

An Ocean of Memories

Melissa Elizabeth Wong

The Road to Cape Spear, June 2020

As our car flies east, the view outside the car window fades from the St. John's downtown early morning lights into the thick green of forests, and rocky hills before the shimmering blue ocean appears in the dim light.

We take turns driving. I cannot sleep. Instead, I use my precious nap time to check my phone battery and to count COVID masks, water bottles, first aid kits, emergency fishcakes, breakfast bars, and plastic gloves.

I am overreacting. I wonder how my partner talked me into going on a road trip to the edge of the world when we could have spent the early morning on the couch.

"It's not too late to turn back, Melissa," My partner says.

We glance at each other, and love is truly a supernatural force because once again, I agree to go to Cape Spear. My partner looks unconvinced but accepts my conviction. The heartless sky glares at us as if commanding us to turn back. Meanwhile, the ocean seems to grow bigger and bigger as we drive toward the eastern coast, but our eyes stay on the road, and together we keep driving east. We commit to each other and this grand adventure.

I wish that my heart could become braver so that the one that I love would not have to worry about me so much. What happened to me? I was once so brave and adventurous as a kid, but now, I'm so afraid of everything...

Middle Cove Beach, June 1998

The memory of the afternoon when the mother and the father drove six-year-old Melissa Wong to Middle Cove beach to capture capelin ebbed and flowed with the tide. The sky was grey as fog, and dark clouds stretched across the horizon like old bones that held up the world.

Child Melissa grabbed onto her mother's hand as smooth rocks refused to allow her to cross the rocky beach. Out of pure spite, the girl released her mother's hand and stumbled through loose rocks from the safety of the family and the car on her large feet and thin legs. The stone beach gave her no solid ground, and the ocean beyond seemed infinitely hostile, but she kept staggering towards the water past groups of fishermen with their nets. It was the first time she had been so close to the ocean, which that little girl wanted to touch.

Cape Spear, June 2020

As our car pulls into the Cape Spear parking lot, I reflect on how the girl on the beach feels like a different person from who I am now. I can no longer understand my past self. In my memories, I can only watch from a distance as the growing number of years divide us.

"Remember to stretch, Melissa," My partner says.

I climb out of the car like an old woman. My joints crack like fireworks when I move, and then I'm struck by the smell of cold, salty air. Long before I peel open my dry eyes, I know I'm facing the ocean in all its magnitude without the protective glass and metal body of our red car.

My eyes open, and I am a child again, standing before the Atlantic Ocean.

Middle Cove Beach, June 1998

Melissa's sister and partner-in-crime raced after her towards the cold, grey waves that rolled up the beach before the tide eagerly raced back off the land. It left a strip of cold, wet sand between the smooth rocks and the water. The sisters poked their fingers into the pocket of sand (back when sand once graced Middle Cove Beach)

only for the sea's white foam to wash each particle of sand off their finger tips and away into the ocean.

There were tragedies at sea, along the coast, and strange stories of pirates lurking in hidden places. Lost treasure, along with so many secrets were said to be deep down in the mysterious ocean surrounding Newfoundland. It inspired the sisters to become pirates then and there. They waded into the water for seashells and discovered beautiful stones, washed-up driftwood, and seaweed even as they hunted mercilessly for seashells as if they were gold doubloons.

"Capelin are coming," their mother yelled.

The father's radio seemed to agree. The afternoon's capelin rolled in with the tide. Fascinated, the sisters tried to capture the tiny fish with their small hands but could not carry as many as they wanted.

"You need nets," their mother yelled. "You need a bucket."

The sisters returned with wiggling fish and tossed them into a bucket. The mother gifted her daughters with rainbow butterfly nets to capture capelin. With renewed determination, the girls charged back into the ocean's capelin-choked tide. They swung their nets into the water, and the nets returned to the surface with fish in their colourful nets. The girls raced from the bucket to the ocean over and over until they were too tired to run anymore. Unfortunately, the bucket was far from full with capelin.

The sisters were surrounded by an ocean of capelin but were too tired to fill one bucket. It looked as if the day's catch would be less than they had anticipated... and then, the girl's mother began throwing the female capelin back into the ocean.

Desperately, Melissa grabbed a large female capelin from the bucket and held the fish behind her back.

Shocked and tired, the sisters watched all the other female capelins fly back into the Atlantic and dance away on the tide. After the long drive, the exhausting work, and the defeat on the beach... the mother's actions confused her daughters, who demanded answers.

"Why mother? Why?" They cried.

Cape Spear, June 2020

Grabbing our bags, my partner and I attentively explore Cape Spear's many pathways. Along the paths are warning signs telling us to only walk in one direction, signs instructing us on the value of social distancing, and signs warning hikers that the ocean was a beautiful life-giver, but it was also a dangerous killer so we shouldn't do anything stupid. I think it is strange that my childhood playground for pirate games could be so cruel and wonder how I did not see it as a child.

My partner and I agree the sign's advice sounds reasonable so we went to the mostly empty Cape Spear World War II coastal defence battery.

As we make our way to the defence battery, my eyes find the edge of the cliff and we arrive at the look-out station where many soldiers once spent their days in Fort Cape Spear to protect the fleet of warships that once rested in St. John's harbour. The soldiers would use Cape Spear as a lookout for enemy warships, battle planes, and submarines.

We cannot spot any submarines in the water, but we do see a massive 10'-gun Emplacement. I feel helpless before it and have to fight a strange craving that tempts me to climb upon the ancient weapon by standing on it and feeling its destructive power below me. Only it is not a power that can help me on this hike, what I need is already inside me.

Standing on a big gun cannot help me overcome fear or weed out the root of what is bothering me. It will make me feel powerful for a moment, but it cannot help me to look inward and find my strength.

Middle Cove Beach, June 1998

"Show me what you're hiding and I will tell you everything," their mother said.

Melissa reluctantly showed her mother the one female capelin she had refused to let go. Mother and daughter looked at the wriggling fish.

"She is a mommy," the mother said. "We want to let the mommy capelin go so they can survive and make babies."

The mother explained to her daughters that if they ate all the capelin, then there

would be no capelin for everyone next year. The female capelin and their offspring must be spared so that there would be plenty of capelin for everyone in the years to come.

The Atlantic Ocean would provide, but only if the Atlantic and its marine life were shown respect and mercy. Melissa understood and walked into the tide. She let the capelin swim away to have babies.

Melissa stared out across the horizon. The sense of failure and mercy grew inside her tired legs. Why did doing the right thing have to be so hard?

The child returned to her mother and sister on the beach, near the mostly empty bucket. It did not look like the bucket would be filled that day. Teary-eyed, she hugged both of them, and they hugged her back. Letting the capelin mother go no longer seemed like a big deal... Melissa had a mother. Melissa could let the little fish have their mother back.

Cape Spear, June 2020

With my partner's guidance, we return to the pathways to explore the cliff from a safe distance. We stop along a wooden path to stare into the great abyss that's known as the Atlantic Ocean. I pull my phone from my pocket and record a video of the waves hitting the side of a cliff.

Heights do not scare me, but some high-up places make me nervous. Using Zoom, I feel closer to the edge than I truly am, and my hands shake. I wait for vertigo to attack me, but I find a long fought-for-peace as we transit over moss and crowberries while the ocean crashes below.

"I belong here," I say. "Thanks for bringing me here."

My partner's face lights up, and we hug.

I know who I am. I was born in St. John's and have lived here all my life. Most people think that I am from some far-off country in Asia due to my grandparents being immigrants who fell in love with the kindness here. While I am part Chinese, the truth is that I am also part Irish. My mother's family has lived in Newfoundland since the Irish potato famine, and I might be a townie, but I'm a Newfoundlander as much as anyone. The island of Newfoundland is my home, no matter what I look like or what my last name

happens to be.

With my newfound strength, we climb to the coordinates 47°31'25' N/N and 52°37'10' W/o and are the first people in North America to see the sun a little after sunrise. As the world lights up, I stand at the end of the world without fear and face the horizon.

I taste the salt air, but I cannot quite see the end of the world because the ocean and sky appear to fade into each other like watercolour paints. The sky is lavender and pink, with splashes of gold in both the sky and the endless ocean.

The ocean seems calm, but each wave is so small that it looks almost like a shimmering fabric with an ever-changing pattern without even a hint of land masses beside ours. My eyes searched the waters for signs of fish and the sky for sea birds. In the distance, a boat grows smaller and smaller until it disappears into the veil of fog and mist that slowly disappears as daylight returns to North America.

Middle Cove Beach, June 1998

With a new found determination, the sisters ran back to the ocean with their nets. They would capture a net of capelin, run back, throw back the females, and put the males into the bucket. It was far more work than before, but if they were going to fish and they were going to fish the right way... then, a heroic fisherman appeared to save the day.

The fisherman cast his net into the ocean. It looked like a large paper circle as it landed in the water over the unsuspecting capelin. Then, the fisherman pulled the cord. The circle collapsed into a net-like bag, trapping the wiggling capelin inside. The fisherman dragged the net of capelin onto the sand and emptied his catch onto the beach next to the bucket the sisters were struggling to fill. The girls cheered for the man as he waved before returning to the ocean with his magical net. The sisters fell to the sand and tossed the fisherman's gift into the bucket. In no time at all, they had filled the bucket with capelin.

The family looked through their bucket of capelin together. All the females were returned to the ocean to live another day. The bucket was no longer filled to the

tippy-top, but it was easier to carry back to the car.

The sisters drew hearts in the sand for the tide to take back to all the female capelin who were still dancing in the salt water. Once the girls had said goodbye, they followed their parents back to the car.

“Where’s your pirate treasure?” The mother asked.

The sisters froze before turning around and running back to the beach. They pocketed their pretty stones and gave the prettiest ones to the fisherman who had helped them earlier.

The fisherman waved goodbye as they ran back to their parents. Kindness and the ocean had always been there. Some are kind because they instinctively know everyone is connected. People need each other. Melissa was only six, but she knew she would be surprised if the ocean or kindness ever disappeared and more grateful than ever that both continue to exist.

At long last, the family car drove away from Middle Cove with capelin and pirate treasure onboard. The mother would fry up some of the capelin that night.

Melissa expected to come back eventually, but the sand eroded, and the parents were worried about the safety of young children catching capelin from the rocks. While other families determinedly never stopped catching capelin, Melissa did.

Life became busy, and the ocean became more and more distant. It was a gradual process. It was a nearly unnoticeable change as Melissa lost that brave and adventurous spark. It was not just one thing that changed her. Time away from the ocean gave her a grown-up view of it. She came to understand the danger, the tragedies at sea, and how it was not just a fun playground.

But she would never leave the ocean... it would always be there – she would not seek it out again for a long time.

As a Newfoundlander, the ocean is always there. When my younger self walked outside, and a cold breeze smelled like salt water, she thought nothing of it. When the past-me saw the harbour from the street, it was a normal day. That lost girl would be more surprised if it was not there.

The first time Melissa had sunk her fingers into the water of Middle Cove beach and understood what this mass of saltwater was – it was life-changing. But afterwards, every time she went to the beach, the ocean became more and more just a part of the world she was living in. It was both great and terrible.

Cape Spear, June 2020

Once the sun finishes her journey into the sky above Cape Spear, my partner and I hold each other's hands. We retrace the steps of our journey in the light of day.

Now it is my turn to pick our next great adventure, and the couch is calling... but so is the ocean. I ask my partner if we can go to Middle Cove.

I was born in St. John's and lived here all my life.

The sea is in my blood, my skin, and the air I breathe. I look out at the ocean from the most-easterly point with the person I love. I know I belonged here because the ocean is a part of the world I am living in, and I would not have it any other way.

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Melissa Wong is a multimedia creator in St. John's, Canada. A MUN alumni with a B.A. (Hons) and a diploma in journalism, Wong's short story "Chirp", won the 2021 Icelandic Festival of Manitoba: Poetry and Pose contest. Wong's writing has been published in The Newfoundland Herald, Truth Serum Press, Pure Slush, Applebeard, The Icelandic Connection Magazine, The Understorey Magazine, WANL Winter E-Zine, After Books Inc, and Engen Books. Her latest poem, "The First Loss," was published in 2024 in Loss Lifespan Vol. 9. She is a co-creator of the YouTube channel "The Little Book Digital Theatre" with fiancé Evan Maddick.