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4. Alistair MacLeod

Interviewed and assessed by Colin Nicholson
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Short stories by Alistair MacLeod have been translated into Russian and into French. One, 'In the Fall', has been made into an award-winning film: two have been dramatized. 'The Boat' and 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood' were selected for and appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*, making him the only Canadian to have been recognized twice in this way. In the first instance, and in the company of work by Bernard Malamud, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Sylvia Plath, 'The Boat' was judged one of the best twenty short stories published in North America in 1969. Several other tales by MacLeod have either been selected for the roll of honour, or listed as distinctive in *The Year Book of the American Short Story*. On its publication in 1976, his collection, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*,[1] received outstanding reviews entirely characterized by the welcoming enthusiasm, recorded on the book's cover, of Joyce Carol Oates: "These are moving, powerful and beautifully crafted stories by one of North America's most promising writers." Or, in the words of Hugh MacLennan, "This may well be the best pure writing ever to appear in Canadian fiction."

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This paper (which first appeared in *Canadian Literature* No. 107, Winter 1985) incorporates an interview conducted with MacLeod during his year at Edinburgh University's Centre of Canadian Studies on the writer-exchange scheme jointly funded by the Scottish Arts Council and the Canadian Council. MacLeod's replies are signalled thus, [AM], and are *italicized*.

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Alistair MacLeod's characters and contexts are miners and their families, fishermen or farmers and their communities. His are, in the proper sense of the word, elemental fictions. The driving wind that blows through the pages of 'In The Fall' both strains and secures a family under economic and emotional duress. Coalmines in 'The Vastness of the Dark' play a comparable role for the eighteen-year-old narrator, imprisoning him but also lending him a strength of which he is at the time of telling only dimly aware: a history of mining disasters in the region of his upbringing both confining him yet paradoxically giving him definition. "This grimy Cape Breton coal-mining town whose prisoner I have been for all of my life" (p. 39), is not something easily shaken off. But the remembered words of his grandfather lend an urgency to the boy's desire to set himself free from a history which fascinates and repels him simultaneously: "once you start it takes hold of you, once you drink underground water, you will always come back to drink some more. The water gets into your blood. It is in all of our blood. We have been working in the mines here since 1873" (p. 41). As these twin and rival themes of entrapment and escape, enclosure and release mutate through the volume, the language registers a history of hardship and of endurance. In the words of the itinerant miner desperately searching for work, whose comment ends 'The Vastness of the Dark', "it seems to bust your balls and it's bound to break your heart" (p. 62).

Or this, as the boy remembers his first working day underground; "and there was scarcely thirty-six inches of headroom where we sprawled, my father shovelling over his shoulder like the machine he had almost become while I tried to do what I was told and to be unafraid of the roof coming in or of the rats that brushed my face, or of the water that numbed my legs, my stomach and my testicles or of the fact that at times I could not breathe because the powder-heavy air was so foul and had been breathed before" (p. 41). Both the boy and his mother are terrified when the drunken father and husband badly gashes his hand: "and we had prayed then, he included, that no tendons were damaged, and that no infection would set in because it was the only good hand that he had, and all of us rode upon it as perilous passengers on an unpredictably violent sea" (p. 43).

MacLeod himself worked as a miner and as a logger to pay his way through University, and inclusion of biographical and family experience gives graphic indelibility to his depictions: [AM] *My father and his five brothers all worked in the mines at one time or another, and every one of them was mutilated – lost one eye, lost a hand, had their bones calcified. And this makes a real difference, I think. It comes, I guess, with being born in a certain place,*

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what you see around you, what your fears and your loves are.

Born in Saskatchewan, Alistair MacLeod grew up in the coal-mining area of Alberta, moving when he was ten years old to the farming communities of Cape Breton. [AM] *My ancestors left Scotland for Canada in 1791. They left from the Isle of Eigg and went to Nova Scotia on a ship under the command of somebody called Colonel Fraser. They've been in Nova Scotia ever since.*

Almost two hundred years later, Gaelic songs, Scottish history, Highland allusions and Scots-Canadian place names like Glenholme, and New Glasgow; all of these are woven into the fabric of his writing. A question which the dying school-teacher who narrates 'The Road to Rankin's Point', asks himself springs naturally to mind: ''what is the significance of ancestral islands long left and never seen?'' (p. 170).

The answer is direct. [AM] *My parents were both from a place in Canada called Inverness County – named that for the obvious reason. When people from Scotland went over there, they went to a large extent in family groups from individual islands, like Eigg, and intermarried, and carried with them the whole body of whatever it is that people carry with them – folk-lore, emotional weight. Because it was all open to them, they settled pretty much where they wanted to. Cape Breton Island and Nova Scotia remained rural for a long time, and fairly isolated. And because there was no one else to integrate with, they stayed very much to themselves amost for six generations. So that if you look at my ancestry and my wife's ancestry, there's no one who's not from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. All of our ancestors bear those names; MacLeod, Maclellan, Macdonald, Rankin, Beaton, Walker, MacIsaac, Gillis, MacDonnell, Campbell, Macpherson, MacLennan. In 1985, this is still who we are. And that is why there is this felt affinity on the part of those who emigrated for those who remain. When you think that this is good you say that people were stable for several generations: when you think of it in negative terms, you could say that they were static. Although my wife has adequate Gaelic, we are really the first generation where the breakdown of that culture is beginning to occur.* It is a breakdown which will return to haunt the writing in a number of ways.

But it is all the more notable, in the light of that clear enunciation of historical awareness, that as a collection, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* is characterized by a narrative predilection almost exclusively dedicated to the present tense. [AM] *In that mode you can be tremendously intense. I just like that. I think that individuals are very interested in telling their own stories, and to adapt this persona is very effective in just riveting the listener. I do think of Coleridge's ancient mariner who, having been ordered by the wedding guest to release him – ''eftsoons his hand dropt he'' – fixes him with his glittering eye and just tells his story. I think, too, of David Copperfield's opening, 'I Am Born', and think how basic, and arresting, that is.*

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Closely focused upon the experiential now of the narrator and the reader, these stories also achieve a similar kind of immediacy and intensity for the recollection of emotions from the past in a troubled, untranquil present, Moreover, by presenting this recall in a style of lyric elaboration, MacLeod's narratives conjure both the bright surfaces of life and their implicit emotional undertow, bringing them into what William Carlos Williams once called "that eternal moment in which we alone live". It is in the sculpting of the emotional infrastructure of any given situation that MacLeod's talent shines, so that his lyricism "celebrates the poetic self despite every denial".[2] And his narrators are, all of them, poetic selves. While the verbal unspooling of first-person narration counteracts a relative paucity of dialogue, the cross-weaving of time past with time present signifies the presence of history everywhere in his writing, as narrating memory speaks. Thus, an account of a middle-class family going back to working-class origins in a mining community, simply called 'The Return', opens with "It is an evening during the summer that I am ten years old and I am on a train with my parents as it rushes towards the end of Eastern Nova Scotia" (p. 89). After exploring that moment in an earlier and a later direction, a re-entry is subsequently effected – "And now it is later" (p. 94) – after which the present moves forward in the narrating memory; "It is morning now and I awake to the argument of the English sparrows outside my window and the fingers of the sun upon the floor" (p. 97). (Argument defines the relationship, on this visit, between the child-narrator's mother and father, and between them and his grandparents: and identity and relationships are very much prefigured in imagery associated with the human hand.)

On the two occasions in the volume where the more traditional past tense is used as the vehicle for fictionalized recall, in 'The Golden Gift of Grey', and 'The Boat', other techniques are used to persuade the reader of the enriching if troubling immediacy for the narrator of what is being narrated. Indeed, from its opening utterance, 'The Boat' may be accurately described as a technical meditation upon remembered events and imaginings as the past folds in on the present: "There are times even now, when I awake at four o'clock in the morning with the terrible fear that I have overslept" (p. 129). Thereafter unobtrusive iterations mark the affective passing of time, as the process of memory inscribes its intricate divagations: "And I know then that that day will go by as have all the days of the past ten years, for the call and the voices and the shapes and the boat were not really there in the early morning's darkness and I have all kinds of comforting reality to prove it" (p. 130). Meanwhile, rhythms of acute discomfort are registered. Or,

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to slightly different effect, "I say this now as if I knew it all then" (p. 132), and later, "I say this again as if it happened all at once and as if all of my sisters were of identical ages . . . and again, it was of course not that way at all" (p. 142). The narrative consciousness in these stories repeatedly demonstrates its ability to enter their constructed worlds at will, at any point, and from that chosen present range backwards or forwards in time.

In the process, 'The Boat' reflects post-modernistically upon its own procedures, so that when we read an instance of apparently more straightforward recall we encounter, rather, an image which encodes the fictive strategy both of this story and of the collection as a whole:

> The floor of the boat was permeated with the same odour and in its constancy I was not aware of any change. In the harbour we made our little circle and returned. (p. 131)

The image is a paradigm of a mode of writing where circling and returning, constancy and change and sameness and difference are central to its concerns. For what strikes the reader all the more tellingly for being implicit, is the narrator's prior, and the reader's subsequent awareness of a change so profound that it jeopardises any sense of constancy either might otherwise enjoy. It is an image which reinforces our own subliminal involvement in the circlings and returns of the past into the present and the present upon the past, and which illuminates MacLeod's narrative technique everywhere else as much as it advances narrative event in this story. And in common with stylistic procedures widely adopted in this volume, the shaping agency of personal, familial and community history is felt along the pulse of practically every sentence in 'The Boat', as an emergent consciousness is adumbrated: "I first became conscious . . ." (p. 130), "My earliest recollection of my mother . . ." (p. 131); "I learned first . . ." (p. 132). It is, then, appropriately typical of MacLeod's method that the past lights up memory's retina with the shock of first cognition: "My earliest recollection of my father is a view from the floor of gigantic rubber boots and then of being suddenly elevated and having my face pressed against the stubble of his cheek, and of how it tasted of salt and of how he smelled of salt from his red-soled rubber boots to the shaggy whiteness of his hair" (p. 130). The past is recalled with a sensuous immediacy as if present, while the story's final image subsequently enshrouds this earlier remembering.

'The Boat' begins in the present tense, and maintains this mode for a page and a half before reverting to the conventional mode of recall. For the reader, this too structures a contextual immediacy of recurrent nightmarish intrusions of the past into the present which technically glides as easily into that past. It is, then, a semantically functional tech-

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nique, offering the reader a kind of analogous exposure to the process whereby, for the narrating self, the past actively shapes his present. The reading present slips into a narrative past just as the narrator's past exfoliates, always already shaping the self he now is. In this way a textual web of two-way entrapment is created. The narrator gives this voice: "I say this now with a sense of wonder at my own stupidity in thinking I was somehow free" (pp. 142–43). In 'The Boat', as throughout the volume, both time and experience appear to be duplicitous, possessing the quality of being double in action, and, then, of double-dealing, almost deceiving the characters, being understood by them in two ways at different times; time passing openly and secretively at the same time.

[AM] *I was interested* [in 'The Boat'] *in the idea of choice, of the price we all have to pay for the choices that we make; in the idea that sometimes people choose to do things that they don't want to do at all, somewhat like the father in that story. This is a man who is caught up in a kind of hereditary pattern, where people fish, and the only son inherits the father's boat – that kind of life. But what I was getting at with the father was that here was a person who maybe didn't want to do that at all, but who is just caught up in this inherited life. Throughout this story, nobody ever thinks of him as ever having a side to him that yearns for something else. They just see him as doing what everyone else does. Which he does. I was interested, towards the end of the story, in the son who is an ambiguous kind of person – can do things well at school as well as handle the boat. It never enters the boy's mind, until his father becomes sick, or something like that, that maybe he has to choose between this or that. And then he realizes that his father has made this choice before. So when I was writing the story, I realized that there were several things I had to do: I've got to make the father old, because if he was a thirty-eight, or even a forty-eight-year-old man with a son who doesn't want to fish with him, then I've got a very different kind of situation on my hands. But what you've got here is a man who is fifty-six when he fathers this child, and his wife is maybe around forty-two. Six daughters before – none of whom marry local people and the mother is left alone – and this is the only son. The mother is thinking of future security and the father is thinking of other things. So that by the time the son has to make these decisions, what he's got for a father is someone who is around seventy-three. Very different indeed from a father who is thirty or forty. You've got a grandfather for a father.*

Within this family configuration, only the briefest of gestures towards a specifically colonial history – "the houses and their people . . . were the result of Ireland's discontent and Scotland's Highland Clearances, and America's War of Independence. Impulsive emotional Catholic Celts who could not bear to live with England and shrewd determined Protestant Puritans who, in the years after 1776, could not bear to live

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without'' (p. 132) – helps to contextualize deeper significations for both a loveless marriage and a mother's attitudes to the relative merits of literature and work. So it seems inevitable that one of the ways this literature works is to make, of a father singing ''the laments and the wild and haunting Gaelic war songs of those spattered Highland ancestors he had never seen,'' an historical epiphany by modulating past tense into fluid continuous present: ''and when his voice ceased, the savage melancholy of three hundred years seemed to hang over the peaceful harbour . . . and the men leaning in the doorways of their shanties . . . and the women looking to the sea from their open windows with their children in their arms'' (p. 140). Conversely, the light but firm embedding of the narrative in an inter-fusing past and present enables extensions from concrete immediacy out towards timelessness: as when the boy remembers evenings spent with his mother, knitting lobster-trap headings ''the twine was always very sharp and harsh, and blisters formed upon our thumbs and little paths of blood snaked quietly down between our fingers while the seals that had drifted down from distant Labrador wept and moaned like human children on the ice-floes of the Gulf'' (p. 143).

Finally, 'The Boat' returns us to the now with which it opened, playing a fugue in memory of the dead father whose presence is everywhere felt. The syntax moves from ''is'' to ''was'' to ''had been'', to repetition: ''but neither is it easy to know that your father was found . . . at the base of the rock-strewn cliffs where he had been hurled and slammed so many many times'' (p. 150), and then from ''was'' to an image whose haunting and continuous immediacy first triggered the narrative act of memorial homage. ''There was not much left of my father, physically, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrist and the seaweed in his hair'' (p. 151). It is the word ''physically'' which provides the clue. The father who exists no more, exists all the time in the boy's mind.

[AM] *All the time. I think what I was trying to deal with there was, as the father makes the choice, and so may always be haunted by that choice, you know, haunted by ''the road not taken'', so the son has made the opposite choice, and the haunting passes to him. Still his mother and all these people who stay there wonder when he's coming back. And of course he's never coming back physically in a permanent sense.*

Narrative strategy floats the possibility that the father has committed suicide in order to free the son.

[AM] *Nobody knows, not even the son. All that the son knows is that when this fishing season is over then it's really over. But as it turns out it's as if they get through the last season and there isn't any more father; like it's on the last day*

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and the weather is now too bad to continue. The boy looks around, and there's more finished than he thought! Remember that when the boy had said that he would stay and fish with him as long as his father was alive, the father had said I hope you remember what you say. So, when the father's no longer there, one way of looking at it is that the son has been freed. When you're dealing with the possibility of suicide, hindsight becomes very different. Cryptic remarks assume strange significance, and nobody really knows what they mean. So, after the old man is washed overboard, and the son looks back on all this, he is left to puzzle out what the old man really meant. But what does happen is than the son goes away and does not pursue that career as a fisherman; then the mother just thinks of it as disloyalty. And with that final image comes the recognition that you're never free of anything.

As the boy remembers it, his dead father was once described by a party of visiting tourists as "Our Ernest Hemingway" (p. 141), and it may not be entirely accidental that Alistair MacLeod's writing opposes itself to one central attribute of the American's style. As with many of the protagonists in Hemingway's short stories, in 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro', a fear of contemplation, or indeed of any recuperation by thought, combines with a celebration of sensuous immediacy to construct a fictive terrain of recrimination and failure. The immediacy of the senses displaces conceptual thought, and the narrative of the dying writer Harry is characterized throughout by a devotion to the "now" of lived experience, even as his life has been characterized by a squandering of that experience. Harry himself recognizes the betrayal implied in selling "vitality in one form or another"[3] in his writing. As he acknowledges elsewhere, "you kept from thinking and it was all marvellous" (p. 65). Only in his moment of dying is Harry able to substitute a sense of duration for the effects of intensity, with the word "then" displacing the word "now" in his terminal experience of consciousness. In marked difference, by playing upon the ambiguities of "then" as adverb in 'The Boat', MacLeod registers the emphasis of immediacy in its lexical dance with "now", but makes of it a process and style which renders *both* words durable. The Canadian's "now" is a deepened, meditative, historical experience.

In contrast with Hemingway's preferred American usage,[4] the "now" in which MacLeod's first-person narrators tell their stories is one of ruminative awareness, one that is densely historical, resonant with the history of a local community. And exploring an immediate present both backwards and forwards in time is, as we have seen, a narrative technique he favours. So to think of him as a kind of fictional historian of the "now", begins to seem natural.

[AM] *I think of myself as coming from a particular place and a particular*

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time. I do not think of myself as anything like an "instant" North American, not sure of his mother's maiden name. The idea of the melting pot. much encouraged in America, has not been encouraged in Canada; you know, the idea that people come from Scotland or Norway or wherever, and that once they're dipped in North American waters, they forget all their history and become instant American. The cliché is that you think of America as the melting pot and of Canada as a mosaic, composed of individual areas – here are the Scots, and here are the Irish names. Here are the French-Canadians; here the Ukrainians, the Icelanders, and they're spread out like that across the country. I think of it as inhabiting a single room within a larger house; inhabiting both.

Of course, then there is the feeling that regional writing somehow is not good enough, but my own answer to this is that most of the world's great literature begins in the regional; all literature has to begin someplace. So if you look at Emily Brontë, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens – though that's the big city – it's still a regional world. Jane Austin is regional. A phrase much used by Flannery O'Connor is that she comes from "some place". She talks in her letters about going to conferences or whatever, meeting other writers and then saying "it seems that this afternoon I met a lot of people who were not from any place. I am from some place." A phrase that I have made use of to suggest one of the effects that this kind of writing might carry to the very different regions of a new country like Canada, is one that I borrowed from Bob Kroetsch, "the fiction makes us real". It's an issue that arises naturally with the idea, for example, of a Maritime literature; there's a current notion that this kind of writing gives people a confidence in themselves, that they can see themselves out there in the literature.

And the idea of a Canadian literature that is somehow nationally cohesive?

[AM] *Well, there's certainly a yearning on the part of some people for "the great Canadian novel". You know, some idealized novel covering everyone from St. John's to Victoria, which is 4,000 miles! The country is just too big for that. Too diverse. There are lots of people who have theories about this, of course, and Margaret Atwood had a long explanation of her view of the literary Canadian as victim.*[5] *And there is at least some justification for that idea. It's a harsher country than the United States: there's* nowhere *in Canada where you couldn't freeze to death in February. The country, too, is a lot younger, and I think that even today a lot more people are employed in basic extractive industries than they are in the United States: they're logging and they're mining and they're fishing – the States is more of an industrial territory. And I think that one of the things that happens if you're engaged in using your body in your daily work, is that you have more to lose; you do lose you hand, lose a limb. It's more physical.*

Yet even in the nineteenth century in the United States, when there was a whole country to be taken, to be worked, the image is not of the pioneer as victim?

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[AM] *No, it's more that of the conqueror . . .*

But that's not a "Canadian" phenomenon. Why is that?

[AM] *Well. . . . It may have something to do with the people who went there, a lot of British people who still looked back to Britain, whereas in the United States they hardly seem to look back at all. Certainly in Canada, I think there's a stronger family connection. Canada seems to be composed of an entirely different set of attitudes. It's a different perception of history.*

What, then, was his reaction to the association of the lyricism in his own writing with the Celtic origins which his stories frequently recall?

[AM] *People are always suggesting this to me, and I've come to agree. But I do think that a lot of the language I use, a lot of the images I use, and lot of the perceptions that I have are, how shall I say this, things that have been around me for a very long time; that language is almost given to a person, and what I try to do is to articulate that language. I read my things aloud to myself, to hear how they sound, and if they work aurally, I find that persuasive. I've heard my stories read on the radio and I'm always pleased that they do work in the mouths of others. But the kinds of things I deal with, I've been talking about to my uncles and my grandparents and everyone else for years, I suppose.*

Alongside the informing lyricism, there is also in MacLeod's writing an abiding note of loss and of regret, with the Scottish allusions seeming to operate like a kind of choric threnody. So there is, co-exising with his lyrical celebration of living, a pervasive sense of sadness, as if the style itself were keening.

[AM] *Well, I'm not sure, but there may be among those people a kind of sadness that they brought with them, the sadness of which we still hear. I don't know how long we can be saddled with Culloden, or with The Clearances, but while some obviously couldn't care less, perhaps meditative, thoughtful people brought that kind of sadness with them.*

It is a remark which brings into focus a feeling generated by reading MacLeod's work, that one of the things he is doing is memorializing an immigrant culture from the Highlands and Islands at a time when its historical purchase in Nova Scotia begins to slip: both memorializing and, since he is writing in English, enacting that moment of slippage.

[AM] *Perhaps. Perhaps. But I don't think of it that way; people do things emotionally without always being aware that they're doing them. I do know that I found myself growing up in a household where a lot of people spoke Gaelic, and not paying much attention to it; and you discover that you pick up a lot more than you realize.*

Yet MacLeod's earlier remark about belonging to the first generation in which the old Gaelic culture is beginning to break down suggests that there are further ways in which he is involved in a kind of historical elegizing, playing a pibroch in his own behalf, perhaps, as

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well as for the purposes and places of his characters. In its invocation of a phase of irreversible transition, his writing is reminiscent of some of Thomas Hardy's concerns, and the tone of regret which suffuses these stories, amounting almost to a characteristic sense of foreboding, might best be intimated through a story not included in *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. 'The Closing Down of Summer'[6] deals with a gang of miners who roam around the world following work and who are at the peak of their powers, but is narrated by the gang-leader whose intimations of his own forthcoming death suffuse the texture of the writing. As he reveals how itinerant mining ruined his own marriage much as it damaged that of his parents, time passing becomes time future in particularly ironic ways – "perhaps we are but becoming our previous generation" (p. 24) – and he wonders whether, in a rapidly transforming world of work, "we have perhaps gone back to the Gaelic songs because they are so constant and unchanging and speak to us as the privately familiar" (p. 24).

[AM] *One of the things I was interested in when writing that story, was the problem of the intelligent, reflective, inarticulate person, someone who thinks a lot. He has been away from his family for so long that he hardly knows them; and his closest friends are those he works with. I think of these men as athletes – but without fans. They're laying their bodies on the line, but with no one to see them! And as they become more handicapped – deafened or whatever – they revert to the Gaelic which they can also use in the lip-reading conditions underground. In my own life, as my grandparents became older, my grandfather became deaf; and they became almost Gaelic speakers again. He could "hear" Gaelic better than he could English. This was in them anyway, and I think they just had some kind of prelapsarian return. So I think that this happens to these men in the shaft when they're in Africa or wherever, they just speak Gaelic to each other.*

I was also interested, with the Gaelic singing, in the idea of whether art ever makes converts, or whether it just speaks to the converted all the time. That miner, looking at the Zulus dancing and wondering about what it might mean. He realizes that no matter how long he watches them, he will understand very little. And these undercurrents lead to the reflection that when he sings his Gaelic songs, and looks out at the audience, he does not know them, and they understand very little of what he is singing. They see him as he sees the Zulus. So the miners stop singing professionally. Then, with that Medieval lyric which he had read during his short time as a university student, it stayed with him, and his daughter reads it as a student. He has changed so much, and his daughter has changed so much, but this little statement about man becoming clay – which he misquotes, changing it to suit himself, though he doesn't know that – continues. He had no way of knowing that it would stay with him. Now he wonders whether he, too, will soon be clad in clay.

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Throughout 'The Closing Down of Summer' the narrator's brooding intimations of mortality seem to owe as much to the alienating effect of a single year at university as they do to art's longevity. Certainly one of the constancies running through many of these tales, playing like a patina over their surfaces but also mining their structures with a calculated uncertainty, is an allusive web of literary allusions which functions in paradoxical ways, at some point involving, whether consciously or not, the author's own literary intervention. For the narrator of the title story, 'The Lost Salt Gift of Blood', self-conscious comparison to a literary figure (''like a foolish Lockwood I approach the window although I hear no voice. There is no Catherine who cries to be let in'' (pp. 81–82)), or reference to Yeats's *Cuchulain* or to Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* serve not to buttress his confidence but to mark his separation. All of these references are concerned with trying to get the lost person back, and thus they enforce a sense of his isolation. Perhaps, outsider that he is, this is why the word ''within'' holds such fascination for him. It does, anyway, soon become clear that in the world of these stories, education, and particularly a literary education is very much a two-edged sword, serving to alienate characters from their origins even as it releases them from the more gruelling demands of necessary labour. From Dickens to Hemingway, from Hopkins to Dostoievsky, ''book-learning'' is both envied and feared, cherished and despised as simultanously a salvation and a curse.

It is a problematic which gathers to a focus in the closing story in the volume, 'The Road to Rankin's Point', where a schoolteacher returns to his grandmother's farm, to die at the age of twenty-six, the same age at which his grandfather had died (though, as with 'The Boat', whether suicidally or not is left uncertain). Whatever wisdom he has acquired seems to be of little use to him now, and the biblical three score years and ten which separates him from his grandmother – the term of a natural life – only reminds him of what he can never enjoy. Paradoxically, then, in Alistair MacLeod's loving inscription the people and places of *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* find a refuge and a permanence which life and history seem destined to deny them, while the dying schoolteacher muses in way which provides a fitting epigraph for the collection as a whole and for the reader's encounter with it. ''The hopes and fears of my past and present intertwine. Sometimes when seeing the end of our present our past looms ever larger because it is all we have or think we know. I feel myself falling into the past now, hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future'' (p. 184).

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NOTES

1 Alistair MacLeod, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. All references are to the 1983 *New Canadian Library* reprint and are given parenthetically in the text.
2 The formulation is from Harold Bloom, 'The Breaking of Form', *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 1979, RKP, p. 17.
3 Ernest Hemingway, 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro', *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1944, pp. 58–83.
4 See Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder*, Cambridge: CUP, 1965, p. 233 ff.
5 Margaret Atwood, *Survival: a Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972.
6 Alistair MacLeod, 'The Closing Down of Summer', *The Fiddlehead*, Fall, 1976, pp. 16–32.

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