SKY WAVES

a novel / a drew

Michelle Butler Hallett

Critically acclaimed novelist Michelle Butler Hallett rolls out her raucous brand of satire in this tender exploration of the human need for communication, communion, and love. *Sky Waves*, set against the development of radio in Newfoundland and Labrador, and told in 98 non-linear but interconnected chapters, crackles with comedy, modulates through history, and toys with a new signal-to-noise ratio. *Sky Waves* is definitely a lively and sometimes demented aural culture novel. Butler Hallett worked in radio for several years and has long been haunted by the story of a cousin who crashed his plane while looking for a lost child.

SKY WAVES, a novel/a drew – excerpt

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"The carrier waves which are sent out by a radio station may be divided into two categories: first, the ground waves, and second, the sky waves. During the daytime the sky waves have no effect upon the coverage of the station because they travel upward and are lost, but at night these sky waves play a very important part because they go up and hit the Kennelly-Heaviside layer and are reflected back to the earth. ... It is this reflected sky wave that causes fading, inasmuch as the fading area exists where the ground wave of the station interferes with the reflected sky wave of the same station. Despite the faults and unreliability of the sky wave, a very large proportion of the radio audience depends upon sky-wave reception for its evening programs."

—Waldo Abbot and Richard L. Rider, *Handbook of Broadcasting: The Fundamentals of Radio and Television,* (1937) 1957.

drew n.
In 'knitting' a fish-net, a certain number of meshes formed in a row. …
ninety-eight meshes in a drew.
—*Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, edited by G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin and J.D.A. Widdowson.

"i've been crying all of my life
but here, entwined in sinew and fire"

—Hey, Rosetta!, "open arms"

"And I was so afraid
I have travelled so far
Blaming the horizon
And shouting at the stars
Oh I was so afraid
But I've come so far
Oh I was so afraid
But I've come so far."

—Amelia Curran, "Scattered and Small."

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PART ONE: SPARK

1. Snotty var
in which Nichole Wright explains herself.

May 14, 2008

My uncle crashed his Tiger Moth.

Great-uncle, really, if you're going to get particular, and yes, all Robert Wright's duty, defiance, anger and hope fell out of the sky seventeen years before my birth. Yes, *that* Robert Wright, the one who started VOIC Radio. Money's involved. Social standing, too. And dogs. Like Atlas in that tiny photo, a saddled Newfoundland with my father at four astride his back, fat little legs kicking the dog in the ribs, Robert standing to one side, hand out in case his nephew fell, peering at the photographer, smiling, worried. I thought the dog had been a bear. Two hundred and seventy pounds, Atlas weighed, huge even for his breed, seven feet two inches nose to tail. The saddle fit.

The dog at the crash site, Artemis, stood almost as high as Atlas, the story goes. Big enough for a lost girl to ride out of the woods. No saddle. No celebration. Because my uncle crashed his plane looking for that girl. Some people tell me the missing one was a blind boy lost near Windsor Lake, or a toddler who'd wandered into a quick fog on Topsail Beach, or an adolescent madgirl who, all glassy-eyed with her own voices and visions, chased something no one else saw into the woods. That last one would make the best song or the longest book, so it can't be what really happened, but then Robert did fly for all sorts of lose ones.

Turns out that in 1954 my great-uncle sought a girl called Rose Fahey, a Catholic, who lived in Riordan's Back, on the other side of the inlet from the mostly Methodist Port au Mal, where my crowd of Wrights came from. You'll find Port au Mal and Riordan's Back on the map not too far from Harbour Grace. God, Port au Mal ... the dead walked the earth out there on Sundays, while the living kept themselves inside, except the children, who got shoved and booted out to play in all kinds of weather for the sake of fresh air – stink of it: diesel, guano, fish guts, salt. The Sunday attractions

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in Port au Mal didn't help: stacked lobster pots, moored trawlers, drawn lace curtains and two services, morning and evening, in that airless clapboard church. Once, accidentally visiting an elderly great-aunt in 1978, I attended evening service. I say accidentally visiting because Dad had taken me out to Port au Mal to look at a small piece of land already willed to me by my grandfather, William Wright. Not that I expected that vicious badger ever to die. Gibraltar would crumble, seas rise, sun explode, and my grandfather would persistently stand where once he stood – at the edge of the water, burning alder in a holed oil drum, rubbish piled on either side – hunched. Land. Well, Dad looked at the land while I studied the hard froth on a balsam fir: snotty var. Then, with a twig, I pricked turpentine cysts on a spruce. Really, I think Dad just got me out of the house so Mom could get some sleep after being up all night with me and my fire dreams, and my throwing up. My grandfather had intended to divide the land between all of his grandsons, then, if anything remained, among the granddaughters, but I, being the only infant to slip the crib death snare, won the jackpot.

So. The ancestral home. Port au Mal, 1978, a good century removed in culture and accent from that throbbing metropolis St. John's, where we got American television, Canadian television, CBC radio and BBC radio, as well as VOIC and VROM; Port au Mal, sliced out of time and dropped at random, like a boulder by a glacier. That sounds like St. John's, too. Regardless, Dad's car broke down. A dozen or more gulls circled overhead, quiet. Dad scowled at the coming fog, until he took my hand and we slipped and stumbled over lichen and rocks to an old house Dad thought he recognized from a photograph, or at least remembered being told he should recognize it. The thin and wrinkled lady opening the door stood just an inch over me – and me only seven years old. Her green eyes, her heavy brow, splotched hands – well, thinks I, there I stand in a century, because she had to be at least a hundred and twelve, and because she ported the same forehead and eyes as every other birthed-Wright. She recognized Dad, called him William's Stephen, and Dad called her Aunt Ellen. She listened to his story of the car, of it being Sunday with no chance of a tow, of needing to get me back into town, school tomorrow. Aunt Ellen nodded, then told Dad she did not have a telephone. She smelled funny – kerosene. Fog became drizzle, so my hair got wet in no time. Aunt Ellen said something about neighbours having a telephone, but it would be a bit of a walk and then a bit of a wait. Perhaps Dad would like Aunt Ellen to look after me while he straightened out transport? Perhaps Aunt Ellen could take me out to evening service?

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Dad said yes. Dizzy, I held Aunt Ellen's hand. She smoothed her soft fingers over my cuticles, informed me that young ladies do not bite their nails, and walked very quickly to the clapboard church. We passed quiet front yards where dogs ate their dinner but watched us all the same. Aunt Ellen wore a dress, stockings, black high-heeled shoes, and a plastic headscarf. Her coat, like her dress, fell at mid-calf. Long dark hairs grew at the edges of her mouth, and long white hairs curled up under her chin. Her eyebrows bushed out thick and black, just like mine would without regular attack by tweezers and wax. Relief there, plucking out chin bristles or brow hairs; I tweezed something daily. But Ellen's thick lips – red, almost winey, no feathering or bleeding of lipstick – lovely. I never learned how to do that, always end up with a smudged and murdered mouth. My hand felt grimy in hers, and my sneakers whopped, undone.

The fog hid the gravestones.

Aunt Ellen opened the low church door to evening service.

Evening service. Mostly men. Mostly older. Not one candle, and certainly no electric lights. Evening service meant the intellectual rigour and moral reckoning of prevenient grace, corporeal resurrection, general damnation and the undeniable if inconvenient end of the world, originally scheduled for March 24, 1974 but still coming to the faithful and damned alike. Darkness of interiors. Minister in the dusk, faceless, just robe and words, so gentle, so soft, far beyond the need to compel or convince, self-evident truth of God's grace and displeasure, my brethren, sins of the fathers visited upon the children's children …

That's where I started to cry. Bad dreams and Mom scrubbing vomit out of my blue shag carpet and my new bedspread with the daisies on it, asking me, as she retched herself, if I'd digested a single bite the last few days or just saved it up for the middle of the night; Dad probably lost in the fog and after falling in; diesel and fish guts and this little old lady with her beautiful mouth, and now sins heaped on grandchildren when I'd never wanted the land, didn't even know why anyone cared about a stretch of rock and grass and the remains of a hearth ... Aunt Ellen patted my hand. Men fingered their eyes. Sin omnipresent, my brethren, grace a mystery: only endure. I whispered to Aunt Ellen I might be sick, and the waves of kerosene off her nearly did it. She stood up, took my hand again, and held me in check when I tried to run. Outside, fog had retreated, maybe a mile offshore, and some evening light remained. Aunt Ellen's soft little hand held me fast. Dad nowhere. Within the fog, just this side of the fire rocks, a small iceberg glowed, dully. Physics of it, something

to do with refracted light, melting and evaporation, with the ice itself feeding and becoming the fog. Berg bits floated on waves as seagulls would, except the ice decayed. Breaking and beautiful. Only endure.

A terrible day.

Robert crashed in the late afternoon of July 12, 1954, skewed eyesight useful; even his father, old Captain Tobias Wright, had finally to admit his myopic and colour-blind son found things lost within the black and green smudge of spruce and fir.

Once he found this lost girl, Robert shot a flare. Then the engine cut. Sounded. Cut again. And he just dropped. Already flying low, Robert and his little Tiger Moth called *Newsbird*, canvas and balsa wood painted RAF yellow, succumbed to an angle of descent – and to trees. Witnesses cringed, waited for fire. The lost girl emerged from the woods on the back of Artemis. Hardened turpentine ooze, pus white against bark, had attracted the girl, and she'd stopped, burst cysts on another tree and then dropped the twigs into the sudden pond at her feet. Deep ponds opened up like sores in those woods, Dad told me – very easy to fall in and be lost. Perhaps snotty var saved her.

So. Evening of July 12, 1954. A lost child, aged eleven, emerged. Robert Wright, aged fifty-three, pioneer of radio communication in Newfoundland, died. Thomas Wright, Robert's son, struggled with his grief and with VOIC. Newfoundland and Labrador had five years before voted Responsible. And the fog made it too dull to see.

Am I getting through to you?

I need – you see, this is why I am requesting an arts grant of $7,500.00, so I may take the next six months away from my job as copywriter at VOIC Radio. A detailed budget is attached.

With thanks for your consideration,

Nichole Laika Wright.

Because I must write this book.

2. CQ 1

in which Robert Wright discovers himself.

1919-1934

Bzht.

Distress. In a small Marconi station in Komatik, Labrador, Robert waited for signals of distress. Spark-gap transmission. Glass jars charged by a big motor generator – storage battery. One cylinder and a flywheel – engine. The flywheel spun hard enough to merit a governor; no need for constant ignition. Spin spin spin ... The engine charged the battery. The battery powered the large spark coil. Robert Wright plucked dots and dashes from the random air and extracted meaning – when he received anything, that is. Howls and whistles in his ears as he logged the utter lack of distress signals, thanking God as he knew he should, yet regretting the boredom. Robert Wright glanced up at a map of Labrador and found himself and the Canadian Marconi Company, the head of a pin, a dot: Komatik, 1919. A few Esquimaux, a few Moravians, one clapboard church, three houses and the Marconi station. What had Cartier said? The land God gave Cain.

Captain Tobias Wright had scowled when Robert told him. —You're going to Komatik? Labrador, dear God, nothing but nuisance birds and deceptive sky. Wireless? Depraved, that is, depraved luxury even to send distress calls, let alone have them received and passed on. How can you trust what you can't see, Robert, you who can't be telling your colours and myopic as a stump? What the hell good is it for you to receive a distress call and then relay all the way down to Fogo when there were no vessels near enough to help?

Considering such encouragement while pretending to read – hating his father – Robert decided Tobias would be proud of a lightning scar down his body. Meanwhile, Melville's devious-cruising *Rachel* found another orphan.

Jane tried to hide her sadness. Then she smiled as though indulging someone and stitched at new woollen underwear for Robert.

Robert could not look at Jane while she handled the garment.

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William, who at eleven should have had more sense, tapped Robert's arm. —Shall you see Esquimeaux?

—Of course.

Their mother Hope, who kept the store and the domestic peace, tallied the books. —Tell me again, Robert dear, how spark works. Tell us about Marconi receiving the three dots on Signal Hill.

Ellen, the youngest, coughed. Robert picked her up off the cold floor and cringed, waiting for the Captain's warning complaints: *Don't get so close to her. Avoid her exhalations, for the love of God. She's got a bad cold.* Complicity: *a cold, some bad cold, will she ever be rid of that cold?* Ellen suffered consumption. Once, Robert had been stunned enough to think tuberculosis marked only the poor and the dirty, the families with streels for mothers. For the wealthy and powerful Wrights, lords of Port au Mal, tuberculosis in the family seemed about as likely as a detached moon rolling near the well. So, nothing wrong. Ellen must simply be kept warm, fed the best, coddled and disciplined at the same time, schooled at home by Jane who had declined a posting at the school in Ellsworth Bight to teach her sister, but still, nothing wrong.

Now Ellen smiled at the older brother she adored, whose bare temples she now stroked, teasing him. —Your brain's too big for your skull, so it's pushing all the hair out.

Robert hugged her too hard, felt her ribs, her rapid pulse.

Parting gift from his mother: an Ingersoll pocket watch. —It's a Radiolite, Robert dear.

Robert cradled the watch in his right palm. The candle, burnt low, offered little light, but the watch took it regardless. Creamy white numbers, modern and squared, separate second-hand measuring out a minute at a time on the bottom instead of a six, all against a black face. The numbers, hands and brand name glowed greenish-white in the dark, like a captured ribbon of the northern lights. Beautiful, expensive, eerie.

—Mother, I hardly know what to say.

Hope closed her son's fingers over the watch. —Don't tell your father.

Mail to Komatik depended on ice floes and coastal boats. The occasional company of the other wireless operators – collegial enough, two men from Toronto, one from Montreal, all three terrified by strange sky and dark rocks and monstrously tall scarce trees in the protection of the southern bays. Robert did not fear the land, sky or trees. He feared the water, yes, but also something bigger, harsher: the sound of wind tormenting the Moravian church, the noise of utter loneliness.

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Robert's heavy spectacles slid down his nose as he pointed at the pin on the map marking Komatik. *Here I be* – no, Mr. Francis would correct that – *here I am, firstborn son of a prosperous family in a prosperous outport, old enough to go to sea but too young to have gone to war.* Younger men had woven extra years, lied and gone to Europe, but Robert's surname imprisoned him. Who would risk Captain Wright's anger by ferrying Robert to St. John's to enlist? Who would dare carry off the eldest son of Hope Jackman Wright, the inlet's main merchant? Robert thought he'd be useful in communications. Tobias reminded Robert of his eyes: *Half-blind fool like you? Give up on it now, because you'll never be a man.* Neither one spoke of Robert joining up after that, just as neither man spoke of Ellen's true illness, or of William's long discussions with the rough and unmarried George Simms.

Robert lined up three spare pins and stuck them in the bottom of the map. Marconi's three dots from Poldhu on December 12, 1901, did not penetrate the aether to wander or decay; that signal bounced off the atmosphere to be heard in St. John's. Marconi heard the Morse code S – if Marconi received the signal at all, if his desire and faith did not create those dots as young men going to war created their years. Plucking out Morse code over static, hiss, whistles and noise like some blizzard of aether – tricky, Robert would agree, even difficult. But if someone received the signal, then the signal existed as surely as rocks. Forces other than human must modulate radio waves – mangle them, obscure them, boot them to another place or time, to another receiver … Poldhu's signal to anyone who might hear, Cape Cod, St. John's, Komatik, Cape Race, Fogo, Cape Breton: *CQ, calling all stations.* Seek you. Morse code carried on simulated and clumsy continuous waves generated by spark transmitters, bursts of information, the radio wave itself sounding like a spark: *bzht*, and then the information; *bzht,* like a warning, a clearing of the throat; *bzht* and information. The expertise: men not only patient enough to tune but smart enough to recognize sulphate corruption on plates; men steady enough to listen, quick enough to act.

Shifting sandbars at Sable Island, massive and fragile towers at Cape Breton. Learning the trick to soap the back of his neck and thereby feel clean even after a day of heavy gear, grease and spark. Glace Bay nearly home, nearly right. Attending socials and suffering examination by mothers, usually dismissed for his bad eyesight but tolerated for his clean nails and exquisite courtesy. Helping to set the reception of the Ottawa time check at Camperdown. Communicating from ships at sea. Sparky, Spark, the Marconi Man, the Wireless Man, Robert Jackman Wright, respected not for

his surname, for being merely his father's son, but for what he could do, respected for who he'd become.

Boston in 1930, teaching now for RCA, paid very well and courting Miss Etta Cleary. Then encountering, in a new class, a face and body language familiar before its owner opened his mouth – Newfoundlander, from Riordan's Back, about ten years younger than Robert: Richard Fahey. Robert took care not to comment on voice that morning, took care not to speak to Richard Fahey at all – mustn't risk favouritism. Fahey persisted, smiling, offering news of Riordan's Back and Port au Mal, of the rest of Conception Bay. Once Fahey passed, despite Robert having been particularly hard on him, the friendship began. Richard stood for Robert when he married Etta, and Richard promised to watch after Etta and the children in 1932 when Robert returned to Newfoundland, tasked by a St. John's merchant named Canning to build a transmitter so he might advertise his store, Port of Call, to anyone in range with a wireless set.

Some frenzied genius seized Robert then. Fruition: years of learning, years of patience, and now, time to create. Sleep decayed, fell away. At four in the morning, he'd sit up in bed and sketch plans for his independent radio station.

Despite Robert Wright showing what several commissioners called *moral enterprise*, his ideas and vigour displeased the Commission, for this particular show of moral enterprise could not yet be taxed. So necessary paperwork got delayed, got lost. Weeks piled up. So did snow. One January morning, 1934, in the hearing of many on Duckworth Street, Robert briskly informed Commissioners Gulliver and Grant-Mainwaring that they understood nothing of business and radio because they hadn't got the sense God gave a louse. After this burst of information, a quiet decision infected the Commission: whatever plea, request or proposal that came to the Commission with the remotest attachment to Robert Wright would be delayed or denied. Grant-Mainwaring disagreed, but communications did not fall into his portfolio, and the fog and the rocks and the utter contrariness of Newfoundlanders tired him. One glimmer of success in a man, and his fellows hauled him back down. How they turned on one another. Just as his wife seemed to turn on these people with her clipped common sense; yet she brought candy whenever they travelled outside St. John's: *For the children, dear, they have nothing*. She gave it sensibly, first calculating numbers, then rationing it equally to bony, dull-eyed youngsters, more than once explaining they should eat the gift. Grant-

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Mainwaring could not quite articulate why the candy, or even Newfoundland, irked him so, and he did not try to explain it to his wife.

Robert Wright's transmitter for Canning's Port of Call worked beautifully – startling, really, raw twentieth-century technology coalescing in the fingers of a man in nineteenth-century dress. Robert Wright's voice – beautiful, too, his accent now a curious blend now of throaty Boston, broguing St. John's, glottal Port au Mal, and hard-palated BBC. Etta's letters diminished; Robert hardly noticed, and the sky clouded and cleared, released rain and snow; the townies bought wireless sets, and the Commission's radio station made its broadcasts, but Robert's repeated proposals to the Commission of Government for his own station?

—We gave up the right to vote for shoddy mistreatment?

Commissioner Lee, one of the three Englishman, corrected Robert. —You people aren't fit for the vote. We're doing what's best for you.

Protesting murmurs from the three Newfoundland Commissioners, and from Grant-Mainwaring. Robert slapped his fourth complete proposal down on the Commissioners' table and strode out of the room, jaw so tense his molars ached for days. Gulliver, a Newfoundlander, picked up the proposal and glanced at the title page – *Plans for a Private Radio Station of 10,000 Watts, Capable of Reaching the Southern Portion of Conception Bay* – before throwing it on the fire. Grant-Mainwaring's spectacles reflected the flames as he scowled, taking care not to remember which Commissioner had just done that and smirking just a bit when he realized a man as stubborn as Robert Wright possessed many copies of that proposal, and he'd likely typed them all himself, two-fingered pecking in poor light.

More Water Street stores got radio licenses and broadcast music and their own advertisements. Robert lost a great deal of sleep and wrote Richard Fahey a great many letters.

William, visiting his older brother, shook his head. —Got a scowl on you that looks like it's carved into rock, got black sacks round your eyes, and you're losing your hair.

Robert ignored him – or perhaps didn't hear him – and spoke beautifully and at some length about radio improving the lot of Newfoundlanders, about the need to connect the rest of the world, about communication; William interrupted.

—Our gold.

Robert looked up.

William smiled. —My share of the Wright family gold coins. Turned twenty-five and got my share.

Suddenly very tired, Robert shook his head.

—Robert, you need to finance your own station somehow. No one's going to give you a transmitter.

—I'll bloody well build that myself.

—Out of what? Spruce boughs and sailcloth?

Robert studied his brother. They looked enough alike to be thought twins by strangers. —How is Ellen?

—You tell me. The San is here in St. John's.

—I've been busy.

William wrote to Ellen regularly and read of her boredom and misery – but no sense telling Robert that. —Take my share of the gold. Those coins have got to be worth a small fortune by now.

—William, I cannot take your gold.

—You're not taking it. I'm giving it to you.

—Those coins have been in the family since – since God knows when, divided amongst the sons –

—Until we've got sons fighting over the one remaining coin? A stunned tradition. Here.

William placed a small black velvet bag on the table before Robert.

—That's my share. George Simms been after those coins for years, offered me thousands. I wouldn't sell. Be like selling my birthright. Giving it is different. You take those coins, and you go see George Simms. And you know what else I say, Robert? Fuck the Commission of Government.

Simms, these days a fat and pale barrister living in St. John's, recognized the coins' value and paid well. Simms smiled hard enough to crinkle his eyes. —Small price to own pieces of the Wrights.

Robert ignored him.

Richard Fahey wired more scarce cash and his solemn oaths of business partnership from Boston. Together Wright and Fahey would change Newfoundland, plough it up, truly serve an illiterate populace crying for guidance. God, the educational possibilities of radio alone! Robert finally slept, quite unwillingly, suddenly unable to get out of bed for seven days. He kept dreaming of

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the coins, of the shocking weight of forgotten treasures. European gold coins hauled across the Atlantic in 17-something by ancestor Jeremiah Wright. Obtained, how? Wright even his real name?

Sudden letters, same post, three from Richard Fahey, two from Etta, 1936 – four years? Four bloody years since he'd left his family to build a radio station, since Etta stopped saying *I love you*? Cool with him on his last visit about sixteen months ago, all nag, *Robert, look at me, are you listening?* Richard as good as his word, good as gold, sailing with Etta and the youngsters from Boston. Soon, on the foggy waterfront, Robert welcomed his oldest son, Thomas, so tall now, a great big boy of five, welcomed his daughter Marie, four, struck by her toddling after Thomas with steady determination, and welcomed Etta, thin and sickly, a six-month baby girl in her arms –

Etta met his gaze, dared him a moment to ask, flushed dark red.

Quick math. Sixteen months. Yes. Yet she'd not written a word of another child ...

One did not speak of such things. One did not even think of them. Could not be. Etta his wife, the baby *his* daughter, despite her face deformed by quickly exposed guilt...

Robert shook Richard's hand, thanked him for seeing his family safely home, and then turned away, plagued by his father's voice: *You'll never be a man, Robert.*

His wife. His daughter. Carry on, for the love of God.

Robert checked the time, first catching the reflection of his face in the back of his pocket watch. Tired, so very tired ... delighted at the weight on his arms as Thomas pulled at him, and he knelt down to smooth the children's hair when he really wanted to embrace them. Thomas stood very straight, the baby fussed, and Marie questioned Thomas, over and over, pointing to Robert.

—Who dat? Who dat? Who dat?

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3. An obituary

in which journalist Rose Fahey neither explains nor discovers the late Jack Best.

Globe and Mail, April 9, 1994.

Building the Boat: A Study of John Edward Best, Prime Minister of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Republic of Newfoundland and Labrador has lost its main architect. John Edward Best, fondly known as Jack, died in the Estuary Rest Home on March 24, 1994. A lawyer, Jack Best came to political prominence in the mid-1940s when the question of Newfoundland and Labrador's future was hardest to answer. Best campaigned for a return to Responsible Government versus confederation with Canada, and the decision in March of 1949 demonstrated the split of opinion: Newfoundland and Labrador elected not to join Canada by 51 percent.

This split dogged Best throughout his career. The opposition party retained a robust number of seats in each election, and Best won his own seat by narrow margins. Twice, in 1955 and 1966, the opposition pushed for and got referendums on joining Canada. In 1955, the population voted 54 to 46 to remain a republic. In 1966, the vote was 55 to 45. Public opinion on the expense and inconvenience of referendums was reported in minute detail by VOIC Radio, the republic's major radio network. This worked to prevent further serious questions of statehood.

Best entered immediately into economic partnerships with several American and European firms, arranging for development of mines, hydroelectricity and pulp and paper. Social changes after 1949 in Newfoundland and Labrador were rapid. Best promised to electrify the island by 1951 and Labrador by 1952. Most homes were electrified by 1953, with some notable exceptions in rural Labrador. In 1955, the government removed education from the control of the churches, a move which caused much upset and nearly cost Best and his party the next election. Best insisted that money saved from duplication of education services could then be invested in the cottage hospital system.

A particular challenge facing Best's government was distance. Many people on the island lived in scattered and isolated outports or on tiny islands offshore, to say nothing of Labrador. Unexpected investments in telecommunications went some way to solving these problems, with a

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favourite exaggeration being that many small outports had radios, telephones, television and even computers before they had a paved road.

After successfully developing hydroelectricity at Menihek and Hubbard Falls in Labrador, on the Exploits and Humber Rivers in Newfoundland, and then experimenting with wind power in Wreckhouse, Best's government brought to Newfoundland and Labrador a new prosperity. Discoveries of nickel and later, oil and uranium, as well as the sale of hydroelectricity to Ontario and the state of New York, kept the republic economically self-sufficient.

Despite a wide vision, Best was thought by some to be narrow-minded, as he tolerated no dissent within his party after losing his first motion in 1949. His catch-phrase, "There's the right way, the wrong way, and the Best way" was often parodied in comedy routines. Best fired thirteen cabinet ministers between 1956 and 1975, breeding the likelihood of unimaginative yes-men rising to the heights of political power. Political historian Clancy Morrow explored this problem in his 1981 biography of Best, *Best Man for the Job*. The resulting stagnation led to dissatisfaction within younger party members, with three of the most promising crossing the floor within one week. In an interview broadcast on VOIC Radio in 1982, Best claimed that generational alienation was part of his long-term plan: "I'll force the spark and passion in the younger generation by pissing them off, if I have to. We've gone soft."

Another troublesome feature of Best's rule was his intimate involvement with Newfoundland and Labrador's broadcasters. Best was a longtime friend of Robert Jackman Wright, who started and controlled VOIC Radio until his unexpected death in 1954. When VOIC Radio passed to Wright's son, Thomas, Best soon placed the younger Wright on various advisory committees and eventually on the Board of Directors of BRATNL, the Broadcast Regulators Association in Telecommunications of Newfoundland and Labrador. No other media-owner ever served on the BRATNL Board, and while no wrong-doing was ever proven or even formally proposed, suspicion remained about the potential despotism of information when the country's major radio network was so closely tied to the government.

Best governed Newfoundland and Labrador without interruption from 1949 to 1975. In 1962, scandal rocked the government. Backbencher Lorne Goodyear was caught in the background of n a VONB-TV live *vox pops* soliciting a prostitute. Far worse for Best was the embezzlement of

government funds, and subsequent flight to Argentina, by Minister of Resources Gerald Canning, followed by the revelations of Nazi wartime activities of electrical engineer Johann Haldorf.

In 1975, aged 74, Best suffered a mild stroke. Six weeks later, having recovered his power of speech, he announced his retirement. An election shortly followed, handily won by the former opposition. That party is still in power today.

In retirement, Jack Best remained a vibrant figure, often touring schools. Grade five students in Newfoundland and Labrador are required to memorize what has become known as the "Mess of Pottage" speech that Best made during the Debates in 1948 and 1949. Best often judged impromptu recitations of this speech, a task he is rumoured to have disliked. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Best lobbied for international aid in patrolling the republic's declared two hundred mile limit on the fishing grounds of the Grand Banks. Canada and the United States rebuffed Best, but Portugal did offer to come to aid in exchange for certain privileges within the limit.

The point became moot in 1992, when, despite decades of economic diversification, Newfoundland and Labrador was devastated by the long-warned collapse of the northern cod stocks. At Republic Building on February 14, 1992, Newfoundland and Labrador fisheries minister Doug Kelsey was preparing to make the announcement by television to a group of angry fishers locked outside. It was estimated over five hundred men and women gathered on the lawns and roads around Republic Building. Jack Best, fearing a riot, and, he later said in a lighter moment, not looking forward to picking Kelsey out of the Bubble in St. John's Harbour, stood on the sidewalk in front of Republic Building and addressed the crowd. Shortly afterward, mounted police were able to disperse the crowd without use of force.

On the Republic Building steps that day, however, Mr. Best suffered the first in a calamitous series of major strokes which soon rendered him an invalid in the Estuary Home. He regained his speech twice more but was unable to walk or feed himself.

Jack Best's wife Colleen died in 1942, and their one child, a daughter, died in 1940. In 1951, in a move highly unusual for the time, Best adopted an infant girl whom he called Calliope, and raised her with the help of his older sisters. Jack Best is survived by daughter Calliope Best, and granddaughter Claire Furey, recently shortlisted for a Republic Emerging Artist Award for her untitled mural featuring a man's arm under a seal pelt reaching for a bowl.

Columnist Rose Fahey was born in Riordan's Back, Newfoundland, and lives in Toronto.

MICHELLE BUTLER HALLETT
Originally published by Killick Press, 2008.

4. Continuity 1

in which VOIC Radio explains independent broadcasting.

TEST CENTRE 1:23

Logged to play at 4:59a and 11:59p M-F, 4:59a S & S.

Run dates: June 1, 1967-TFN

INSTRUCTIONS: Cart off three copies, one for control room, one for production, one for the safe.

VOIC Radio is a proud broadcaster in the Republic of Newfoundland and Labrador. The VOIC Radio Network covers the island, with stations and repeaters from St. John's to Port aux Basques, to Baie Verte and St. Anthony, the Southern Shore and the Burin Peninsula. VOIC blankets Newfoundland! Since 1936, VOIC has brought you the news before anyone else. International, national and local: VOIC Radio is there. The VOIC Radio Network is proud of the role it has played in the development of Newfoundland and Labrador, from broadcasting the referendum debates of 1948 and 1949, to its penetrating journalistic coverage of the news of this moment. VOIC is committed to Newfoundland and Labrador. VOIC is committed to you. For that reason, 570 VOIC in St. John's has installed generator backup. In the event of a power failure, VOIC will remain on the air, because you depend on it. In the event of a power failure in an outside network station, said station will switch automatically to 570 VOIC St. John's. Great expense? No. Great investment, investment in the people of Newfoundland and Labrador. And 570 VOIC is the only broadcaster, radio or television, in Newfoundland and Labrador to have installed such a rigorous fail-safe. Even when all else is dark, VOIC is there, still a leading light. As a responsible broadcaster, the VOIC Radio Network adheres to the rules and regulations of the Broadcast Regulators Association in Telecommunications of Newfoundland and Labrador and to BRATNL's high standards of integrity in news delivery, commentary, musical selection, advertising material, and live audience call-in. Should you at any time have a concern with something you have heard on any station of the VOIC Radio network, your

first step should be to contact that station. If, after contacting the station and receiving a written reply as spelled out in BRATNL regulations paragraph five subsection twenty-seven, you continue to feel your concerns are not sufficiently addressed, please direct your comments to BRATNL, PO Box 8570, St. John's. VOIC. Connect to the whole world on VOIC.

5. Silvern voices 1

in which VOIC *Free Line* host Neal O'Dea speaks in the voice of a common man.

August 28, 1965, and September 14, 1984

Angry and sick, salt spray drying on his face, Neal O'Dea patiently explained to visiting American Calvin Bryson that he owed his nausea to stings, not the swell. Neal had never vomited out on the water, until today – twice now. Two hornets had stung Neal's hand as he'd cast off lines on the wharf – the insects stunned by cool air, aggressive – this on a beautiful Saturday eaten out by unpaid work for VOIC when he'd already punched his regular week on the air hosting the *Free Line* call-in show. Trapped on board Thomas Wright's bright yellow motor yacht *Newsvoice* and expected to entertain Bryson ... no, not seasick, but, in his father's vernacular, *poisoned*.

Bryson owned BrightSun Engineering, the major partner with the government in Newfoundland and Labrador's hydroelectricity grid. Bryson also owned a goodly part of Thomas Wright' desire. Thomas Wright owned the VOIC radio network, and he hoped Bryson would invest in the network's expansion. So Thomas had ordered Neal duly to impress the American: *You sound smart, Neal. You talk to him*. Disgusted with Thomas, and himself, Neal had agreed, adding he'd planned to visit his father that Saturday, so perhaps Mr. Wright could drop him off in Riordan's Back?

Feeling quite runty at five foot three next to the six-foot Bryson, Neal almost didn't hear Bryson's question.

—Which one is Riordan's Back?

Newsvoice had entered a deep and narrow inlet of Conception Bay. Neal opened his eyes and pointed; the hornet-sting rash had spread up his forearm. —Over there. Port au Mal's on the other side. Mr. Wright's family is from Port au Mal.

—Is it true that one community is Catholic and the other Protestant?

Neal smiled. —Oh, yes.

—And you. Thirty-six and a broadcaster. Never wanted to be a fisherman?

MICHELLE BUTLER HALLETT
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—Father had me out a few seasons, but he really wanted me to know something else. I did the elocution course at the Normal School and went off to Canada.

—University of Toronto, Mr. Wright tells me. Just like that?

Just like nothing. —Worked for campus maintenance. I audited a fair bit, but you don't get any credit for that. My brother John likes to say I'm the most educated man in Newfoundland, but I can't prove it. Worked the mines a while, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick. Came back for Labrador, then went down in St. Lawrence after fluorspar, then back to Ontario. Shaft-sinking when I got out of it. Good money. Nearly drowned once. Nowhere near the ocean. Hanging on to a ten-foot rock two thousand feet under, drowning nonetheless, apologizing to my father. Synge would have loved it. Riders to the shaft.

Missing much of this – wind, context – Bryson squinted. —I studied anthropology myself. Are these stages?

Neal felt hot shame. Just a moment of it, a shard, but shame, undeniably. Rickety houses, perched on thin sticks, lacking only one goodly push to collapse them clacking into the sea. No insulated bungalows here, no cul-de-sacs and front lawns, no carports. Riddle fences, outbuildings, backkitchens, all to an unaccustomed eye sprawling but in fact organized by kin, convenience and good use of old materials. Tied to the stages, neglected dories bobbed. In a few weeks, or maybe tomorrow, schooners under sail would return from the northeast shore and the Labrador where men prosecuted the fishery and still said *prosecuted* – phantoms, old photographs, shedding sepia with each movement. Schooners under sail, yes, but Bob Jackman in Port au Mal had bought a trawler, and the fish plants paid by volume. Neal frowned. *Nineteen sixty bloody five.*

A rag of stench on the wind from the plant farther up the bay at Little Cut Head – Bryson did his best not to sneer; behind him, Thomas Wright complained, his loathing of fish guts clear. Neal's stung hand burned hard. Mines: holes in darkness for asbestos, uranium, gold, fluorspar, more than nets, for the love of Christ, more than fish. Ripping a living then, the way an angry child would rip pages from a book, ripping it out of the water, out of the rock, split, gut and dry, pry, comb and pack, cod strangely blue under water, Blue John strange and sudden in dull rock, rip it out, truck it off, sleep in camps more like prisons. All this moneyed brutality while Neal's father Ange kept a root cellar and mended nets by hand. Then Neal recalled feeling mortified at U of T when he referred to a Bach fiddle partita – mortified then, furious now, mostly with himself.

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Bryson pointed to land, to the black wires drooping slightly between poles. —It's all in place. Electricity. Telephones. Most people have a radio. Television's not far behind. Gold mine. A society like yours has an easier time adapting to new media.

Neal's accent clotted up in anger. It did that, precisely at moments he did not wish it. —A society like mine? Backwards, you mean?

Bryson winced. —No, no. I mean pre- …

—Pre-literate?

—Pre-industrial. No. What I'm trying to say – Mr. O'Dea, please, a pre-industrial society like yours has not forgotten its milieu of oral culture, has not pried itself –

Neal hoisted himself onto the wharf. The engine idled; Bryson's voice carried now.

—Listen to me. Your society already understands how small the world is. Connections. Wires and names, shared piers and outbuildings – is that what they're called? You people understand that if one man takes a leak in the well, we all suffer.

Not caring that Thomas Wright stared hot corrupting death at him, Neal strode away from the dock. Bryson's voice thinned back into the thrum of the yacht's engine, and the wind changed, carrying fog.

The garbage I put up with for Thomas Wright. Come Monday morning, I'll be hauled apart.

People like mine.

Neal walked towards his father's house, sports jacket, chinos, acrylic sweater and white Keds as incongruous in Riordan's Back as a palm tree. Yet he walked like his father, bent slightly at the small of the back as though fighting a headwind.

Ange O'Dea, who occasionally still needed to explain that *Ange* rhymed with *flange*, not *range*, had unofficially retired from fishing. His sons Neal and John, and even young Fabian, wealthy and often thoughtless up in Canada, pooled sufficient money to keep him off the water and took turns paying his utility bills. So now Ange spent his days cutting wood, picking berries, and looking after maintenance at the district schools. And baking delicious bread. Neal had no idea when or where his father had learned to bake, but the old man's bread won prizes at the church fair each summer.

Ange stood waiting for Neal in the kitchen, at the back of the house. Suddenly, everything smelled right: tar paper, spruce splits, birch smoke, baked bread and that metallic scent, almost like

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salt water or spilled blood but muskier, that came off Ange himself. Ange nodded to his son, to the one he'd dreamt for years would drown, and finished spreading margarine over the tops of the loaves. Neal nodded back, helped himself to the teapot.

Ange carefully folded the wax paper. —Take some berries over to Jeannie Hicks in a minute. What are you staring at?

—Your beard.

—Shaving's a nuisance.

Neal hid his smile behind the envelopes he now pretended to study. His father's white hair had gotten a bit long, too. Perhaps Jeannie Hicks liked long hair and a beard.

Between the light bill and the phone bill lay a small envelope from Mrs. Matthew Sexton in Sudbury, Ontario. Neal recognized his sister's handwriting immediately. —Father, you've got a letter from Liz.

Neal heard himself: so professional, radio smooth, much more so than with Calvin Bryson. *Yes now, talking to Father like that.* Modulating his voice into something more believable, Neal read Liz's letter out loud three times, a litany of her children's school grades and shoe sizes, troubles and accomplishments.

Ange smiled. —Her boy now, he takes after you, getting into fights and punching above his weight. And that daughter of hers will be tormenting the boys soon, if she's anything like her mother. I wish … she sounds right proper and far away on the phone. Bread's cooled off by now. You take one of the buckets of berries, and we'll go to Jeannie's.

Outside, surprised at the blue and purple of the rocks – all grey at a distance – Neal asked Ange if Jeannie still feared her radio.

—Don't you laugh. Come twenty years, the youngsters'll have something you're scared of.

—She's only scared because she doesn't understand it.

Sunlight glared hard through the fog, making it painful, despite dullness, to see. Ange pointed at hidden spruce. —So foggy today the birds are walking.

—Just like waves on the ocean. Already there. Radio just harnesses waves and loads them with information, like stuffing a bottle with a message.

—Don't go spilling the berries. Took me all day to pick them.

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As the O'Deas walked the shore to Jeannie's house, electric lights flicked on to shine through window after window, in the living room of the grand new Fahey house, a television glowed. Neal called Jeannie Hicks *Aunt Jeannie* – not for blood but respect. Adults other than Neal's parents had all been *Uncle* or *Aunt,* except for the wealthy Wrights in Port au Mal – Captain, Missus, Mister and Miss there.

Ange knocked on Jeannie's back door but did not wait for an answer before opening. —Nothing is after changing, Neal. When the weather's not civil, women light the lamps. Jeannie? Need you to do me a favour. I'm after picking too many berries, so you got to take some.

Jeannie bustled out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

—Angel O'Dea, you're too good to me. Neal, come over to the wall 'til I check your shoulders.

Neal did not hesitate. He kept still while Aunt Jeannie got on a stool and measured the width of his back and the length of his arms, pencilling his boundaries on the wall. Once she got down, she fingered his acrylic sweater. —What in God's name is that? Store-bought, I suppose?

—A gift, Aunt Jeannie.

—Seagulls could knit better. Catch your death in a store-bought. Thought you had more sense.

Neal decided he would not pass this judgement onto Liz, who had sent him the sweater last Christmas; she'd bought it at The Bay. —But Aunt Jeannie –

Ange interrupted, loudly. —Neal's going to fix your radio.

Jeannie glanced round before confessing to Neal. —The voices aren't right. Come in and out, like travelling ghosts. Not that I believe in ghosts. I want to listen to you on VOIC in the mornings, Neal, but I can't find you.

She pointed to a Grundig MusicBoy squatting, somehow malevolently, on the table closest to the window, between an aloe vera and a cherry tomato plant. Neal bent over the radio, thinking of his father's Hallicrafter Sky Buddy, of the two large knobs and how his younger brother John had wanted to suckle them. Jeannie had enabled a shortwave receiver, not AM. Neal flicked the switch: static in waves, then a distant language, young woman counting.

—*Ein, zwei, drei. Ein, zwei, drei.*

Jeannie darted back to the kitchen. —See? Voices.

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A test signal, the woman's voice pleasant enough, but the steady counting, clearly live from the variations in tone and the sigh at one point, unsettled Neal.

—*Ein, zwei, drei.*

Ange didn't like it, either. —Turn that off.

Neal enabled AM. Hidden within the noise all the way down to 570 VOIC: ship-to-shore. —*Southbound Two, Southbound Two, this is* Rhonda Grey*, do you read? Over.*

A dim reply from the station Southbound Two. *Rhonda Grey* gave her distance, but particulars got lost in static.

Then: —*This is* Rhonda Grey. *John Dunne has a message for his wife, Anne, in Bangor. Can you relay? Over.*

The signal faded.

Neal continued to VOIC – The Beatles, "Help." —Found it, Aunt Jeannie. Keep the radio like this, and you'll get VOIC.

She nodded, pleased. Then she handed a can of heavy cream to Ange. —Give that a shake so we can have it with the berries. Neal, I'll have you a proper sweater come Christmas. Dark blue. Bring out your eyes.

Neal asked for that sweater the evening he died, after Ange had fed him soup.

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6. Culture shock 1

in which Gabriel Furey comes of age.

September 2, 1968.

Gabriel Furey caught his reflection in the cab's rear-view mirror; it obscured the view of St. John's behind him. *Head shaved for sacrifice, b'y. Look like I just escaped something.*

The cabbie smiled. —Spruce Court, is it, there by Bond Street?

—How'd ya know?

—You're not the first St. Raphael's boy I've driven there, and I dare say you won't be the last.

Some sort of excitement –fear? – pricked Gabriel's stomach. Free. Eighteen. Out on his own. Done with St. Raphael's Home for Boys. Buzzcut and shave only as old as the daylight, one final mark of Raphael upon him. Mouth open, eyes big, scared as a landed fish.

The cabbie stopped at a red light. —Those little apartments in Spruce Court are all right. Nothing to write home about, but good enough for starting out. Bit of privacy for a change.

Gabriel took care to deepen his voice. —Be all right once I get settled.

—Just stay away from the bars 'til your hair grows out. Anyone can spot you for eighteen with that St. Rape's job. All you're missing is a burning seal on your forehead. Listen, now. There's a superette down your way, open 'til three in the morning. Sell ya stale bread on the cheap.

They drove some more, Gabriel studying the mist. The wipers thwupped.

—Spruce Court, my son.

Gabriel leaned forward. —How much?

—I charges the Church.

Gabriel tried not to watch the cab drive off. Rucksack cutting his shoulder, two keys poking his leg, fraying his pocket – big one for the outside door, little one must be the apartment door ... stink of wax, piss, beer, smoke, sweat, cabbage. The white floor glared. Three floors up. Cheap wooden doors painted primary and secondary colours – Gabriel's key fit the yellow door. A neighbour behind a blue door coughed in harsh futility. Another neighbour played a radio: VOIC, loud and tinny.

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Corner apartment – bedsit, really. Kitchenette, fridge and stove. Rustpocked chrome table. One chair, vinyl backpad knifed open. Lights so bright. Bugs in the bathroom, earwigs and carpenters, once-white tub nearly as dark as the latter.

But a toilet with a lid. And no other toilet in the room.

Gabriel Furey had fifty dollars. Brother Michael Stephens leaning forward, desk gone dark and dented, fifty-dollar bill pinched between thumb and forefinger and offered forth like water with berries in it. Gabriel imagined cold metal in his hands, imagined calluses warming, fingers curling – *Copper pipe to the temple. Can't look him in the eye.* Brother Stephens with that one piece of money as though Gabriel must perform one last act to merit blessing. *Now then, Mr. Furey. Your first two months' rent are paid. Take this money and get some groceries. Should tide you over until you get a job.*

Fifty dollars.

Stay away from the bars until your hair grows out.

Brightly lit but losing to the fog, the superette stocked more than Gabriel could imagine ever needing: bread, Spaghetti-Os, toilet paper, Comet powder, sliced bologna, chocolate milk, margarine, peanut butter, and India Ale, the one with the Newfoundland dog on the box, the bottles brown like Gabriel's eyes – that had to count for something.

The woman behind the counter, maybe thirty-five but looking fifty, bulged over her polyester pants as she stared at *Coronation Street* on the small black and white television while tallying Gabriel's purchase. Then, seeing Gabriel's haircut, she took a breath as if to ask him a question, but she let it go.

Spaghetti-Os. Cook. Do I need a match? Electric, electric.

Back to the superette for a can opener and a pot. *Coronation Street* had not progressed.

Gabriel dumped the wet pasta into the pot and then wished he hadn't. He squinted at the can, the instructions like a cipher in moveable type: Heat on wol. Rits foten.

Wol?

He tried again. Hear on low. Stir foten.

Stir, right, got that much. Hear on low – heat? Foten. The fuck –

Stir often.

Fled. Gone without comprehension.

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Another neighbour turned on another radio, and the staticky treble racket carried, pierced: *Connect to the whole world on VOIC! VOIC top news. This VOIC Noonday Gun Newscast is a presentation of Kelloway's Old Fashioned General Store. Kelloway's, in the former Mahon's Building on Water Street. Kelloway's, just what you needed.*

Once more, Gabriel tackled the label.

Stir. Fine. I'll stir ya.

In a stiff and dark drawer, Gabriel found a plastic spoon and a bottle opener.

—Well, that decides that.

Two and a half beers in, the smoke started – Spaghetti-Os bubbling and burnt, freedom charred to the pot.

—Fucking stink.

Gabriel knocked over his open bottle of India when the Spaghetti-Os scalded his mouth. He knew he'd dream of ravens and crows that night. Striges, too, Old dread chilled him.

Then he cried.

7. Three dots 1

in which Christopher Francis keeps a promise.

December 12, 1901

Just a few minutes after the birth of Robert Jackman Wright back in Port au Mal, Christopher Francis, grateful for his wool jersey, wiped sleet from his face and walked into Mahon's General Store on Water Street, St. John's. A travelling teacher, normally visiting communities up and down Conception Bay, Christopher had come into town on an errand for Mrs. Hope Wright, who needed a letter delivered to her brother on Cochrane Street, a simple errand. Truth told, however, Christopher had come into town for books.

Dark wood and white lettering, barrels of pork, copper pots hanging from the ceiling, fabrics, raisins, tea and coffee, ladies' garments, finally, the books. Surely Mahon's bookshelves were the best part of St. John's. Christopher's fingers brushing the pages of locked and until now, distant treasures: Dickens, Miss Austen, and ah, really? *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*.

A voice murmured at Christopher's shoulder. —'Heaven have mercy on us all – Presbyterians and pagans alike – for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending.'

Cost, but my savings. Books so heavy.

Mr. Mahon tried again, a little louder. —Fine day for a good book and a pot of tea.

Christopher looked up. Instead of struggling not to knock off people's hats, he stood struggling not to spend most of his money on books in Mahon's General Store.

Mr. Mahon grinned. He knew the look. —I said, fine day for a good book and a pot of tea. Fine day for a duck, too. Don't know if this fog and rain will let up. Better than the snow, I suppose. You're a reader?

—Teacher. But I have not got much time to read.

Mr. Mahon tapped *Great Expectations* and *Moby-Dick*. —These two will keep you going all winter, if you can afford the lamplight.

—Lamplight, yes.

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Mr. Mahon glanced over his shoulder, as though expecting his wife to screech a command. —I got a quiet store here, and nothing now would please me more if you bought those books and sat there to read one. I'll even make you the pot of tea. No charge. For the tea.

—I … thank you. Thank you very much.

Mr. Mahon shrugged. —'Tis all I want to do today myself. It would be the next best thing to watch someone else. That fellow there, Ishmael, teacher like you. Before he went whaling.

Christopher stared down at the book covers. Imported. So expensive.

Mr. Mahon kept talking, gently. —Can't live without books. Named my three sons Kipling, Stevenson and Conan Doyle.

Board free, but new clothes ...

—And Dickens, Dickens now, Magwitch and Estella –

Token donations to families for lamplight. He must have lamplight. But books …

—The most amazing wedding cake …

Christopher could bear no more. —I'll take them. But I cannot stay.

Mr. Mahon's face fell. —You're going?

—I must. Please wrap them well.

—*Great Expectations* and *Moby-Dick*, excellent choices. Are you sure you've not got time for that tea? Not even a cup? Very well, sir.

Ten minutes later, Christopher Francis, spectacles blurred by the freezing drizzle, stood at the bottom of Cochrane Street. Cold air scraped his face, and the books tugged his arm. Yet he'd promised Mrs. Wright he'd visit her brother, Peter Jackman, and give him a letter. So much easier to say Peter Jackman had not been at home, to lose the letter in a gust of wind, let it soak to illegibility in a dirty puddle, to deny the old wound. For shame, that Christopher Francis, grown man and teacher, still gritted his teeth at the thought of Peter Jackman. Christopher tasted seaweed and beach rocks, grass and soil: *nancy boy*. The appalling taunt, untrue but no less humiliating, Peter Jackman and George Simms catching him from behind, knocking him down, two stocky boys atop a bony one, pushing his face to the ground: *nanceeee b'y* whispered in his captive ears, hissed and spittled, and only Peter Jackman, George Simms and Christopher Francis knew of it.

Time. Time gone since then, since boys' foolishness. Standing at the bottom of Cochrane Street, hungry, suddenly wondering if Jackman would offer him dinner, Christopher glanced at

foggy Signal Hill and hoped tomorrow's newspapers might report on the Italian count's progress – though why Marconi needed a kite to receive a signal from Poldhu … yes, the letter, sister to brother, he must deliver it. Asked a favour. Simply what one does. Christopher turned away from Signal Hill and struggled up Cochrane Street to Jackman's room.

MICHELLE BUTLER HALLETT
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8. Debate in the house

in which Callie Best stands up to her father and introduces further problems.

October 10, 1970

In the same kitchen where she'd started flowers from seeds for Brownies, finished tedious homework and eaten many suppers alone, Callie Best now accepted the cup of tea from her father, recognizing it as an opening salvo. Before he could follow with words, she catapulted simple truth.

—I'm not asking for your blessing, Dad.

Jack stood in front of the window over the sink. Black sky interrupted by stars, but the stars fled, it seemed, as more and more streetlights went up. —My blessing isn't the issue. Getting married is. Remember that ancient rite, Callie? Did your man Mr. Furey ever hear of it?

—Gabriel wants nothing more to do with the Church.

—And he wants nothing to do with a proper job, either. He turned down that position I got him at the Holyrood Sub-station. There's good money in hydro-electricity.

—Fine pile of painting and sculpture he'll get done stuck between turbines, steam, knobs and ducts.

—Or BRATNL. They always need office clerks.

—Gabriel's dyslexic. I don't think –

—You can't just move in with a man and set up house because you're too addled with lust to think straight. Like some demented call girl.

Early wound. —Dad! I love him.

—Your mascara's running. Take my hanky. You don't need that paint around our eyes, Callie, you're already beautiful.

—I choose to wear mascara.

—Remember the time you came home with your hair cut in bangs, just after I told you not to? Beautiful brown hair you had, all one length and down to your waist, off your forehead …

—Beautiful because you chose it.

—Calliope Ann Best, if you knew what I put up with in the House today … please, don't test my patience any further.

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Originally published by Killick Press, 2008.

—I love him.

—He's a handsome young fellow, no doubt.

—*Love* him, Dad. Would sacrifice for him. Do you understand me?

—But no daughter of mine, indeed, no Newfoundland girl who holds herself and her family in any esteem whatsoever, will live in sin.

—I am not your old-time toothless electorate. Nor am I some orphan in a diaper. I will not be told how to think.

She stood three inches taller than Jack. She had been sitting at the kitchen table, but now she got to her feet and put her hands on her hips. She spoke coldly. Jack didn't recognize her.

—Twenty years old, Dad. Age of majority even on this treacherous navel-gazing bog of an island.

—Callie!

—I love that man. And I am going to live with him.

Jack steadied himself against the counter and nearly knocked over the teapot. His adopted daughter sounded like his father – how? Five foot six, willowy, hair past her shoulders and still in those thick bangs he disliked, all the way down to her lashes. Now her blue eyes burned within circles of ruined ink. Like he'd struck her. Which he'd never done. Lectures and silence had always kept Callie in line. So now Jack Best retreated behind the mask he wore when Listening Respectfully to the Honourable Member; he sneaked into silence.

—Did you hear me? I am going to live with him.

Jack said nothing.

Callie glared round the kitchen, her favourite place in the house, struggling not to run to the small pantry off servants' staircase and cry. Then Callie squirmed, jeans and bra too snug. *Already?*

Jack said nothing.

Already. Yeah. Maybe if threw up on him. —I don't know why I'm arguing with the leader of a republic who calls himself a Prime Minister.

—Prime Minister means first among equals.

Got ya. —But Prime Ministers report to royalty. Who do you report to?

Jack's neck hairs stiffened as his cheeks flushed. —History.

MICHELLE BUTLER HALLETT
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Callie rolled her eyes and put on her coat. Her untouched tea remained on the table.

—History, right. Precisely what Gabriel wants to break away from. Start fresh.

She walked out, slammed the door.

No one had ever walked out on Jack Best.

Beyond any pretence of patience now, Jack shouted at the kitchen window, reasonably sure Callie would hear him. —And what in the name of Jesus is his problem with history?

MICHELLE BUTLER HALLETT
Originally published by Killick Press, 2008.

9. Myopia sky 1

in which a dead body barges in on Robert Wright.

September 7, 1913

Dire Sunday boredom.

Robert squinted from a back window, one overlooking the shore, but still could not see, could not decipher. Black mound moving: Casseiopia, the Wrights' Newfoundland dog. She'd barked, one deep rumble – a bad sign. Then she'd run into the water, very intent, out where the shelf fell away, and dove. Surfaced, something dull yellow in her mouth. She dropped it, barked again.

Tobias Wright grunted, rustled his newspaper. —Robert, what is the matter with that dog?

Robert nearly answered that whatever addled Cassiopeia could hardly be his fault, but instead Jane coughed.

Tobias turned a page. —Give it up, Jane.

She took a steadying breath, held it. Her rib cage jerked; several coughs broke free.

Hope put down the Bible. —Jane. Your father asked you not to cough.

—Yes, Mother. I am sorry, Father.

Still hidden by print, Tobias grunted again.

William sniffed. Hope clicked her tongue. Jane swallowed her own saliva desperately, trying to fend off another coughing fit. Tobias shook the newspaper sharply, briefly revealing his face: indistinct flesh, dark pits for eyes, black hole for a mouth. Like anyone else's. Robert stooped when he walked, watching the ground for obstacles. Reading made him ill, small type on flat books drawing him bent so that his neck and shoulders often got sore, so that his head hurt. Smart enough, both Mr. Francis and the travelling nurse agreed, just weak-eyed.

William dabbed at his nose with a hanky. Robert stared out the window, seeking the dark blur of Casseiopia.

Gone under?

Silence.

MICHELLE BUTLER HALLETT
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Casseiopia reared on her hind legs and shoved her front paws against the window, barking once more. Robert screamed and knocked over a lamp. William yelled, Tobias cursed, Hope called on God, Jane coughed so hard her lips went blue, and Ellen, the baby, who'd slept maybe three hours of the last twenty-nine, bawled. The room, darkened by that huge dog blocking the daylight, contracted, so that siblings tripped in one another trying to escape. William helped Jane to her bedroom; Robert darted outside. Tobias threw down his newspaper, snarled at his wife to go quiet the infant, and strode to the back window.

The dog leaned there still, a good four inches taller than Tobias. He stared up at her, at her strands of drool and dark eyes. She barked once more.

—Get down!

Casseiopia got down, but not in obedience to Tobias. Robert called her, and Robert followed her to the low shore.

No one played or worked by the low shore. Currents snatched.

Yellow. Under the water.

The sea sparkled as sunshine fought with fog.

Yellow, rough shape of a man.

—Don't be getting wet.

Accent and grammar almost foreign – religion, class. Young man's voice speaking past the wood separating Port au Mal from Riordan's Back at this deep end of the inlet. Robert knew the sound even though he could not see the face: Angel O'Dea, about his age, from Riordan's Back, carrying a dead rabbit. Robert scowled. Ange's voice had dropped so smoothly, while Robert's shook like slob ice.

—Snares. Didn't be seeing I'd come this far over. How are you, Robert?

Grown men addressed Robert as *Master Wright*. How dare Angel O'Dea –

Casseiopia barked again. Three times in one day, from a dog who might go a year without a sound.

Ange laid the rabbit on some beach rocks. —Something's in the water.

—Yellow. Right there. It shifted. Bide here.

—For the love and honour of God, don't be so foolish.

—How dare you talk so on a Sunday, Angel?

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—'Tis Ange, not Angel, as well you know. Or are you so blind that you can't see sense? I know you can't be telling your colours.

—I take no guff from the likes of you.

—You're after forgetting that I am not bounden and owed to your family. You be no captain to me, so you can step out of your father's boots right quick.

—You shall bide here, Ange, while I go for help.

—No good can come of me staying here when I can't be seeing what you're after seeing. Think, b'y. Don Mallory, gone missing in June. Be nice if his missus got something to bury. Might stop those dreams some of the women get, their man lost and tangled up in the seaweed worse than the woods and trying to come home. My mother dreamt that for years.

Tide rattled the beach rocks. Robert said nothing.

—So keep an eye to it, Robert. I'll be getting your father.

—See that you do.

Ange climbed up to the Wright house. —Keep an eye.

Robert stood on the shore with Casseiopia. Foam broke on the low rocks. The yellow shape retreated a few inches.

—Wait.

The yellow shape shifted half a foot now, turned, released a wad of fatback – no, a bloated hand.

—Wait!

Robert ran into the water, hand outstretched for the drowned man's sleeve, and tripped. Pressure roared in his ears, and a current took him. And the corpse. For it had been a man, but which man Robert could never say. He surfaced, swam back towards shore, meaning to get the corpse by the shoulders, but his numb fingers slipped off the oilskins. *Must be green,* Robert told himself, *must be green oilskins, everyone says I call yellow green.* Beneath him, the corpse bobbed, and Robert reached for the shoulders again, but then he'd slipped under water, tumbling, struggling like Jane earlier not to breathe. So cold. Wool sweater a weight. Touch of that white hand, but the sense of peace that's supposed to come of drowning, where – ah. Oxygen deprivation, Christopher Francis had taught him. The airless brain collapses, higher functions cease, the lungs suck in water. Dire peace.

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Peace.

Teeth.

Casseiopia at his neck, biting through his shirt and sweater, dragging Robert's face towards the surface, sunlight and fog, pressure and the violence of drawing breath. Two shapes on the low shore, man and boy, indifferent current, cold. Robert twisted against Casseiopia, because if he could be free of the dog, he might get warm under yellow.

Casseiopia heaved Robert ashore.

Tobias, knees clacking on beach rocks, screamed at the sky. Then he took Robert in his arms, still shouting, some of it coherent. —My son. Not taking this one. Mine!

Ange peeled seaweed from Robert's face.

When Hope asked Tobias what happened as they both stripped their son, Tobias sneered. —Half-blind fool fell in.

Ange, crossing the threshold to the Wrights' grand house for the first time, smelled boiled vegetables, just like in his mother's house. —No, sir, he did not.

Jane stumbled with a load of blankets, shocked to see Robert naked. Skin so white, hair so black – when had hair grown *there*? Jane looked instead to the fair O'Dea boy. Had he just dared to contradict Tobias Wright?

Tobias busked Robert hard enough to bruise. —Did you speak to me, O'Dea?

—I said, he did not fall in, Captain Wright.

Robert's teeth rattled, and he moaned.

—Robert saw a body, Captain.

—Robert can't see past the end of his nose. Have you never heard of myopia?

Darkness on the floor; Robert collapsed. His mother quickly covered him, and his father carried him to the daybed. Someone held hot tea to his mouth; he drank, then spoke, looking at Ange.

—Why did I have to see the body?

—'Twas coming ashore.

Tobias scowled. —You saw no body.

More tea. —Why did I have to see him if I couldn't save him?

Ellen screeched, knees drawn up to her belly. Jane soothed her, coughing, while Hope tucked another blanket round Robert. William took Casseiopia outside.

Tobias pointed at Ange. —Mallory?

—I didn't be seeing, Captain.

Brief peace.

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Originally published by Killick Press, 2008.

10. Excerpt without remuneration

in which Nichole Wright exposes herself, oh, so craftily.

New from Hangashore Printing! A searing upcoming novel named Once I Stood by young new talent Cassandra Vocum, who is not yet twenty!

As Carla Furlong leaned against the statue of the Virgin Mary on the school grounds, she looked at me quizzically. "Describe it again."

"It's like winking out, like your memory's a star gone behind a cloud, and then you sort of come to in daylight, and you're really not sure how you got there."

Carla said, quietly, with conspiratorial weight, "Does it happen a lot?"

"Not as much as it used to," I hissed. "Or like being blind after your picture's taken, when you can't see after the flash has gone off."

"Nancy," opined Carla with heavy knowledge, "that's not normal."

I wanted to go home so I could roll up my sleeves and cut my arms. I muttered, "I hate getting my picture taken. But I must."

Turn the page for another fall title on Hangashore Printing's list for autumn 1991!

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Sky Waves: a novel/a drew is available for online purchase directly from my publisher, from amazon.ca, from chapters.indigo.ca, and from amazon.com.

Storylines in Sky Waves link back to the story "Trail marks" in my 2006 collection The shadow side of grace (Killick Press). Characters from *Sky Waves* will recur in my forthcoming fall 2011 novel, deluded your sailors.