

## 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 coughing  
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 currachs. 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).*