimacy with a very real sense of the finality of . . . death" and makes the "refusal to mourn" an ethical act (17).

Just as Helen's efforts to imagine Cal's death ultimately result in her realization that there will always be an aporia, so too do her attempts to reconstruct the disaster:

> The Royal Commission said there was a fatal chain of events that could have been avoided but for the inadequate training of personnel, lack of manuals and technical information. And that is the true story. It is the company's fault.
>
> But there is also the obdurate wall of water, and because of it Helen will finally give up her careful recital of the fatal chain of events. (301)

There is no doubt that the company was responsible for its negligence. As Berleant would say, there is a reciprocal relationship between people and place, and the company's actions — and inactions — contributed to the disaster. However, to blame *only* the company for the sinking of the rig would be to succumb to the illusion that complete mastery over the environment is possible. But the "obdurate wall of water" — the image of the wave that smashed the portal window and a metaphor for death — illustrates the fallacy and hubris of this illusion; as the Royal Commission observed, "the sea cannot be conquered" (*Report Two* 31). As Moore suggests, "the true story" is that "[i]t is the company's fault. But there is *also* the . . . wall of water." Human agency cannot be separated from nature.

Although Helen "finally give[s] up her" attempts to reconstruct the disaster, and although the final scene suggests that Cal's death will always "leave a definite shadow" over their lives, *February* is a novel neither of despair nor of stoic acceptance (306). In the words of Tennyson's Ulysses, "Tho' much is taken, much abides" (65). As a homeless man tells Jane of his novel, in a rather playful (and pointed) metafictional moment, "This is a book about redemption" (Moore, *February* 264). It is also, as Sylvia Brownrigg contends, a book about "renewal" (8). Indeed, the ending — with Helen's wedding to Barry, the man who renovates her house, their honeymoon in Mexico, and the birth of John's baby — befits the conventions of a comedy more than those of a tragedy, a move that Moore says was deliberate: "When someone dies, in order to honour their life you have to live joyfully" ("Once Moore").

The ending, with its emphasis on the motif of cycles of return — of the sun, of the waves, of Barry to Helen, and of John, Jane, and their baby to St. John's — also suggests that sometimes "to go forward" you

have to go back. According to Berry, "in all our attempts to renew or correct ourselves, to shake off despair and have hope, our starting place is always and only our experience. We can begin (and we must always be beginning) only where our history has so far brought us, with what we have done" (*Life* 4). It is only by returning to the loss of the *Ocean Ranger* disaster, then, and only by reflecting on "where . . . history has so far brought" Newfoundland, that Newfoundlanders might find the answer to the question posed by John to his mother at the beginning of *February*: "Have you ever tried to figure out the difference between what you are, he said, and what you have to become?" (5).

Moreover, in *February*, Helen's resistant mourning suggests that, "to refind place" (Casey, *Getting Back* iv), we might need to reorient ourselves and our values. To be ethical, this reorientation necessitates "deep political changes away from hierarchy and its exercise of power and toward community" (Berleant 5). In other words, we need to move "away" from an understanding of people and places as abstractions to be exchanged in the market economy and "away" from efficiency as "an end in itself, a value often more important than others" (Stein 3), and "toward" those things that Luttwak suggested were invaluable — the very things about which we are sentimental — "love, family, attachment, community, culture" (qtd. in Stein 1).

## Notes

[1] As the Royal Commission report summarized, "Early on the morning of February 15, 1982, the semisubmersible drilling unit *Ocean Ranger* capsized and sank on the Grand Banks, 179 nautical miles east of St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. The entire 84-man crew was lost in this disaster. Of the 69 Canadian crew members, 56 were residents of Newfoundland and the shock wave created by the loss was felt particularly throughout the province" (*Report One* iii).

[2] Whalen identifies the "Romantic tradition" with sentimentality. In other words, he treats "Romantic" and "romantic" as synonymous terms.

[3] Apparently, Kay has not read *Barometer Rising* either, or perhaps it has also become "jumbled together in [her] memory," since she neglects to mention that it actually is a romance, much of which focuses on the feelings of a woman who is unsure whether or not her lover died in the war.

[4] Alaa Alghamdi's article on gendered work and on Helen's search for a vocation following her husband's death is an exception to the rule. Avoiding the debate over the value of stoicism or sentimentality altogether, Alghamdi argues that *February* traces Helen's transformation "from bewilderment and grief following her husband's death to increasing acceptance and self-actualization" (48).

[5] Berleant, who calls for "a major conceptual shift" in "the ecological conception of environment," argues that much of our language is problematic because it implies our detachment from place (*Aesthetics of Environment* 4). He refuses to speak of "'the' environment," for example, because although "this is the usual locution, it embodies a hidden meaning that is the source of much of our difficulty. For 'the' environment objectifies environment; it turns it into an entity that we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves" (3-4).

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