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## Entitlement, Anxieties of Possession, and (Re)Working Place in Michael Crummey's *Sweetland*

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Paul Chafe

The front flap description of Michael Crummey's *Sweetland* (2014) threatens readers with a version of the oft-told tale of Newfoundlanders intertwined emotionally, bodily, and intractably with their island home: "[Moses] Sweetland's most intimate relationship is with the island that shaped him, a place at once beautiful and potentially lethal, as enigmatic and as fierce as the man himself."<sup>1</sup> Yet, Crummey reanimates tired tropes of entitlement and interconnectedness to answer, in a Newfoundland context, a decidedly unsettling question posed by L. Camille van der Marel in her analysis of the poetics of the Canadian North: "it goes without saying that certain landscapes trouble colonizing practice, so can a landscape, through physical conditions, also be said to resist an ideology?" (13). Crummey's protagonist, 69-year-old Moses Sweetland, one-time fisherman and lighthouse-keeper, has lived all but a few (albeit physically and psychologically scarring) months of his life in the tiny community of Chance Cove on a small island off the southeast coast of Newfoundland with which he shares his name, the name of the people who first worked and settled the tiny piece of land.

By inheritance and by labour, Sweetland-the-man believes himself possessed of what ecocritic Lawrence Buell would term the "local place-allegiance [and] ecological distinctiveness" establishing him as an authentic and authorized occupant of Sweetland-the-island ("Eco-criticism" 100).<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Buell notes, ecocritical analysis of these very

traits has produced a “substantive reconception of the local and the regional in terms of the impact of translocal, ultimately global forces” (100). Although the government-sponsored relocation program against which he eventually finds himself the only holdout is the greatest threat to Moses and his sense of self he has embedded in Sweetland, he realizes, even as he struggles to maintain his home and his place in it, that “home” is a mercurial and perforated notion already lost to him. As Crummey reveals through his depiction of the novel’s narrative present of 2011, global warming, human interference, a burgeoning tourism industry, and the pervasive World Wide Web change even the most isolated places and, perhaps just as important, change human understanding of those places.

Throughout “The King’s Seat,” the first half of *Sweetland*, Moses is plagued by what van der Marel terms “anxieties of possession” triggered primarily by his neighbours’ acceptance of a government package promising at least \$100,000 per household if all residents of Sweetland agree to leave their community and move to any other sustainable area of the province (38). Moses’s steadfast refusal to accept the package puts him at (potentially violent) odds with the rest of the community, but, echoing Buell, as a place-connected person, Moses cannot imagine a life outside of Sweetland and cannot help but believe “there is something deeply wrong with a person who is not able to feel placelessness as loss” (*Writing* 75). In truth, Moses sees “something deeply wrong” in any person whose understanding or occupation of Sweetland threatens his established and sustaining narrative of the place. This includes not only government agents and community members who visit Moses, encouraging and threatening him to accept the relocation package, but also “eccentrics from the Canadian mainland or the States” who purchase land on the neighbouring island of Little Sweetland, erecting elaborate cabins they apparently never use just because “they enjoyed being able to say they owned an exotic bit of property in a corner of the world no one else had heard of” (*Sweetland* 146). Moses has nothing but disdain for visiting journalists and photographers who, years

before, flooded Sweetland to report on Moses's miraculous rescue of Sri Lankan refugees lost and adrift on the Atlantic Ocean:

The island was overrun in the wake of the incident with the lifeboat. As if, for the first time ever, someone had placed Sweetland on a map for strangers to find it. . . . Most of them stayed only as long as the ferry was docked and they charged around Chance Cove in a mad rush, snapping photos and taking quotes from the folks they spotted on the wharf or outside the houses. . . . [Moses] was poisoned with the whole affair and wished they'd all fuck off home out of it, leave him and the island alone. (117–18)

While Moses cannot tolerate what he perceives as the “mainland entitlement” of outsiders, neither can he abide the bogus place relationships brandished by Sweetland-born Newfoundlanders whose connection to the island Moses judges not as authentic or altruistic as his own (119). This includes itinerant Newfoundlanders who returned to Sweetland during the first “Come Home Year” in 1966: “Dozens of people coming back to the cove from the mainland as the fishery floundered. They flaunted their store-bought, handed out suitcases full of trinkets for the youngsters, talked hourly wages and hockey games at Maple Leaf Gardens and how much they missed Newfoundland. Most of them hadn't shown their faces home in a decade and Sweetland couldn't wait for the fuckers to leave” (136). Also troubling for Moses are the ever-ominous Priddle brothers and their cocaine-addled scheming to transform an abandoned Chance Cove into a tourist attraction “like one of them Pioneer Villages on the mainland” and offer “authentic” “package tours to a vintage Newfoundland outpost” (67). Compounding these conflicting narratives, claims, and intentions and further elevating Moses's anxiety is his own uncertain connection to Sweetland and the reason behind his refusal to leave: “Everyone . . . was after Sweetland to explain himself these days, to offer a rationale for his refusal to leave. He'd tried to parse out an

argument in his head for awhile, but every attempt to name what he was holding onto made it seem small, almost ridiculous" (49).

Ironically, the second half of the novel, "The Keeper's House," in which Moses fakes his death, dodges the final ferry run evacuating the last of his neighbours, and returns home to live as the solitary resident of Sweetland, brings Moses no closer to decoding or consummating his relationship with his homeland. In the early days of his hermitage, Moses is surprised to find the island does not "feel larger with everyone gone," but instead "seemed smaller and strangely intimate, as though it had shrunken down to fit his solitary presence. Licked clean of all claims but his own" (194). These feelings of intimacy and inheritance quickly dissipate, however, as Moses soon realizes he is possessed irrevocably of what van der Marel would classify as an "anthropocentric understanding" (19) of the place and discovers that the notions of place-allegiance and ecological distinctiveness by which he defines himself may be entirely illusory.

Laurie Brinklow claims correctly the "second half of the book becomes a Robinsonade, where Moses follows the pattern of castaway narratives begun with the novel, *Robinson Crusoe*" (137), yet Moses is a peculiar sort of castaway in that he does not leave *terra firma* for *terra incognita*, but instead becomes a baffled and unhinged witness to the transformation of *terra firma* into *terra incognita*. Void of a larger human presence or stewardship, the community of Chance Cove becomes uncanny, the wilderness of the surrounding island becomes threatening and unfamiliar, and Moses becomes the unhomed castaway ill-equipped to endure what Adam Beardsworth has adroitly termed, in his analysis of the poems in John Steffler's *That Night We Were Ravenous* (1998), "the effacement of selfhood implicit in encounters with the Atlantic Canadian wilderness" (255).

*Sweetland* continues the postcolonial-ecocritical dialogue begun by Buell, van der Marel, and others to question the relation between bodies and the physical environment and to trouble the notion of human embeddedness in any place. Crummey's novel shifts between realism and magic realism and is metafictional in its references to itself

and to other literary and artistic depictions of Newfoundlanders and their relationship to Newfoundland. As such, the novel is not unlike Beardsworth's categorization of the poems comprising Steffler's collection: "its own ecosystem that sits in precarious balance with the world around it" (Beardsworth 238). This largely ecocritical reading of *Sweetland* will reveal (contrary to Brinklow's assertion that "[t]he island and the man fit together like a hand and glove" [137]) that attempts such as Moses's to "position the self in nature are as ephemeral, slippery, and paradoxical as the language" (Beardsworth 238) by which Crummey delivers his troubling narrative.

### **"Measured and Made": The Homesteading Virtues of Labour**

Buell notes that "maintenance of place-connectedness is an ongoing discipline demanding hard work and commitment," and Moses is often depicted toiling to earn, maintain, improve, or otherwise justify his claims to Sweetland (*Writing* 63). Greg Garrard witnesses in the georgic tradition "a sense of sacred duty called 'stewardship' . . . repeatedly promoted figuratively as a 'marriage' of man and place, culture and nature," and there is no doubt Moses believes his labours and their fruits provide evidence enough of his sanctified and righteous occupation of the place (Garrard 123). Nominated by the other occupants of Chance Cove to cajole Moses into accepting the relocation package, Reet Verge is frustrated instantly by Moses's stonewalling insistence that "You got nothing I'm interested in" and that he's "Not for sale," and demands of him: "You thinks you're doing God's work, is that it?" (*Sweetland* 48). Moses does not deny the accusation and admits to himself that he finds such self-righteousness defining and sustaining: "He found himself enjoying it almost, to be the one knot they couldn't untangle. Holding on like grim death and halfways invigorated by the effort" (49). While labour legitimizes Moses's existence and manifests his persistence, it also functions as a distraction through which Moses can ignore the reality of relocation and defer or deflect any discussion about leaving Sweetland. When Moses finally realizes he cannot

work against so many changes, he experiences a harrowing moment of existential angst in which he realizes his efforts and continued commitment to Sweetland do little to guarantee him a sustainable life when only he is left to work the place.

In her analysis of how “[p]ossessive acts of representation” are “rebuffed by resistant Arctic landscapes,” van der Marel claims: “Settler-invader practices for colonial (dis)possession are rooted in the agricultural-cum-epistemological limits of settler-colonialism” (16, 18). Van der Marel relies heavily on D.M.R. Bentley’s “three principles of land ownership,” which are legitimized by poetic and pastoral depictions of the Canadian homestead: “(1) the right of first discovery; (2) the right of first possession; and (3) the right of annexation through labour” (18, 19). These principles translate nicely to Moses’s understanding of himself and his connection to the island of Sweetland. Seemingly ignoring any Indigenous claims to the place,<sup>3</sup> Moses believes the very eponymous nature of the island fulfills the first two principles of landownership: his people were the first to discover and then occupy and name this place, as he declares with great satisfaction to the “government man” who visits him early in the novel and asks how long Moses’s people have lived on the island: “‘Time before time,’ Sweetland said and then smiled at himself. ‘People been fishing here two hundred years or more. I expect my crowd was the first ones on the island’” (*Sweetland* 9). This leaves only “annexation through labour,” which Moses demonstrates, values, and valorizes throughout the text.

Moses is a marvel of movement. There is rarely a scene in the text where he is not already labouring or eventually sets himself to a task. Witness the conversation Moses has with Glad Vatcher about their neighbour’s downed cow. Before the conversation begins Moses is “at the table saw ripping a length of two-by-six to replace the sill in the shed’s side door” (84). Moses shuts down the machine to hear Vatcher, but as the younger man speaks, Moses continues to work: “Sweetland took a broom from the corner and swept up the spray of sawdust” (85). Moses is never more than a couple of days away from his next

three-hour boat trip to the mainland to cut and collect firewood. Among people for whom relocation is all but a foregone conclusion, his ever-increasing woodpile is a marvelous anomaly, as noted by one villager: “you got enough split and stacked to keep hell in flames for half of eternity” (39). Moses admits to himself after his latest excursion that the act of collecting the wood and not the eventual use of it is justification enough: “It would be next spring before he could cut and junk it up. He had longers<sup>4</sup> in various stages drying around the property, all waiting for the chainsaw. He was soon going to have to find somewhere else to pack it away. . . . People said he would never live long enough to burn it all and he couldn’t stay out of the woods after more. It was like having money in the bank” (41).

Reiterating Bentley’s third principle, Moses does believe his labour garners him an authority over the place that outranks even provincial law, as evidenced by Moses’s regular ritual of setting and checking rabbit snares regardless of the time of year. When his niece Clara returns the rabbit carcass he gave her son Jesse because it is “out of season” and she does not “want it in the house,” Moses counters her legal piety with his greater knowledge of the place: “They’re peaked out this year. . . . They’ll be starving in the woods come winter” (26). Moses’s constant working of the place has given him an intimate understanding of its ebbs and flows that justifies his stewardship. As Buell would put it, he is possessed of a “sense of fitness to place so keen” it fills him with a “deep, fundamental, insistent need that would not be denied” (*Writing* 75). Moses will not listen to suggestions from others on what is best for Sweetland or when he should leave it, for by love and by labour he has earned his right to occupy and own it, as he realizes while standing on his roof working on his chimney: “He looked up at the hills surrounding the cove, sunlight making them ring with meltwater. He’d always loved that sound, waited for it each spring. Hearing it made him certain of the place he came from. He’d always felt it was more than enough to wake up here, to look out on these hills. As if he’d long ago been measured and made to the island’s exact specifications” (*Sweetland* 280).



What Moses values most in others is their willingness to work, and he judges the fitness of others by their labours. Even as he steels himself for Reet Verge's confrontational barrage, Moses cannot help but admire her tenacity and ingenuity: "She was a hard ticket, Rita. Raised two boys on her own after her man moved out west for work and hooked up with a missus from Catalina. . . . She'd made half a living in her kitchen, cutting hair. Started up the museum with a make-work grant from the feds" (47). Moses does not even begrudge how "[s]he managed to use [his] recalcitrance as a bargaining chip to double the government's offer, the extra money enough to bring most of the last holdouts onside" (47). Another villager, Sara Loveless, is a figure of fun for most of the people in Chance Cove: "As squat and solid as her cow, they used to say. And almost as simple, ha ha" (91). But for Moses, Sara's industry qualifies her as a true Sweetlander: "But laziness was the only form of stupidity Sweetland couldn't abide and whatever else might be said about Sara, she was not a lazy woman. Kept animals and the garden, cut and cured her winter's hay up on the mash. . . . She had never married and seemed completely unfit for it. But she was built for the island" (91). And, despite their wildness, the Priddle brothers, Barry and Keith, also demonstrate a productiveness Moses deems redemptive. Their mother died giving birth to Keith and their devastated father became indifferent to the upbringing, so life-long bachelor Moses became a permissive avuncular presence in their lives, his home becoming a place where the boys could watch and imitate televised wrestling and enjoy a glass of homebrew. In his way, Moses loves the Priddles for sharing with him an affinity and appreciation for labour: "The brothers would bring him a brace of rabbit now and then, helped dig his potatoes in the fall. They'd go across with him after wood and they were sluts for the work, they cut and sawed and hauled with the same gleeful abandon he saw in them as they inflicted pile-drivers and sleeper holds on each other in his living room" (56).

Conversely, Moses cannot abide anyone who does not contribute meaningfully to the upkeep or advancement of Chance Cove. Sara Loveless's brother, who is damaged mentally and physically as a result

of drinking “a pint of kerosene when he was a toddler,” is regarded unsympathetically by Moses as lazy and generally useless, “sail[ing] in the wake of Sara’s industry his entire adult life” (8, 91). Moses is often exasperated and even disgusted by the man who he rarely refers to as anything other than “Fucken Loveless” (8, 75, 151, 313). Nor can Moses stop himself from feeling petty disdain when his beloved niece leaves Sweetland for university, then for work on the mainland: “Sweetland never said a word about her decision to leave for school though he was against it from the start. . . . And he turned his back on Clara in small, spiteful ways. . . . A barely discernible coldness toward her that he would have denied if she accused him” (27). How this attitude towards one’s aptitude for life in Sweetland affects his relationship with his autistic grandnephew Jesse is the tragedy around which this narrative turns.

Where 12-year-old Jesse’s needs run contrary to Moses’s is where the first half of the novel finds its propulsion. The affection and the tension are apparent immediately in the text, as Jesse is more than a little athwart of what Moses would like him to be: “Lank and pale, the boy was, like something soaked too long in water. The purple light making his face look sallow, cadaverous. ‘Jesse,’ Sweetland said. He had never made peace with the youngster’s name. It sounded fey, feminine, like something off one of those soap operas Sweetland’s mother used to watch. He’d tried to rechristen the boy with half a dozen nicknames—Bucko, Mister Man, Hunter—but Jesse would only answer to his proper name” (13–14). Like the Priddle boys years before, Jesse accompanies Moses on his excursions after firewood and rabbits, but unlike Keith and Barry, Jesse does not work. Instead, he chatters incessantly, revealing an encyclopedic and slightly eerie knowledge of the place and its human history.<sup>5</sup> Though Moses insists to Clara that “Jesse won’t be happy nowhere else but here” when she suggests the boy would be best served by a move to St. John’s, where he could have access to specialized school programs, Moses knows Jesse’s departure is inevitable and that his particularly passive participation in the place cannot be sustained (29). In so many ways the boy is “hopelessly vulnerable” to the dangers on an island possessed of

untamed wilderness, perilously high cliffs, derelict buildings, and the portentous Priddles (126). Ill-suited to the place, Jesse covers the first half of the novel with a caul of unavoidable disaster worthy of a David Adams Richards novel or a Dickensian waif. Even as he brings the boy with him to handline for cod, Moses cannot help but sense the finality of their relationship: “it felt like another crack showing in their lives together. The boy as good as gone already” (127).

Echoing other Robinsonades, Moses’s assiduousness can be seen as a sustaining virtue in itself, and at some level Moses believes this. As Ian Watt says of Daniel Defoe’s novel: “One of the reasons for the canonization of *Robinson Crusoe* is certainly its consonance with the modern view that labor is both the most valuable form of human activity in itself, and at the same time the only reliable way of developing one’s spiritual biceps” (296). The “therapy of work” is often depicted as a panacea in *Robinson Crusoe*, yet Watt contends it does have its side effects: “blinded, perhaps, by our wishes and dreams, we avert our attention from the subtle ways by which a consolatory unreality has been made to appear real” (295, 297). Despite Moses’s efforts, Sweetland is being abandoned by others, chunks of land are being purchased by outsiders who have never worked it, and Jesse, “the last of Sweetland’s blood” and rightful inheritor of his labours, is also the harbinger of the community’s death (*Sweetland* 84). As Herb Wyile notes, such an enforced eviction is a traumatic “rupture and dispossession” inducing not only “vulnerability and aggrieved dignity” but threatening erasure of self (Wyile 169). Buell contends that such a failure in humans to “connect themselves with specific places of settlement” may be expected to produce in many “a pathological effect” that could be termed “displacement anxiety” (*Writing* 75). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin concur with Buell as they examine pastoral elegies “in which the redemptive power of rural labour works towards counteracting an awareness of displacement and separation” (*Postcolonial* 89). In short, working the land can be a “strategy of avoidance” by which the labourer can defer his “crisis of ownership” (83, 85).

Moses undeniably uses labour as a strategy of avoidance. When his

conversation with Reet becomes too heated, Moses leaves her in his porch to hide in his shed until he is certain Reet has left, spending “the better part of the day . . . replacing the floor of the trailer he’d built for the quad twenty years before” (*Sweetland* 48). While Moses’s growing woodpile circles his house like a parapet, making the passive-aggressive statement that he has wood to burn and is not going anywhere, his use and collection of the wood is more an act of circumvention than preservation. Moses burns wood gratuitously, “putting a fire in the wood stove, opening the vents and stoking it until the shed was stifling” whenever the retired Reverend visits, in order to prevent the man from becoming comfortable and addressing finally his clandestine relationship with Moses’s sister Ruth: “The Reverend was forced to abandon the fiery pit after half an hour and eventually he gave up the visits altogether. Sweetland lost a lot of good wood in those months, but he considered it well worth the price” (51, 52). Following an argument with his brother-in-law over relocation in which Moses uses Jesse like a pawn, riling the child until he is left screaming “on the floor, knocking his forehead rhythmically against the boards,” Moses “spent the rest of the afternoon splitting wood. Stunned, and sick of himself, and hoping he might disappear awhile in the mechanical strain of the work, of occupation” (110). When the Reverend visits to discuss the situation, Moses does not “look up from the work” and refuses to engage (111). When the Reverend presses, Moses finds something else to do, retreating inside to sharpen his axe, seemingly more preoccupied with this quotidian task than the conversation, keeping at it even after the Reverend has given up, presumably in an effort to keep his own thoughts at bay: “Sweetland leaning back over his lap, repeating the sickle-shaped motion of the sharpening stone against the blade on his knee, the scrape of it like something working at bone” (112).

Moses’s sullen toiling could be a symptom of his defining inactivity. Despite all his puttering and preserving, it could be argued that Moses does not actually do anything in this novel. His great action is essentially an inaction: he is not so much staying as he is not going, not accepting the government package to leave, not joining the communal exercise of

relocation.<sup>6</sup> When forced to speak about his refusal to leave, Moses uses evasive and passive language. At Queenie Coffin's funeral, her daughter Sandra tells Moses, "Everyone says you're set on staying here," to which Moses replies with a rather less than assertive "Might be I am" (102). When scolded by a police officer during a stockpiling mission to Miquelon that he must bring a passport with him on his next trip, Moses responds coyly, "Won't leave home without it, don't you worry" (173). Moses's failed attempt to buy a large amount of rifle ammunition in Miquelon results in a visit a week later from a rather suspicious RCMP officer who presses Moses on whether he intends to board the final ferry out of Sweetland. Though angered, Moses still refuses to be definite and answers with a hypothetical "What if I'm not" (175). Moses even shocks himself when in a private conversation with his brother-in-law Pilgrim he makes a declarative statement, albeit still one about inaction rather than action: "I'm not going anywhere, Sweetland told him. Even to himself it was a surprise to have his mind stated so plainly" (167). At other moments, when such responses prove insufficient protection against prying questions, Moses simply leaves the conversation, as he does with Reet and the Reverend. When such moments happen in his home, Moses's preferred tactic is to retreat to his hallway and stare at the hanging picture of his father, "Uncle Clar." Moses's niece is too aware of this tendency, calling after Moses when he leaves their conversation about her scandalous parentage to stand staring into the hallway: "How's Uncle Clar doing out there? Clara said" (257).

Moses's peculiar inactivity extends to many aspects of his personal life and leaves its mark on Chance Cove and its occupants. Though a primary participant in major events in the area — namely delivering the Sri Lankan refugees and, years earlier, helping transplant two dozen bison as part of an ill-fated government program to populate the island with another large game animal — Moses is plagued and preoccupied by past moments of inertia, one of his more profound inactions being his failure to marry Chance Cove's schoolteacher, Effie Burden, who would later marry Ned Priddle and die in childbirth. Placed "in his way" by his mother, who invited the young woman to Sunday dinners,

Effie seems ideally suited to Moses: “A sensible child with a bit of education, who wasn’t afraid of work” (179). Despite this and Effie’s declaration, “I might marry you . . . if you asked me,” their relationship peaks in a borrowed horse-drawn cart when Effie masturbates Moses, leaving both of them mortified (209).<sup>7</sup> Following her death, Moses “felt he was making something up to Effie by watching out to the boys. Though it wasn’t in him to settle on or name exactly what that was” (55). Whether he is unwilling or unable to identify his relationship to Barry and Keith, it is obvious he regards them as the sons he and Effie never had — or could have avoided. Moses believes he has failed the Priddles, who have grown up to become petty criminals and drug addicts who regard him with a thinly veiled Oedipal hatred, and Moses takes small comfort in the belief it “wasn’t necessarily a bad thing . . . that their mother wasn’t around to see the lives they were leading as men” (70). Moreover, Moses undoubtedly feels guilt for ending his quasi-courtship with Effie: though at the time he may have thought he was sparing Effie a lifetime with a man disfigured by an industrial accident, the fact that his injuries rendered him sterile would have guaranteed the wife of Moses Sweetland would not have died in childbirth.

Though it may be a convoluted line between Moses’s inertia and Effie’s death, the line between his inactivity and Jesse’s demise is slightly more obvious. When Moses finally breaks and accepts the relocation package, he reverts to his classic strategy of using work as avoidance and does not attend the town meeting where his coalescence with the rest of the community will be announced, opting instead to take one more boat ride to collect wood. Jesse is unmoored to discover the one constant in his life is changing and leaves the hall “in a state” in search of Moses and an explanation (148). Though it is unclear if it is by intent or as a result of manic carelessness, Jesse’s body is found in the sea at the base of the demonic Fever Rocks: “A bit of flotsam down there being tossed against the rocks, lifeless in the ocean currents” (154). “The King’s Seat” ends with a horrific scene worthy of Greek myth: Moses, whose blind hubris and toiling have led not to his assumption of the eponymous throne as

king of all he surveys, but rather to his being bashed by the sea at the foot of a sheer cliff, lashed to the bottom rungs of a hellishly high and twisted ladder, fastened to Jesse's pale, ravaged corpse.

### **"When You Scalds Your Arse": Sweetland as a Space of "Trauma and Alienation"**

There is no doubt that Moses believes the community of Chance Cove and the surrounding wilderness of Sweetland have in many ways been forged not just by his fortitude but also by his failings. Van der Marel claims "Bentley's tenuous trinity of colonial possession . . . was never completed through the annexation of northern land via labour" (19), which provides insight into Moses's decision to remain in Sweetland: perhaps he regards the settlement as an unfinished project and the abandonment of Chance Cove as self-effacing capitulation to failure. Moreover, Moses certainly believes he will be better able to complete this project once the unindustrious, like Loveless, and the unfaithful, like Reet, Duke, and even Clara, leave the island and stop hindering him; and he is self-righteous as he watches the unworthy depart: "It was like watching dirty water drain from a tub" (*Sweetland* 164). Yet, van der Marel claims the "homesteading caveats of landownership" are harder — if not impossible — to attain in "landscapes whose climates, ecologies, and biophysical expressions limit or completely prevent such improvements" (20), and Moses is soon unhomed and undone by a landscape too formidable to be tamed by one person. Too late, the tragic hero of *Sweetland* has his moment of *anagnorisis* and is jarred irreversibly from his assuring space of place-connectedness by an overwhelming bout of what Christopher Manes has termed "ecological humility" (cited in Estok, "Theorizing" 210).

Despite Moses's defining belief that he has been "measured and made" for life in Sweetland, the second half of the text is a mercilessly prolonged assault in which his life is beaten out of him. This is not pathetic fallacy, nor does Crummey intend it to appear as such, for the environment can only be indifferent to Moses's desires, as Lawrence

Mathews notes in his review of the novel: “Newfoundlanders love the place, but the place does not reciprocate” (Mathews). Moses’s perceived kinship with the place is challenged and overthrown in “The Keeper’s House” as he discovers the dualism at the heart of human–place relations identified by Garrard: “although humans are supposed to be ‘part of nature’, many of the things humans do are still portrayed as ‘unnatural’” (Garrard 32).

This dichotomy troubles what Buell describes as a long and widely held tradition of identification through place: “even though social theory knows better, a specious concreteness in labelling people as belonging to one geographically finite community or another persists as an ethnological illusion or demographic artifact” (*Writing* 65). The doggedness of this notion legitimizes its analysis, Buell claims: “All the more reason . . . to recognize the insufficiency of concentric models of platiality even while acknowledging their continuing force to arrange lives” (66). Brinklow partially agrees when she says of Crummey’s novel: “while attachments to one’s island may be stronger than other geographies, ultimately the hold of humans on their place — and place on their humans — is tenuous at best” (Brinklow 134). But Brinklow personifies the place, claiming “The island wills [Moses] to continue” and concludes her analysis with the claim that man and island reach out for and reflect and become one another: “one becomes the other, mirrored, doubled. Indeed, the fact that the novel itself is called *Sweetland* suggests a three-way mirroring, heightening the idea that Sweetland the man is equated with Sweetland the island” (139, 142). It seems more likely that Crummey establishes this cliché to write against it, to assume Buell’s challenge to “recognize the insufficiency” of “place-connectedness” amplified to place-as-identity and produce a text that explodes these oft-expressed sentimentalities — this appears certainly to be the path of self-realization by self-eradication Crummey forces Moses to walk.

Before Moses can assume his role as sole occupant of Chance Cove, he must first fake his death, then hide in the woods until the final residents leave on the last ferry. Almost immediately, Moses



realizes that he may not be as attuned to the environment as he previously assumed. Struggling through a “gnarly length of valley” only a few miles from his home, Moses is quickly lost and over-matched, making “his way blindly, stepping over deadfall logs, the bog sucking at his boots” (*Sweetland* 162). Moses scrapes “his neck raw on a claw of tuckamore,” then trips and knocks himself unconscious: “Lost his footing and fell backwards onto his pack, his crown clipping hard off a rock” (162). Waking on his back, Moses struggles to right himself and dislocates his shoulder. Not for the last time during his hermitage, Moses finds himself “Feeling like an idiot” and has to admit “He hadn’t thought any of this through clearly enough” (163, 162). Not yet truly marooned on the island, Moses manages to keep his panic at bay and assesses the first few moments of his venture rather sardonically: “Sweetland’s ass was soaking wet. The raw patch on his neck stinging, his head and his shoulder throbbing. He supposed he could get himself killed out here in the meantime and no one would ever find the body. And wouldn’t that be a funny end to it all” (163).

Further misadventures leave Moses thoroughly beaten and broken by novel’s end. Loveless’s tiny dog, having like Moses evaded the last ferry out of Sweetland, comes to a grisly end which hastens Moses’s demise. Having befriended the hapless dog, Moses braves the March winds and snow to recover the pathetic corpse and in doing so contracts a fever. Only partially recovered from his illness, Moses, now truly alone, decides to leave Sweetland via Loveless’s equally ill-suited boat. The dory is destroyed by the sea and the cliffs and Moses finds himself once again being battered viciously at the foot of the Fever Rocks. Miraculously, Moses is able to make his way back to his home, “his body alight with rivets and hinges and underground cables of pain as he lurched and righted himself and lurched opposite” (304). Thus is he found — a feverish and flagellated wreck — by the Priddles when the brothers return to Chance Cove at novel’s end. A scene that could play out like a wizened wise man dispensing knowledge from a position of enlightenment instead portrays Moses, bashed and abashed, acknowledging the foolishness of his endeavour and accepting Keith’s

assessment, “You got some mess made of yourself, Mose,” with a self-damning proverb: “‘If you scalds your arse,’ Sweetland said and he smiled weakly. ‘I got what I was after and then some’” (315). Moses cites partially one of his mother’s famous admonishments, “If you scald your arse . . . you got to learn to sit on your blisters,” which only now at 70 years of age is he beginning to understand, along, perhaps, with the oft-repeated refrain of the televangelists Moses’s mother watched in her later years: “*What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world?*” (57).<sup>8</sup>

Moses has been relieved of the blindness of his perceived “place-allegiance” in much the same way the speaker of Steffler’s “In a Makeshift Blind” has, according to Beardsworth, been relieved of “the blindness of the culturally constructed position from which he envisions the natural world” (Beardsworth 248). Huddled in his house, defeated and demoralized, Moses realizes, as does Steffler’s speaker, “[f]ar from a space of harmony and interrelatedness, nature is . . . a space of trauma and alienation” and his attempt to claim that space only “highlights his estrangement from the environment” (247, 248). Having been ravaged physically and mentally by “the unforgiving, non-narrative nature” of Sweetland’s wilderness, Moses is now possessed overwhelmingly with what Leo Mellor terms “a desire for a community to allow human survival” (Mellor 112). Reunited with the Priddles, Moses “had no appetite for anything but company and he spent a while asking after the people he’d known for years in the cove” (*Sweetland* 314). As Huggan and Tiffin explain, “imaginative and/or emotional possession of a place” does not necessarily equate to entitlement, and, citing Tony Buckle, they précis the very sort of epiphany Moses experiences — place-connectedness and place ownership are marked not so much by “a relation between people and things [as] a relation between people, concerning things” (*Postcolonial* 82, 119).

There is evidence that Moses always knew his solitary quest for consummation with his homeland was a fool’s errand. A mere three pages before his self-assuring meditation that he is “measured and made to the island’s exact specifications,” Moses makes the following unsettling observation:

There was a new world being built around him. Sweetland had heard them talking about it for years on the Fisheries Broadcast — apocalyptic weather, rising sea levels, alterations in the seasons, in ocean temperatures. Fish migrating north in search of colder water and the doves lost in the landscape they were made for. The generations of instinct they'd relied on to survive here suddenly useless. The birds and their habits were being rendered obsolete, Sweetland thought, like the VHS machines and analog televisions dumped on the slope beyond the incinerator. Relics of another time and on their way out. (*Sweetland* 277)

Moses's assumption that he can build his identity on something as impermanent as place is a common enough supposition according to Estok, who identifies the misnomer at the centre of this ideology: "It suggests that biotic systems are static when, in fact, they are not" ("Theorizing" 209). As Estok claims, "Nature actively disrupts the integrity and stability of biotic communities all of the time, and this is neither good nor bad" (209). Moses now realizes one cannot survive the "morally neutral" natural world with such "anthropocentric notions" as affinity to place (209). All species, including humans, survive because they adapt, and sometimes leaving a place is a fundamental part of that adapting. *Sweetland* slides into magic realism and the metafictional as Moses becomes literally the impossibility of place as identity.

### **"A Body Could Do Worse for Company": The Afterlife of Moses Sweetland?**

As Brinklow writes, "Readers cannot help but speculate when Sweetland the man actually dies" (Brinklow 140). Crummey begins sowing this narrative uncertainty near the end of the first half of the text. Apparently all is not well with Moses as on a fishing trip with Jesse and Pilgrim he seems to suffer a stroke or a heart attack, though this is not

stated explicitly. Shortly after recalling his father's death and how the old man's "body seem[ed] to know ahead of the man himself what was coming," Moses suffers two separate rattling bouts of vertigo that leave him "stunned and drifting" (*Sweetland* 131). Back on land Moses dismisses Clara's question "Are you okay?" and her assessment "You don't seem yourself" but acknowledges inwardly that "his face felt crooked and unnatural" (134). With his "hand at his chest opening and closing, mimicking his own heartbeat" and trying desperately "to quiet his breath," Moses phones the "government man" and accepts the relocation package, perhaps realizing, unlike his father, that he has little time left and at least this way Clara and Jesse will inherit his share of the money (135). Later, while searching for Jesse, Moses feels again "the rat's nest of commotion in his chest," then exposes himself to the icy violent sea as he retrieves Jesse's body at the foot of Fever Rocks (153). Against Barry's protests, an exhausted Moses demands to be tied to the ladder with Jesse's body while Barry returns to send a boat to retrieve them. It seems very likely that Moses, already weakened before this harrowing ordeal, will fulfill the bleak prediction Barry makes as he heads back up the ladder: "I expects you'll be dead before I gets back" (157).

Such an ominous ending to the first half could mean the second part of *Sweetland* is an exercise in magic realism, as the ghost of Moses moves through the landscape, remembering and reconsidering his life, not unlike the titular protagonist in Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*. Or perhaps the second half of the text plays out like the fantasy in the head of the condemned man in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge": Moses imagining a life alone on Sweetland in the final moments before his death on the bottom rungs of the ladder.<sup>9</sup> Crummey fills his narrative with conflicting moments that could support many possibilities — including this paragraph appearing closer to the end of the text describing the moment after Moses buries Loveless's dog in Jesse's grave: "He forgot the lamp where it sat near the headstone and it threw shadows across the boy's name until the small hours of the morning when it dimmed and bowed and flickered and finally went out in the rain" (286). This

passage marks the only time the narrative voice and vision leave Moses's immediate space, suggesting that in the reality of this novel, the lamp is really there and Moses is really alive and alone in Chance Cove. Accepting this reality leads only to more contradictory readings, however. Moses's witnessing of a vast and voiceless congregation moving through Chance Cove; his hooking of a gigantic cod that does not rot; the horrific transformation of a seal into Jesse's bloated corpse; the appearance at her lighted window of Queenie Coffin both as a child and a grown woman; and the three culminating visitations from the "government man," Moses's drowned brother Hollis, and even the Priddles: all could be either paranormal experiences that unsettle Moses or delusions plaguing Moses's tortured mind until he finally drifts out of his own narrative.

Dead or alive or haunted or hallucinating or some trying combination of these, Moses traverses an uncertain space once he becomes the sole occupant of Sweetland, and this may be the novel's *raison d'être*. Crummey is not proselytizing: he is not prioritizing his interpretation as the more likely, more authentic depiction of human-environment or (to borrow a phrase from Garrard) "natural-cultural" interaction in Newfoundland and Labrador (Garrard 205). In truth, Crummey's novel threatens to erase itself as it moves towards its uncertain ending, becoming increasingly intertextual and metafictional. Freed from all the contesting narratives of the place, seemingly liberated to make his the only Sweetland story, Moses disappears. In his assessment of the similarly troubling, potentially culturally devastating conclusion of Patrick Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails* (1996), Adrian Fowler writes, "The community, pulling together, is the only response to such a fate" (Fowler 88). Perhaps Crummey's purpose in *Sweetland* is a slight refocusing of this: the community, talking together, arguing, and otherwise contradicting and informing one another's understanding of place, is the only way to overcome the eradication that relocation threatens. Place, as Buell informs, "is not just a noun but also a verb, a verb of action; and this action is always happening around us, because of us, despite us" (*Writing* 67). Place is

an argument, a living, transforming, multitudinous entity, and Moses is misguided when he labours to claim a constant physical space rather than working on becoming a part of the cacophony that engenders and enlivens any concept of community.

Over a decade ago, in a CBC documentary entitled “The Rocks Here Tell Stories,” narrator Lisa Moore claims that unlike New York, London, and other places that have been “papered over” with literature, Newfoundland is “uncharted territory” (*Hot Type*). Crummey appears to have always disagreed with this sentiment, as is evident through his clever metaphor of a “papered over” wall in *River Thieves* and *Sweetland*. Dick Richmond, a member of the expedition that led to the murder of a Beothuk man in *River Thieves*, and whose stoic adherence to “The facts are the facts” will cover always the truth of that murder, lives in a tilt with walls “papered with what on closer inspection turned out to be the pages of a Methodist missionary magazine” (*River Thieves* 245). Crummey’s not-so-subtle indication, arguably, is that the history of Newfoundland’s original inhabitants is being “papered over” with European words. In *Sweetland*, Duke Fewer, the would-be barber, dedicates a wall of his establishment to photographs and newspaper clippings detailing the history of the place, including reports from papers “from the mainland,” one in particular containing captions revealing how the reporter fell for Moses’s joke when he passive-aggressively misspelled Sweetland, claiming it was an old Swedish name: “*Local fisherman, Moses Swietlund. Newfoundland Fisherman rescues Sri Lankan boat people*” (*Sweetland* 186–87). One story can underwrite or undermine another, Crummey seems to be saying, but all interpretations exist and work on a contested space.

Buell claims that, in literature about place, the difference between jingoistic place-allegiance and a more critical understanding of one’s relationship to place is “a sense of inhabiting different places simultaneously” (*Writing* 66). While Moses certainly occupies an in-between, perhaps even purgatorial place in the second half of *Sweetland*, Crummey’s novel is not just an examination of the work Moses does to create a space but also a metafictional, intertextual probing into the

work writers do when rendering on the page their depiction of Newfoundland and Labrador. Crummey represents in his narrative the inevitability of retracing the works of others, of “inhabiting different places simultaneously,” as he writes of this “papered over” place. For example, the premise of a solitary person occupying an abandoned island off the coast of Newfoundland will be familiar to readers of Steffler’s *The Grey Islands* (1992) and Wayne Johnston’s *The Custodian of Paradise* (2006) — two works that revolve around writers forsaking mainland Newfoundland for more forsaken islands along its shore where they can continue their work uninterrupted. Like Moses, the protagonists of these pieces begin to believe they are hearing voices and experiencing other sensations that confirm the presence of others on their empty island. Steffler at times adopts the voice of Carm Denny, the last occupant of Groais Island, who, like Moses, begins to see shifting, spectral figures move through his landscape.

Crummey moves beyond this intertextuality to in-text reflections on how such work is received, and as Queenie Coffin reveals, one writer’s definitive, historicizing tale could be one reader’s misinformed, reductionist nonsense. Queenie reads the Newfoundland novels her daughter sends her out of “a kind of patriotic duty” but admits readily “it was a torture to get through” these depictions of a home she does not recognize: “Half the books supposedly set in Newfoundland were nowhere Queenie recognized and she felt insulted by their claim on her life” (*Sweetland* 32). Later, after pilfering Queenie’s abandoned home, Moses sets himself to reading a novel Queenie was reading at the time of her death. Though the book is praised by a “Toronto paper” for depicting an “authentic Newfoundland,” Moses is quickly disgusted by the text: “Whoever wrote the book didn’t know his arse from a dory . . . and had never caught or cleaned a fish in his life” (206). Deeming the book not even worthy to substitute for toilet paper, Moses walks to the head of the cove and throws the book “into the open ocean” (207). “The pages made a small fluttering explosion as he let it go,” and though it was dark, Moses “heard it strike the water’s surface” (207). This act of defiance mirrors almost exactly a scene from Johnston’s *The*

*Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) in which Minnie May Smallwood, grown weary of her husband's nightly battles with his signed copy of D.W. Prowse's *A History of Newfoundland*, forcibly removes the book from her home in a late night, clandestine performance witnessed by her son, Joe, who, unbeknownst to Minnie May, sees his mother with the book at the moment she "hurled it out into the darkness," sees "it unfold in the wind, the pages flapping," and hears it land "with a dull thump" (*Colony* 70). The book Moses propels into the ocean could be *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Crummey suggesting subtly that Johnston's novel now occupies as big and definitive and domineering a space as Prowse's history did for Johnston's protagonists. Or it could be Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Shipping News* (1994), or (as Michael Collins suggests in his review of *Sweetland*) even Crummey's own *Galore* (2009). Mirroring such a moment so precisely, Crummey certainly seems to be suggesting that a writer's work to tell a new, untold Newfoundland story may be as daunting, deluded, and eventually as humbling an effort as Moses's attempts to claim a physical space as his own.

Crummey even puts his readers to work and challenges them to remain focused on his narrative while craftily seeding his novel with "click bait" that will likely send some readers away from his text and down various Internet rabbit holes. As much as Moses embodies the tropes of fisherman and lighthouse keeper, he is a denizen of the modern world, a burgeoning Internet troll, and an online poker player (and widely suspected Internet pornography aficionado). When unable to raise Loveless's downed cow, Moses resorts to "a Google search on *cow lifting*" (*Sweetland* 89). Curious readers who conduct a similar search will find the narrative holds true: "The Upsi-Daisy Cow Lifter" is the first result (89). When the extents of Moses's horrific industrial injuries are revealed as "Traumatic degloving lesion of the penile and scrotal tissue," readers who type that sentence into Google's search bar will be taken to several versions of a medical journal article from which Crummey purloins almost verbatim the grisly details of Moses's injury (287).<sup>10</sup> All narratives and places are penetrated by other narratives and places,



as Sven Birkerts warns in *The Gutenberg Elegies*. In this “Electronic Millennium,” the “numbers of distance and time no longer mean what they used to. Every place, once unique, itself, is strangely shot through with radiations from every other place. ‘There’ was then; ‘here’ is now” (Birkerts 120). Moses recognizes the Internet as “A window [Sweetlanders] could peer through to watch the modern world unfold in its myriad variations, while only the smallest, strangest fragments washed ashore on the island” (*Sweetland* 89). But Moses mistakes Sweetland’s physical isolation as central to his and his neighbours’ identities and clings wrongly to the place when he needs to move with his people who are already travellers in the “modern world” Moses believes is so far away.

Moses’s forsaking of his people for the land may explain why he cannot recognize the dark, silent figures when they arrive: “Strangers every one of them, though he felt they knew him. That he was known to them somehow” (264). Defining characteristics reveal to the attentive reader the identities of some of these spectres, though Moses cannot recognize them: “a hunchback in a black overcoat, limping toward the rest” is obviously Uncle Clar, whose lifetime of hard labour left him crippled (264). The woman who smiles at Moses, revealing “teeth in her head too small for her mouth,” is undeniably Effie, who as an adult was still possessed of her baby teeth, “which had never fallen out and the adult set never come in” (264, 179). As he approaches the group at the end of the novel, Moses still does not recognize Sara Loveless, “A squat form in rubber boots just ahead of him, a shapeless gansey sweater swaying almost to her knees,” or Jesse, who he is certain he knows by the boy’s telltale “seashell whorls of a double crown, a rogue lick of hair” but cannot name (318). It is only when Moses leaves Chance Cove to join the fluid movement of this congregation that he feels suddenly at home.

Crummey concludes his novel with a wonderful whirlwind of intertextuality and metafictional erasure. Moses’s death (or perhaps his final death in a series of deaths) occurs heart-wrenchingly at the moment the Priddles rescue him, and is more than a little evocative of George Cartwright’s death detailed at the end of Steffler’s *The Afterlife*

of *George Cartwright*. While Steffler's Cartwright is something of a dull, colonizing monster who desires only to exploit Labrador and build his reputation upon it ("He imagined himself plunging into its clear, healthy space, consuming it, swelling to fill it" [*Cartwright* 96]) and is thereby a less pitiable character than Moses, both characters die having failed to conquer their respective landscapes, and die in a similar fashion. Witness first Cartwright's death, as his brother John tends to him:

John held the beer to Cartwright's lips, but the smell and the taste were repugnant to him. He shook his head at the proffered cheese.

John's eyes and his briefly met. Still dodging each other's reach.

John dozed in his chair, and Cartwright drifted uncomfortably in the flickering light, feeling water-logged, scarcely able to breathe — then at last fell asleep. He awakened in daylight, seemingly well again; but completely alone. And that was the way he stayed. (265)

In much the same way does Moses seem to die. Taking his second dose of OxyContin from Keith, but too weak to feed himself, Moses shakes his head when Keith moves to administer the pills with the hand brandishing the word "F\*E\*A\*R" tattooed across the knuckles, preferring instead to be served from the hand that reads "H\*O\*P\*E" (*Sweetland* 315). Like Cartwright and his brother, Moses and Keith share a loaded glance: "Sweetland looked up at his face and Keith stared back, unselfconscious in the night's quiet, in the dim light" (315). Like Cartwright, Moses slips away before he knows it and awakes revived: "It was still dark when he woke, feeling rested and ready to start the day. He sat up carefully, lifting his legs to the floor, surprised how little discomfort the movement caused him" (316). Though it takes him a little longer than it did Cartwright, Moses realizes eventually there is no indication the Priddles were ever in his home: "there was only a breathless stillness. And he knew he was alone in the house" (317).

Steffler concludes his narrative by painting Cartwright out of the landscape, his spirit being devoured by a bear who may be a descendant of the bears Cartwright slaughtered needlessly when he was alive: “The bear’s white head is a wide pointed brush, moving from side to side, painting him out, painting the river, the glittering trees in” (*Cartwright* 267). Crummey provides a similar departure for Moses, though oddly etching the man in at the moment the narrative dissolves. Moses does not just depart the living world at the end of *Sweetland*, he steps out of the narrative. In a moment that is both delightful and devastating, Moses asks of Barry, “Your crowd is real is you?” to which Barry responds reassuringly: “Real as you are” (*Sweetland* 314), Crummey’s dark joke here being that neither of these men is real. When Moses awakes to an empty house he pores over a commemorative map of Newfoundland marking the *Come Home Year* of 1966. Moses had liberated the map from the Priddles’ cabin and amused himself by rechristening it “*Stay Home Year*” and renaming some of the communities. The map is poorly detailed, and while the islands of Little Sweetland and Sweetland appear, “neither warranted a name,” so he wrote them over the illustrated islands (247). Alone in his kitchen, Moses inspects his map and discovers not only are the names missing, but also the very islands Moses has written over, “As if he’d only imagined seeing them there,” because, of course, Sweetland the island, like Sweetland the man, is entirely fictional (317). As Moses leaves his home and his story, walking “away from all he’d ever known or wanted or wished for,” the island dissolves into nothingness: “he turned to look down on the water and there was nothing below but a featureless black, as if the ocean was rising behind him and had already swallowed the cove and everything in it” (317).

This conclusion runs contrary to one of the more notable conclusions in contemporary Newfoundland literature — the parting remarks of Sheilagh Fielding in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* as she seeks to express the inexpressible losses engendered by Newfoundland’s Confederation with Canada, and does so by connecting Newfoundlanders to the land: “From a mind divesting itself of images, those of the land

would be the last to go" (*Colony* 562). The last image Moses and the readers of *Sweetland* have is of the people, the landscape having already disappeared: "A press of silent figures with their faces turned to the open sea. They seemed resigned and expectant standing there, their eyes on the fathomless black of the ocean. Sweetland anonymous among that congregation" (*Sweetland* 318). The image of these innominate figures departing a landscape seems an obvious reference to several of artist David Blackwood's etchings: *Fire Down Harbour, Monday, March 1st Pool's Island*; and especially *Gram Glover's Dream: The People of Bragg's Island "going away"* (Figure 1). As Al Pittman puts it in the poem dedicated to the etching, *Gram Glover's Dream* depicts "the islanders / leaving their island" as part of the government-sponsored resettlement program (Pittman 18). As was likely Blackwood's intent, Pittman is saddened by this image, and sees nothing in it but irrevocable loss: "they are going away / out where there is nothing / they have gone away to nothing" (18). Like Moses, these islanders have laboured and have failed to maintain their place and must now "turn and walk away" and "become nothing in the windy distance" (19). Removed from the land they worked and the identity they both derived from and carved upon it, these islanders are unhomed and unstoried and will disappear once they crest the horizon of their homeland.

Yet throughout *Sweetland* Crummey seems to be troubling the very notion of a definitive story of a person or a place (or person and place). Can such a story be told finally and completely? Or only debated? Can such a story be lost if it is never complete? Upon hearing the "government man" read from the slim file he has on him, Moses comments, "Not much when you lays it out like that" (*Sweetland* 9). Later, when reflecting on his reasons for leaving Sweetland to work in Toronto, a reflection spurred by his decision to accept the relocation package, Moses remembers the surreal moment when as a young man he shot a transplanted bison in the living room of an abandoned home on the vacated island of Little Sweetland. Remembering this uncanny moment and how his concept of home "went sideways there on Little Sweetland," Moses questions the very veracity of identity: "A life was

no goddamn thing in the end, he thought. Bits and pieces of make-believe cobbled together to look halfways human, like some stick-and-rag doll meant to scare crows out of the garden. No goddamn thing at all" (141). Crummey then proceeds to reveal everything he can about Moses, to literally and figuratively "deglove" the man to expose every secret, shame, and motivation, but he comes no closer to rendering Moses a knowable, authentic occupant of a space.

As Buell notes, to "inhabit place" is to accept personal identity as "a patchwork of specific entanglements" drawn from a shared space consisting of sustaining but "*conflicting* allegiances" (*Writing* 66, 67; italics in original). Beardsworth would agree, claiming that the relationship between person and place is "a form of composting," a loose gathering of sustaining conceits and unsettling fragmentations that reveal how "being at home in the world is, paradoxically, defined by an incommensurable feeling of homelessness" (Beardsworth 239). So, too, is Crummey's novel a compost of countless depictions of Newfoundland and Labrador, an impossible fiction always threatening to disappear. Crummey etches his protagonist into the travelling, numberless mass, just as Moses leaves the land he has worked so hard to claim and own. Just as his attempt at an impossible, singular narrative vanishes, Moses "felt of a sudden like singing" (*Sweetland* 318), to finally join and listen to the calamitous and contradictory voices that ever speak, ever complicate, and ever create community.

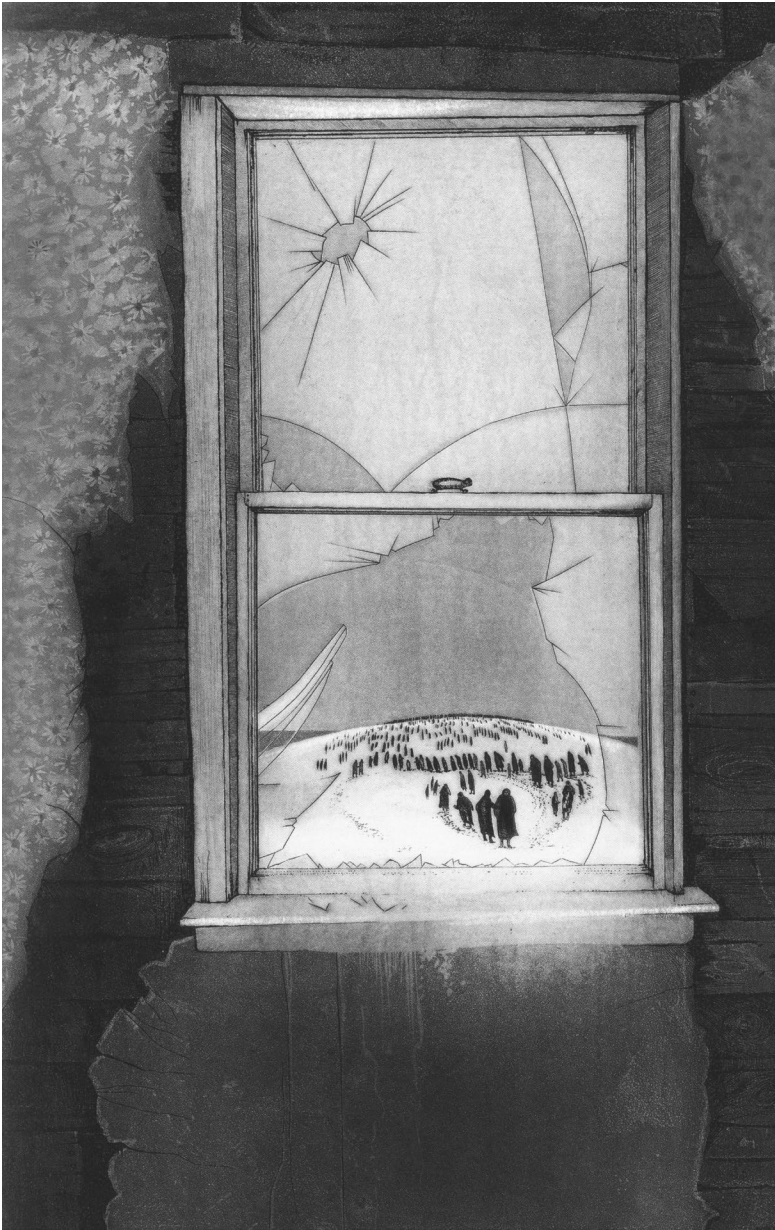


Figure 1: David Blackwood's etching, *Gram Glover's Dream: The People of Bragg's Island "going away."* 1968. (Image provided by the Centre for Newfoundland Studies. Used with permission of the artist)



## Notes

- 1 For discussions of depictions of physical, sexual, and psychic mergers of people and place in contemporary Newfoundland and Labrador fiction, see Paul Chafe's "If I were a rugged beauty . . .': Contemporary Newfoundland Fiction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 676–90, and "a terrain of jagged, fearful aspect': Reconsidering Patrick Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails*," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 31.1 (2016), 35–75.
- 2 Crummey uses "Sweetland" throughout his text to refer to both man and island. In the interest of clarity, this essay will use "Sweetland" to refer solely to the island, and "Moses" to refer to the protagonist.
- 3 Crummey certainly does not ignore Indigenous claims to the Newfoundland landscape and through some lovely treacherous words undermines his protagonist's narrative. The greatest physical manifestation of Moses's claim to the place is perhaps the government wharf: "No one knew how old the building was, but Sweetland had seen it standing over the landwash in a picture of the cove from a hundred years ago" (33). As a testament to his forebears who undoubtedly built it, and as a way to stake his perpetual claim on Chance Cove and its surrounding environment, Moses maintains the building: "It hadn't been used to clean or store salt cod in a generation, but he kept the building in pristine condition, the roof patched and tarred spring and fall, the outside walls ochred red" (33). Even the most casual student of Newfoundland and Labrador history will recognize in this sentence an unsettling reference to the Beothuk, the island's original inhabitants, referred to as "Red Indians" by the European settler culture that would eventually eradicate them. The Beothuk were given this name due to their distinctive practice of "coloring their garments, their canoes, bows, arrows, and every other utensil belonging to them, with red ochre" (*Dictionary of Newfoundland English* 408). Crummey seems to be reminding his readers they are reading a novel by the author of *River Thieves*, a book which meditates on the impossibility of telling the story of the Beothuk whose lives and language have been almost completely erased: "*At the edge of a story that circles and circles their own death, they stand dumbly pointing*" (*River Thieves* vii). Such craftily executed word

- play imbues Moses's narrative with uncertainty, reminding readers that under every claim made by Moses is written an older, contradictory narrative. As Pamela Banting would put it, symbols like the wharf "are tokens, not totems" that mark the "non-Indigenous Canadian writer's unease . . . ambiguity and discomfort about our past, incurred by the fact that our homes are on First Nations' land" (Banting 728).
- 4 The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* defines a "longer" as "A long tapering pole . . . with bark left on" (313).
- 5 Jesse is an avid user of Google, Skype, and YouTube and is only relaxed when "plugged into some electronic device," so most of this knowledge is undoubtedly the result of Internet searching (105). He also has very little in common with the "handful of youngsters" left in Chance Cove and harangues adults for stories of the place (29). Yet, when Moses asks the boy who has told him some of these stories, Jesse claims it was Hollis, Moses's brother, dead for 50 years yet with whom Jesse claims to be in constant contact.
- 6 This sort of doing by not-doing is a recurring theme throughout *Sweetland*. Moses's friend Duke Fewer is an echo of Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener in that he is a barber who does not cut hair. Following the collapse of the inshore fishery in 1992, Duke, a fisherman, purchased a barber's chair and converted his shed into a barbershop, despite having "never cut hair in his life" and neither "[m]an nor woman was willing to sit in that chair and let Duke at them with the clippers" (21). Though his wife and children have long left him and the island of Sweetland, Duke has operated the barbershop for over 20 years, seemingly always ready to perform a task he is never called upon to execute — save during one of Moses's last visits with his friend when Moses spitefully forces Duke to ply his trade and reveal his ineptitude. Moreover, there is a chess game apparently always in play at Duke's barbershop, though no one is ever actually seen moving a piece. The appropriately named Queenie Coffin is another villager known for her inactivity — Queenie has not left her house since she had indoor plumbing installed "sometime after the moon landing" (31). She dismisses her voracious reading as a non-action: "It was just a way to kill time, she said, pass the afternoons" (30). Prophetically, when discussing with Moses her husband's acceptance of the



- relocation package, Queenie assures him: "Hayward can sign whatever he likes. . . . I'll be leaving this house in a box" (33).
- 7 Though a queer reading of *Sweetland* may, to steal a phrase from Simon C. Estok, "strain at the seams of what the text allows," an examination of Moses's possible homosexuality could reveal much behind his complex relationship to place and how he is equated with, yet "both voiced and stifled with the natural environment" ("Ecocritical" 84). Moses's bachelorhood and sexuality are the topic of much speculation throughout *Sweetland*. Most pointedly, after her mother's funeral, Sandra asks "Are you gay, Moses?" then immediately retracts the question because she is "half-cut" (*Sweetland* 104). But investigating the possibility that Moses is homosexual and repressing could be as rewarding a reading as Estok's "slightly queer" reading of Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*, which considers how that novel "draws a thematic link between, on the one hand, compulsions and inexorabilities in the natural world that are totally at odds with the life that is trying to survive in that world, and on the other hand, a man whose desires put him at odds with the community in which he is trying to eke out a living" ("Ecocritical" 82). A logical (though perhaps simplistic) reading of Moses's failure to propose to Effie could be that he no longer deems himself worthy of her after suffering horrific injuries to his face and genitalia while working at a steel mill in Hamilton. Yet Moses's stasis could be a result of his not knowing how to exist within the culture and environment in which he finds himself. While Duke Fewer and others in Chance Cove believe Moses left for work in Ontario in order to earn enough money to buy Effie an engagement ring, it is just as likely Moses left so he could sidestep the heteronormative path he was being forced to walk. Furthermore, remaining the sole occupant of Chance Cove following relocation would be particularly attractive to Moses as it would enable him to remain comfortably at home yet forever outside of a society that would call upon him to identify himself.
- 8 In a rather artful parallel, Crummey demonstrates the wretched depth of Moses's fall by mirroring in his conversation with the Priddles an earlier conversation Moses had with the dim-witted "Fucken Loveless." Discussing Loveless's pregnant cow, and having already mentioned how Glad Vatcher could supply her with some much-needed

hay, Moses then says “You should have him come look at her,” to which Loveless replies, “Who, Glad?” drawing from Moses an exasperated “Yes, fucken Glad” (59). At the end of the novel, a weakened Moses, mind further fogged by the painkilling OxyContin the Priddles have provided him, now finds himself in the same pitiable place as Loveless, “finding it hard to follow the breadcrumbs of the conversation” (312). Indicating his brother, Barry informs Moses, “He spent days out jiggling for you before the last ferry,” to which Moses replies “Who, Keith?” eliciting from Barry the same admonishment Moses delivered to Loveless: “Yes, fucken Keith” (312). Echoing Beardsworth’s assessment of Steffler’s poems, *Sweetland* “foregrounds homelessness as a condition of wilderness experience,” and living alone on the island has resulted in Moses’s “coherent self [being] metaphorically scattered” (Beardsworth 243, 246). Moses’s quest has left him doubly displaced — all too aware that he has no affinity with his environment and too damaged to participate meaningfully in the community.

- 9 There is certainly an oneiric quality to “The Keeper’s House,” as Moses is often depicted waking at odd hours or in the middle of dreams, casting into doubt the events preceding each waking. “The cold woke him” the first time Moses sees hundreds of ghostly figures heading towards the lighthouse, and just as he is about to interact with them, “The cold woke him” again, so readers can never be sure if Moses is being haunted, is simply dreaming, or is losing his grip on reality (261, 264). There is plenty to suggest Moses is still on the ladder with Jesse, that the wet and cold he seems to feel constantly and the injuries he sustains are actually the result of him being beaten by the ocean as he dies on the ladder. Crummey even employs the metaphor of an ocean wave crashing over Moses as he reaches for the hallucination of the “government man” in his kitchen, “but the dark folded in on him like a black comber rolling over and it swallowed the room whole” (307). Most interesting, Moses seems to always be drawn to Fever Rocks throughout the second half of the novel, and in fact ends up there in the final lines, suggesting that the boat does not come in time and Moses never leaves the ladder.
- 10 See “Traumatic degloving lesion of penile and scrotal skin” by Luiz E. Zanettini et al. (<http://www.scielo.br/pdf/ibju/v31n3/v31n3a12.pdf>).

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