

THE HARBOUR

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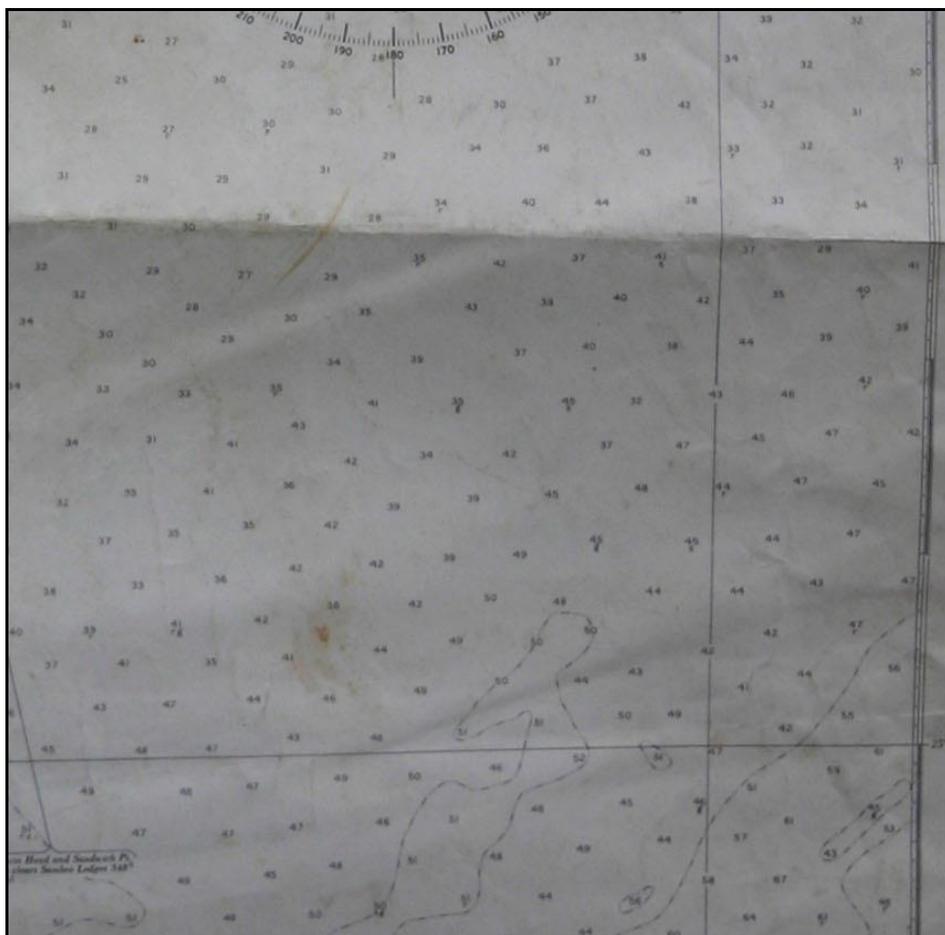
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Introduction

"The Harbour," a work in progress represented here by its initial two chapters, is at once a book of elegies and an effort to translate various representations of the city of Halifax on Canada's east coast. These representations have been set down in the languages of photography and cartography, each of which sets out to articulate and to lay claim to place in its particular way, each with its particular strengths and limitations.

If these are the languages of origin, what is the target language? Always the language of the heart. "Even in Kyoto/", says the poet Basho, "hearing the cuckoo's cry/ I long for Kyoto." Like the practice of translation itself, each of the pieces in this collection is about longing across a certain distance: here, the longing for home across the inevitable distance of time and loss. Each piece, by reaching through a mnemonic image or artifact, strives to touch the city AT a particular moment, to follow back along the cuckoo's cry.

1. The Approaches



None of it has anything to do with us, except for the few things we have brought with us: the faint outline of the sails against a starless sky, the contours of the hull where wave foam inscribes it, the dim glow of the compass light, like a locket opened. And there is also the tentative narrative of our arrival here; a story the navigator has plotted from day to day from the day of our departure, it repeats itself in the stuttering wake that trails out behind us, illumined for an instant in the stern light's beam, then swallowed by the black waves that cross it. We appeared on this chart an hour ago, about half way down the right hand margin, and an inch or two in from it, a small x at the end point of a ruled line in pencil. This is where we begin. A white sheet of paper, heavy, creased from folding, about a yard square, stained here and there with rust or coffee, blued slightly at the upper left corner. A chart of nothing we have a name for: not of a bay behind a headland, not of a reach or gut or arm, not of a body of water, but of water itself, an element on the move, moon slung, pure sea sway. The depth is marked in fathoms. It is 2:30 in the morning, and the darkness goes down a long way. It will be grey dawn before we cross over the braided margin and onto the next chart, where the land appears: the Harbour and Approaches.

When the thin light comes up evenly all around us, thumbed into the fog, it reveals nothing except ourselves and the boat length horizon that contains us. We pick up the lightship on the radio direction finder, its signal suddenly appearing out of a static of rain and sea wrack. And then in a chorus of call and answer its ship's horn sounds from far off: first the coded signal from the radio down below, — . — , then, faint at first, below hearing, the heavy sound of the horn itself moving the heavy air. Gradually the gap between them closes as we close the distance between us and the weed-heavy ship with its high tower we never see, its blind light, its sleeping crew.

We lift across the grain of the groundswell, the wind in the southwest. I have three guides in this, each with their rope of names made of sea-crossings plied together: Finley, Angus, Allen, Cassells, Stuart, Arsenault, Martin, Mack, Townsend, Fosseler, Ferguson, Mühlig, Pyman, Tempest, Tardy, Ware.... One is bent over the chart, his hands light on the woven surface, each incremental minute of latitude a taught string that sounds differently, a slow mile; one is braced down below against the waves' motion and proffers hot coffee with rum in a yellow

mug, and, in the same hand held up over the threshold of the companion way, a biscuit clasped between her first and middle fingers; one is at the wheel—rain and spray stream down the brim of his foulweather gear hood as he reaches forward. All of them pale with sleeplessness, and cleansed by it, and by the sea sound rocked, emptied of everything. Coming in.

Coming into harbour. I suppose I see them now at a little distance, sitting here at this window in this city in the rain. But I am *in* this picture too, as is my brother, tiny, alert to the slackening wind and easing motion. We are buttoned into orange foulweather gear, cold and eager for the mnemonic scent of spruce, crowberry, fir, juniper that will in a moment slide down off the headlands and over us like a benediction, or like a word for home. By mid-afternoon we come in under Chebucto Head, its looming presence, its mass and height marked out for us in the fog only by the sound of the surf and by the diaphone that booms and sighs far above us, its voice full of warning and of welcome and of something, in its shifting note, a sadness more than simply human—and then again, twice on every moment. We alter course just east of north to run down the harbour's western shore. The wind drops to nothing, and the ground swell swings around behind us and lifts us in, one wave after the other, an awkward bundle passed from hand to hand along the granite wall behind its stone grey curtain.

This is where the placenames start, with their stories of panic or of plenty: Portuguese Cove, Bear Cove, Halibut Bay, Thrumcap, Hangman's Beach, Litchfield, Neverfail, Herring Cove, Mars Rock, York Redout, Ferguson's Cove.... And with them the first small sounds, with their pressing intimacy, are carried out to us through the sound amplifying fog. They are the ordinary sounds of community life and seem momentous, heart-breaking, true against the day and night and day of sea surf, our listening tuned already to a different scale in this short time at sea as though we were arriving from a far off place and for the first time upon this shore. The low voices of mackerel fishermen balanced at the end of the gap-toothed pier are suddenly near at hand; a car door opens somewhere behind the banked fog, and then closes, and then a soft exchange of voices, easy, understated, trailing off—something about a key betraying a casual intercourse, lives locked into

a day, a hand that touches the side of a face as it smoothes a damp strand of hair back into place. A sparrow's call.

Here the harbour narrows and divides. Granite turns to ironstone beneath the hull. Beneath the pendulum of the keel, dismembered hulks play out the rhythm of their construction in reverse, nail after nail loosens and falls out, rivets calcify, blister, dissolve to salt; a fluted point carried back from the highlands lies where it was unwrapped and dropped and clicked and broke its edge against a hearthstone; beside it a bicycle that stands upright on an ancient river bank; beneath the hull, beneath the seethe and settling of the city's effluent, pollen whispers through an ancient hemlock grove among old tires, bottles, shoes and broken plates. We feel our way in blind.

Coming into harbour thus, under a lowering sky, the place itself obscured by fog and rain, and now by the darkening late afternoon, where is it they are coming into, my three guides who bring me with them? The ring of rigging on moored boats, hammer beats, roadwork, a flatbed backing up, all passed by unseen, their measure slowed by the fog they sound through, and yet drawing in the mind's eye the contours of a known shoreline, the crosshatched streets that rise steeply behind it. Just as the sound of falling rain might wake a sleeper in the city late on a summer afternoon to trace the shape of things beyond the shadowed room—the sound of rain on the roof, the sound of rain on leaves, and further off rain that pools and splashes onto stone, rain on water —just the same, the sounds of the city come breaking in on us and lead us in. And there are other sounds that come along with these, and to which, I know, we are orienting ourselves: the sound of voices mostly, the babble of any port that carries out across the water and dissolves. But for us there are among them the soft voiced cook, the nurse, the social worker, three sisters who made their own way; the novice who threw his books in the sea and suffered a sea change; the school principal struck down by a street car; two girls, one dancing, one kneeling neatly upon her knees; a child lost, oh the loss the loss, a secret kept; also the gambler; the good man; the gardener with his famous coronet; the father full of laughter and of tricks; the great and tragic beauty in her Dublin shoes, her cases packed, time already gone on ahead; there is the tailor; the builder; the joiner; the sailor; the teacher late for school one day in December, who stands up, her pale skin unscathed, and shakes out her glass torn cape in a ruined place;

the girl full of promise who left, with her braided hair, only the lovely plain garland of her name; also there is the sound of fingers that move lightly over shoals of braille, others shaping words out of the shapes of air around them. These lead us in.

A lifetime is not long in a place, in the scheme of things, its true, nor is a century or two or three measured against the place itself, or against the claims of others. But it is something, after all, and is passed from hand to hand, and into mine. As evening falls, we come in under the loom and the lee of the land, and pick up our mooring line in the oil-iridescent calm. We pack our gear and make our way to shore in the tightrope dinghy overloaded, and take in the strangeness of the solid earth beneath our feet, the speed and order of the drive home along the lit city streets. But this first night back on land, and at sea in a bed that seems too large and still, not bunked together in the close cabin but alone in a room that is too straight and square and empty of the chorus of our breathing, I am at first too light to sleep, a child adrift amidst the heavy furniture passed down. But when I do, it is to rock all night off-shore of the distant shoals of stars.

Sometime before dawn the rain starts up again, drumming on the roof and eaves, and it carries me—city, stone vessel on the edge of things, hull lifting on the thrumming tide, cup.

2. Sackville and Barrington¹



Having returned to live again in the city of my birth.... Or so it might begin, this storied photograph. At its geometric centre, a policeman, head tipped slightly forward against the sunlight, signals to a car we cannot see “come forward” and sets in motion all around him. A clutch of school girls crosses Sackville Street at Barrington, with them, perhaps their teacher, and to their right a tall young sailor. Ahead of them crosses a phalanx of four women, two of them clearly older; one wears a fur jacket, one a heavy woolen coat, their hairstyles identical; the third, just visible in front of the woman on the left, wears a sheer head scarf and has a strapped bag hanging over her right shoulder; and the fourth, out in front, is young and fashionably dressed with her sheer stockings, handsome shoes and slim leather gloves. A row of decorative buttons runs down the back of her fur cuffed and collared jacket. In a

¹ “Sackville and Barrington” was previously published in *A Ragged Pen: Essays on Poetry and Memory*. Kentville: Gaspereau Press, October, 2006. It was also produced as a video installation for the City of Halifax Nocturne 2008 Festival under the same title, and directed by François Gaudet.

moment all of them will pass out of the frame of the photograph on the left. Their counterbalance, across Barrington Street, is a group of three: two women, or a woman and a girl, and a thin man with a long, light stride, all similarly intent on reaching the opposite curb, which we cannot see. Behind this group of three, and almost imperceptible in the shadow cast by the Tramway Building, a fourth figure hangs back and directs his gaze up Sackville Street to where something has caught his attention. He leans forward at an angle impossible to sustain, about to launch himself into motion. Behind him, her head obscured by the policeman's signal, a woman takes small (uncertain?) steps up the hill. And behind her, at the southwest corner of the intersection under a suspended sign for Charles Brown Furriers, a group waits for the policeman to blow his whistle and change his signal. They direct their gaze variously, soon to cross over Barrington from west to east toward the harbour below. A woman a few paces further south on Barrington near the door of Meyer's Photographic Studio appears to be waiting there for a ride that has been prearranged, or perhaps, since she has stepped right out to the curb, she too is waiting to cross over. Only the figure closest to us, held at the threshold across which the girls stepped an instant before, lightly and talking in the cool clear air, their strong shoes sounding on the uneven pavement, only this figure seems entirely contained by the photograph. He does not, as do the others, project any intent outward or beyond the photograph's frame. He stands apart: where the others are clustered into groups with shared objectives, he is set back from those nearest to him, whose backs are turned. This, together with his dark suit and hat, black against the variegated grays that fill the photograph, exaggerates the sense of his isolation in the scene, and conspires to make him the centre of our attention, as do the whirl of motion around him and his position in the foreground. Has he missed the policeman's signal and let the group go on ahead? What is it that holds him there? The inclination of his head suggests that he is lost in thought and that his eyes, though we cannot see them, fall out of focus on the middle distance, that his gaze is inward. By being, in one sense, the least present in the scene, stopped at the curb by a thought which has lifted him out of his surroundings, he inhabits the photograph most forcefully, is its strongest presence, and he becomes our proxy for this moment otherwise out of reach. We, like him, look into it, not, like the others, out. *Having returned to live again in the city of my birth, a port city high up on the Atlantic Coast...* But there is no way to know, of course, what it is that he is thinking. The cars and clothing suggest an era which makes it unlikely, possible but unlikely, that he himself is still alive to answer such a question. And even if he were, it is a moment so ordinary in every respect, a glint in the flow of things, and he more

abstracted than the rest, what are the chances that even with this photograph as a prompt, he (or any of the others) would remember it—perhaps the hat, the briefcase, perhaps the year, or more broadly the touch of sun like that on the shoulder, the quality of light in a certain city in a certain season at a certain time of day. But not the moment or its particular freight, not the day itself. We could speculate: close inspection reveals that his shoes are worn out, he needs a shave, and although a suit and hat might look dapper from this distance, the suit is rumpled and loose-fitting—he has been losing weight—and is the homburg with its domed crown not somewhat out of date? Perhaps things are not as they might be, or not what he might hope, or have hoped, and his thoughts turn on this. His right hand appears to be thrust into his jacket pocket where he may turn a token of some kind between finger and thumb—a penknife, a charm, a stone, a key, each one of which would unlock a different kind of story; or he worries the decal edge of a letter we cannot see and which harbours a promise, new or old. Or perhaps he is asking himself a question for which the newspaper neatly rolled and stowed in his briefcase will provide an answer: Room and Board for Gentlemen. South Park Street. Twin Beds. Reasonable Price. 4-7804. He is headed in that direction. Or: Young Man Wanted As Bookkeeper. To be trained for office manager. Experience an advantage, but not a necessity. Box 1198. Is he young enough? Or: *Elizabeth Bakke* from Far East; *Zilck* for Burgeo; Empress for Antigua. Or is he carried off by something in the news itself? A wartime friend, a pilot, his face and hands, someone lost to burning, or by his own once-upon-a-time contractions of the interstellar spaces—a navigator who returning home finds the intricacies of the city's small streets and intimacies suddenly more difficult to negotiate than the inevitable stars. Caught in midcentury at the centre of his city, has he discovered there an emptiness so vast, so precipitous and so near at hand that for a moment he cannot cross over? We could speculate, but only that. And yet, and yet... the shadows and the light inscribe the scene as memory, this moment unremembered except in this, a photograph, except by us who were not there, perhaps not even born. *Having returned to live again in the city of my birth, a port city high up on the Atlantic Coast, a city that has become, in my absence, a city of traces...* It is in the nature of photographs to be, as this one is, elegiac. Making artifacts, monuments, of a moment in time and bringing them forward, they necessarily leave the living behind. And here the long shadows, outsized, larger than the people themselves, surely influence the way we read the image. Also the way all the figures but one, and the policeman who directs the motion, turn away and step blithely out of the frame to disappear as though to point wryly at our looking and play

at the eternal cruel game of now you see me now you don't. Also perhaps the way the photograph reads from left to right, from darkness into a light palpable enough to ascend along, shadowless, scoured, bright where the negative is burnt, and that it is burnt by the light of late afternoon, toward evening, the sun low in the west, just cresting the brow of Sackville Street where it levels out above Queen. All this, and of course, the plain poignancy of the black and white. Perhaps it would be helpful to fix the date. The photograph was taken sometime in the forties by the cars, though late: one sailor seems too few for wartime, and the car furthest down Sackville, behind the striding thin man, post-dates the rest. Parking meters were a post-war addition to the city centre. And the street-car tracks on Barrington were paved over, poorly it seems, in 1948. The Garrick Theatre there on the left hand side of Sackville Street was closed in 1948 till June when it reopened with *Robin Hood*. The new marquee protruding over the sidewalk, though overexposed, can just be read: *Case of the B.../Sitter & Retu.../of Wild...* For three days in October 1949 *The Case of the Baby Sitter*, a forty minute comedy starring Tom Neal and Pamela Blake, played there in a double bill with *The Return of Wildfire*: October 17th, 18th, 19th, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Wednesday was overcast. Monday was clear with light winds, cool. Tuesday was clear but windy, a high of sixty. Sixty degrees seems about right for the open jackets on the group waiting to cross Barrington. And is there a bright autumnal wind that cuts through this photograph, the north wind that appears suddenly at the end of summer and turns the season in the city all at once, turns its thoughts inward, brings its shoulders up? Certainly a gust up Sackville Street from the harbour down below seems to be inscribed in the rucked-up skirt of the fashionable woman crossing Sackville from north to south and also in the sway of the heavy coat of the woman farthest to the left. Also perhaps in the windblown hair of all three girls and the woman crossing with them. And there is something in the posture of the woman crossing over on the other side of Barrington, behind the thin man: her head is lifted and her hair swept back in a way that suggests, what, a bracing wind? a change of season? rapture? *Having returned to live again in the city of my birth, a port city high up on the Atlantic Coast, a city that has become, in my absence, a city of traces, a place I no longer know, and yet, all I know....* October 18th then, 1949, a Tuesday, say at 4:30 in the afternoon—sunset in an hour's time? The date is interesting inasmuch as this is a photograph found among my father's things, among his photographs: it marks the anniversary of his own father's death the year before, which was taken hard, and it seems to speak to the sense of dislocation that might go with that loss. But there is some question as to whether he was taking

pictures at this time—though an avid photographer in his youth and later on. And this photograph is unusual among his others for being of a peopled scene: not a natural setting, but a photograph of the urban centre of the city he lived in his whole life except for the period of the war. On the other hand, in the fall of 1949 he had returned to the city and was working on Hollis Street, and would often enough have walked this way home, to South Street. And this photograph does share with his others its clarity, its use of light and shadow, an interest in the early morning and late afternoon with their strong contrasts. But what is it about? Why stop here, uncase the heavy camera, edge into the shade of that overhanging awning and shoot this scene of perfect plainness, a faceless scene? This photograph uses the same diagonal composition that many of his others do. The view is askance, across the grain. Behind the policeman at the centre, the background is dominated by the monolithic V of the Tramway building cast in shadow. The alignment here is exact—note how the illumination on both sides of the sign that hangs over the corner of Charles Brown Furriers is visible. This basic geometry is reinforced by the lay of the streets themselves: Barrington falls away to the left, the dark line of its western curb intersecting the left-hand margin of the photograph just over halfway up; and the shadow that climbs up Sackville Street meets the right-hand margin in near perfect symmetry and makes the photograph a winged thing. A third and more acute repetition of this shape triangulates the camera lens itself and the photographer: one axis lies straight past the hatted man to his double, the male figure cast in shadow part way up Sackville Street, and who likewise hesitates, coatless, feet together at the curb, hands at his sides, looking up the hill to where something has flashed on his attention. This axis includes the photographer in a group of three, three who pause on the held breath of this moment, who lean into it, who lean into the light. The second axis arrows out from the lens through a gap in front of the school girls, and terminates at the woman standing at the curb near the door of Meyers Photographic Studio on Barrington Street. She alone of all the people in the photograph seems to be looking directly back at the photographer, and so, although her gaze falls outside the frame of the image itself, like those of all the others, it is fixed on us, a witness to our witnessing. What might she see, if her eyes are good? A lean man with glasses who pauses just down from Barrington Street, opens a polished leather camera case and steps half into shadow under an awning in order to shoot against the sun. He looks down into the camera held up by his heart and adjusts the lens, just so. Then he shifts his grip and there is the light click of the shutter under his touch and it's done. *Having returned to live again in the city of my birth, a port city high up on the Atlantic Coast, a city that*

has become, in my absence, a city of traces, a place I no longer know, and yet, all I know in the way of something that I have carried with me, like a talisman, like a polished stone... It is to that shadow that I lift up my hand, making my own long-shadowed pantomime, and I am still for a moment where we stand, looking into the light that falls. And then the solitary hatted man crosses over; you see, already his right foot is lifting at the heel. The policeman sounds his whistle, bright, incandescent sound, a flash of light, and after, still a trace of the girls' laughing, a gust of wind, the slap and billow of the green awning overhead, engines changing gear, the autumn smell of apples, oil, salt. And with the heavy closing snap of the brown leather camera case, the photographer himself sets off alone up Sackville Street into that burnished autumn light and leaves me here attending to this photograph at the centre of his city and his age, something that I have carried with me. Like a talisman, like a polished stone, half slate, half granite, I take it up between my finger and my thumb, and I turn it to the light, the same light.