MAUREEN HYNES

Irish Literature Exam

For M.H.

I failed the exam, couldn't finish it. Three essay questions.
This one would be easy, I knew the book so well, as if I lived three cottages
down from Eileen Sean, as if I knew her
and her husband the fisherman who would play
only the one tune on the penny whistle,
and her son, Eoin, nine years old, fallen
a hundred feet over the cliff.
Around me in the huge hall,
twenty rows of students coughin',
and writing page after furious page.
I write on my scrap paper, I am not
on the west coast of Ireland, I am in Canada.

The woman's scream
fells her; flat on her stomach,
she sees his small back hit the rocks,
his fists and eyes still grabbing up to her
and the waves pull him out fast, not a minute
gone and there's no sight of him, his red jumper,
his black boots. Throwing his name down
after him down the cliff,
and I am screaming too, running for the old men
to get out in their curraghs. The limestone
cliff scooped and plunged the wind, the accident
of ocean, and he's lost.

Inside the cottage
the fire is dropping. The smoke curls up the
chimney
from the fireplace, the single brick of peat
burning out.
I knew this woman, knew her sisters, even her
grandmother who had lived just as long as mine,
the red
faces, dark eyes and black hair of them all.

Two nights and days
full of a roaring gouging wind; you could hear
the wind
scraping at the cliffs like a breadknife, pulveri-
zing
the waves below into a fine spume so cold
the droplets scoured and stung the limestone
ledges.
Two nights it roared low and shrieked high; it
wasn't
sleep we got, just a burrowing into a dreamcave
that opened out onto this wail and cry of wind,
the clamour that kept finding us.

Was it a quick loop of wind
that curled up over the cliff to snatch him,
or was it a mighty wall that came storming
behind and gave him the one push, and she
turned
to see him fall, the wind snatching her screams
too,
and mine, thieving our screams afar.
For two days the men searched for him,
their cries tattered and swallowed into the wind.
He's gone into the ocean.

My pen froze in my hand, my ink
froze
on the page. Salt water in my ball-point pen.
Words, any words. Eileen Sean and her son Eoin,
I wrote, are friends of mine. This is craziness,
I wrote. I have fallen into the story
as the boy fell into the water.

Maureen Hynes' first book of poetry, Rough Skin (Wolsak and Wynn) received the 1995 League of Canadian Poets' Gerald Lampert Award. Her poetry has appeared in many journals across Canada; one of her stories was included in Frictions II: Stories by Women (Second Story Press, 1993).