

ENGLISH: *ISLAND*

Human impact on landscape is always fleeting.

The old man had just risen from his deathbed. Exiting the darkened, quiet room to limp slowly to his old rocking chair on the front porch, the scene opened up to a vista of sweeping, jagged cliffs, the rocks careening down to the tempestuous grey sea below. The scent of sea spray filled the air and the biting, cold wind elicited a shudder through even this hardened, wizened fisherman's body as he eased himself into a sitting position. He knew that no true man of Cape Breton died in the comfort and safety of a warm luxurious bed, and he would not be the first to break that trend.

As he breathed in the fresh, salty air, the man was instantly transported back to the days of his childhood, destined for a life of fishing before he could even talk. But though he may have been hindered in communication, he had nevertheless struck himself a place in Cape Breton and in the wild society of miners, fishermen and farmers. He recalled watching the fishermen unloading their hauls of glistening, squirming fish onto the cobblestones of the wharf, a practice that had continued since the first settlement of this windswept island, and knowing that like his father and his father before him, he would one day be trawling the depths of the ocean with them. He remembered the first time that he had heard the wild and sometimes frightening tales that his grandfather had whispered into his ear on that night of the great storm, as black clouds hung overhead and lightning sparked through the dark sky. He still remembered the stories, word for word, keeping alive the tenuous link between his ancestors and the rugged landscape of Nova Scotia. Knowing that he would keep such memories until the moment his heart finally betrayed him, he sat back, momentarily relieved, gazing out at the foam-capped waves battering the unyielding cliffs below.

And then adulthood had come, brilliant in its promises of adventure and excitement, and the man had grasped his life ahead with eagerness. Now he recalled the days where his own life seemed sure to be lost, and the grief when his friends and crew members had perished instead. He recalled the hot summer days where the sun gazed down into clear, still waters teeming with fish, and the long winters where snow whipped about their faces in violent gusts as waves of black, seething water towered over them. At last, he had experienced the true nature of Cape Breton, astounding in its glory. He had formed a true connection with the world he lived in and depended on through his experiences, memories and emotions that could never be broken. But things had changed. Now the ages-old tradition of fishing had been cruelly broken by the commercial trawlers and their automated nets and machines. They had plundered the treasures of the sea, leaving nothing but filth and litter in their wake, and now it seemed as if this place would never be the same again.

With a sense of finality, the man stood and slowly made his way down to the edge of the rock face, leaning down to make out the rocks below for the very last time. Eventually, he considered, eventually we all cannot escape Death. One day, the world will finally be free from us, the human race. And at that moment, no matter how far into the future, there will be no more trawlers, no more memories, no more stories. One day the tallest buildings will crumble and the ever-present, patient force of Nature will step forth and stretch out her wide hands. And it will be as if we had never existed. All our works of art, scientific reports, philosophies, love- they will be dust in the wind, and Cape Breton will be free once more. He allowed himself a small smile as he thought. And maybe this is what the world needs, he concluded. A short break from humanity. Just as the words passed through his mind, he felt a small shudder, deep in his heart, and knew that he was no longer breathing. And then the long, twisting fall, his eyes wide towards the stony sky as the impact pushed all the air from his lungs. His last thought, before the hungry, dark sea took him in its embraces, was the knowledge that we would all, in time, be swallowed by nature.

They found him later that morning, as gulls circled his shrivelled, frozen body on the stony beach. Identified and placed into a Cape Breton morgue, cause of death was later attributed to drowning rather than cardiac arrest. But what caught the coroner's attention was not the water in his lungs or his failed heart; it was the peaceful, contented smile on his face.