

Johanna Skibsrud

The Sentimentalists

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She completed her BA in English Literature from the University of Toronto, her MA in English and Creative Writing from Concordia University in Montreal, and is currently completing her PhD in English Literature at the Université de Montréal, with a focus on the poetry of Wallace Stevens.

She has held a variety of different jobs in the meantime, including working with Youth at Risk in the Canadian arctic, as a wilderness instructor in Florida and Maine, teaching ESL in Asia, and as a sales associate for Canadian Scholars' Press and Women's Press in Toronto.

Her first book of poetry, *Late Nights With Wild Cowboys*, was published by Gaspereau Press of Kentville, Nova Scotia in 2008, and shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert Award for the best first book of poetry by a Canadian poet. A second book of poetry, *I Do Not Think That I Could Love a Human Being*, was published in 2010, also by Gaspereau Press.

Her debut novel, *The Sentimentalists*, was awarded the 2010 Scotiabank Giller Prize. The novel is based, in part, on the true story of her own father's experiences during the Vietnam War – specifically his involvement in a controversial operation, which resulted in civilian casualties.

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The Sentimentalists

1

The house my father left behind in Fargo, North Dakota, was never really a house at all. Always, instead, it was an idea of itself. A carpenter's house. A work in progress. So that even after we moved him north to Casablanca, and his Fargo home was dragged away – the lot sold to a family from Billings, Montana – my father was always saddened and surprised if the place was remembered irreverently, as if it had been a separate and incidental thing; distinct from the rest of our lives. In this way, he remained, until the end, a house carpenter. If only in the way that he looked at things. As if all objects existed in blueprint; in different stages of design or repair.

The Fargo place had been acquired by my father in the first year of his sobriety, and by that time it had already been pieced together from two and a half aluminum trailers and deposited in a lot – No. 16 – at the edge of a West Fargo mobile-home park. To him, and therefore to us, it was always his “palace” nevertheless, and he looked on the additions and renovations that he made to the place over the years of his residency there with particular pride.

The park itself was crowned by a large blue and white water tower and the surrounding landscape of West Fargo was so flat that my father could follow the tower, from the other side of town, all the way home. He could drive straight across the city on the carefully sectioned right angles of highway, and it looked, as he approached the park, as if the neat rows of long, low houses were, for the tower, a structural necessity. It also appeared that the park was in the tower's full shade. But, as he approached – as he passed the last four-way intersection and his own house came into view – the tower diminished, the houses lengthened, small front gardens appeared, and there was suddenly space for two or three cars in every drive. By the time he pulled into his own driveway, the water tower, although still large, was a peripheral structure six or seven blocks away.

The additions to the house had been made awkwardly before my father arrived, so that, from the side, the building appeared to be attached by several loose joints. Inside, the linked sections were marked by a step, and because the corridor was so narrow and long those steps were as much of a surprise to come across as a curve would be on a prairie-town street.

At the end of the corridor was the room my father referred to as the “second library” – the “first” having reached its limit years before. My father was a great reader and a great rememberer of things, though he never remembered anything in the right order, or entirely, and always had just little bits of all the books and poems he'd ever read floating around in his mind. The second library was the most lived-in room of the house and stored (besides

the shelves of books that gave to it its name) the computer, the TV, the exercise bike, and the photographs, in piles.

The photographs had been mostly those sent, over the years, by my mother and grandmother, and I knew them all well because they were the same ones kept in albums at my mother's house. They were of my sister Helen and me: posed for yearly school portraits, or else with our feet up on soccer balls.

Our early years were documented well in my father's house. There were shots of backyard camping, of our first dog (a golden lab named Roger), as well as stacks and stacks of Christmas concert photos, in which it is nearly impossible to identify a single subject.

A gap of four years in the progression of the photographs left most of our adolescence unaccounted for, so that, in going through the piles on my first visit to my father's house, at the age of twenty-two, I was surprised to find us – toward the end of the collection – suddenly grown. The documentation resumed itself only in sheets of uncut wallet-sized graduation photographs, and then in the newer, less dusty images of my niece, Sophia, which Helen had sent from Tennessee.

The second library was the designated smoking room when I visited. My father retired there after meals, and at half-hour intervals throughout the day. I avoided the room and tried to keep the rest of the house aired out as best I could. Sometimes, though, I would get it into my head that, like my father, I couldn't breathe – and then I would run back and forth along the corridor and swing the front and back doors quickly in and out.

In my father's last winter in Fargo, too out of breath to continue repairs on the palace, he became interested in the stock market. He upgraded his computer and after that spent nearly all of his time in the second library, rarely venturing into the long corridor that led to the rest of the many-roomed house.

He had set up the computer on a low desk next to the television, so that it was possible for him to watch them both at once, and he kept up on the progress of his few shares throughout the day, even watching them while he logged his obligatory mile on the exercise bike, which he had moved in front of the screen. When the markets closed in the evenings and on holidays he missed them and paced the room, he said, "like a bear."

The computer was part of a package deal that he paid for so slowly that the interest soon turned out to be double the cost. "I'm even getting a burner thrown in," my father told me over the phone in January, "and a fax machine."

"Doesn't all this depress you a little?" my sister Helen said a month later when my father's operations were in full swing.

"Dad," I said, "what in the hell are you going to fax?"

He didn't hear.

“I might as well,” he told me. “At this price I can’t afford not to.”

By the third week of my father’s career he had lost a total of \$150 which he pointed out to us was pretty decent for a newbie.

“This is much safer than blackjack,” he told me when he tallied the results and let me know.

“This might be the wrong economic moment, Dad,” I said, “to get into this sort of thing.”

“You may be right,” my father admitted, “you may be right.”

But my next communication from him was an e-mail he sent to both Helen and me, and it looked as though he had no intention of pulling out. It read, “Keep your fingers crossed and we’ll be retiring to the original Me-hee-ko in very short order.” Another message followed this one closely. “I’ve given up on the miners, but – doing a little research, and, third time being the charm, our next venture’s going to put us in the running, my sweethearts. Hope you’re feeling as lucky as I am.”

Helen wasn’t feeling lucky at all. “We’ve got to get him out of there,” she said. “Henry will never put up with this shit.”

Henry’s place, tucked into the tiny town of Casablanca, Ontario – just twenty miles from the border of New York – was the site of all our childhood summers, and what all of us, including my father, secretly thought of as home. Still, when Helen first suggested that my father move there permanently to be looked after by Susan, Henry’s part-time nurse for as long as we had known him, my father clung resolutely to the independent refuge of his palace, which he returned to every year, like a bird. But that next spring, after the stock-market winter, we moved my father, despite his protests, permanently to Casablanca. The palace was sold, according to Helen’s direction, shortly before his departure, and it was arranged that my father’s medical files be transferred to the North Country Veterans Clinic in Massena, New York, from where Susan – now fully employed – could drive his medication across the border, without delay.

It’s a tall, upright building, Henry’s house. Constructed on government money to replace the old family home, one of twelve original houses lost when the dam came through in 1959. Even now, Casablanca is a small town, but before the dam it was not even, properly, a town at all. It was only referred to by its intersecting county roads, and because of this was never officially recorded as being “lost.” It wasn’t until the dam came through that people started calling the place Casablanca. Because of the way, like in the Bogart film, they had begun to “wait for their release” from a town that – never having fully existed – had already begun to disappear. But then, even after the relocation was complete, the name stuck – coming to refer to the new community of government-built houses that got strung along the lake road.

Although many of the original homes were, like Henry's, submerged, and others were burned to the ground, some had been simply lifted from their foundations and carried the short distance into the new town. Even the year before, with the construction of the St. Lawrence seaway, it had been anticipated that even the older houses could be so cleanly removed that residents were encouraged to leave everything in place inside them. For the most part, this advice went unheeded. People packed their belongings into boxes anyway, placing them in relative safety, in the corners of the rooms. But there were those who, curious to test the claim, left candlesticks on narrow ledges in the halls, books balanced upright on countertops, chipped teacups on high kitchen shelves.

One resident who left two mayonnaise jars balanced one on top of the other in the middle of her living-room floor, found them – upon re-entering her house fifty-two hours later and at a distance of several miles – upright still. As though they themselves were the axis upon which everything else had turned; seemingly less bewildered by their journey than she herself had been.

Henry's old place still lies buried under one hundred feet of water some miles from his front door at the end of the disappearing road, which begins on one side of a small island and empties out into the water again on the other.

The dock at the end of the government house drive still points like a long finger in the same direction, and at the end of the dock, Henry's old boat is tied.

The remains of the rest of the original town (if that is what it can be properly called) can sometimes still be seen below the lake road, which runs from the town limit to an archipelago of islands in the middle of the large created lake: sections of fence posts, a crumbled church steeple, and pieces of the old foundations, which are marked at the water's extremity by long poles that stick out at odd angles around the edge of the lake – a warning for the boats that go racing by sometimes with their motors down, too fast.

2

My parents hadn't split yet when we first drove north to Casablanca to visit Henry, and we all lived together in the house that my father had built. It was a tiny place, tucked into the back of the woodlot we owned, just outside the small, Southern Maine paper-mill town of Mexico. That house had also been a work in progress; a three-room cabin, clad in tar paper. Its inner workings – a network of exposed water pipes and electric wires – were always bare on the inside walls. Its front steps were missing, too; we'd always just gone in around the back.

The progress of the house was stopped entirely in the spring before I was born, when my father began work on *The Petrel*, a wooden boat built for my mother. It was a project that marked for him a spring of such passionate

and uninterrupted enthusiasm, that, by the time I was born, he was hardly coming home at all. He slept, more often, curled up next to the boat in Roddy Stewart's old shed in town, and it was because of this that on the afternoon of my birth my mother drove herself to the hospital, my sister Helen in tow.

If, in the summer that followed, my mother complained – that she had been abandoned by my father, left all alone in the world, with two small children and a half-finished house – my father would reply with a wink and a wave, and in one small gesture describe to her perfectly the curve of the bow, or the slant of an imaginary sail.

If, when my father spent what my mother later claimed was their literal last-dime, in order for the *actual* sails to be sent (they were shipped, in mid-December of 1981, all the way from Delaware), my mother complained that they had eaten nothing but celery for a week, my father would remind her once again of the contoured coasts of Maine and Nova Scotia – from Booth Bay Harbour to St. John's.

The plans for my father's boat had also been sent away for, and I remember that – years later, in a renaissance evening – the blueprints would be spread around our kitchen as my father consulted them, promising once again that we'd be sailing by spring. But, as I hovered to watch, and my father made fantastic, undecipherable scratchings with his carpenter's pencil on the page, I began to believe that the blueprints of *The Petrel* (where the constellations of lines and images had been drawn in the finest of ink, and on the thinnest of paper, which I thought hardly intended for human hands) depicted vast and astonishing kingdoms that were voyageable to him alone.

My father himself was not a water man – so when, in the summer of her abandonment, he was able to comfort my mother with the articulate gesture of an imaginary sail, it was because it was my mother and not my father who loved the sea. If it had been up to her, we would not have settled inland, but on the great and open Maine coast instead, the waters of which she had known as a child, having spent her vacations there, and which – even in my own earliest memories of it – remained still largely untouched and wild. It had become fixed in her mind. A blueprint for all of her future happinesses, which she could still, on those occasions, name.

It had been, after all, within those brief sea holidays that her own father had woken from his year-long nap to become, again, a human being – orchestrating great sea hunts in which the entire family scoured the tidal pools for clams. In which they speared fish, and tied white chickens onto lines in order to catch the blue crabs, which flocked like flies to the bait. And so it was the ocean that, for my mother, became the great elemental figure that was either missing, or to some degree at hand, when she searched in later years to solve the problem of her own and my father's lives. I think now of what a shame it was that the joy we, her own children, later found at the

lake with Henry and my father was something that excluded her, and that she passed on her own love of the water only through the stories she would sometimes tell. Stories that made her seem, instead of closer, only further away – as though she surrendered herself, in the telling of them, to her own, separate, antediluvian underworld, which was what (influenced, I suppose, by the submerged town of Henry's backyard) we imagined all stories to be.

In the loneliness of the summer of my birth, when my father slept in town, my mother experienced on occasion pangs of such sudden and unexplainable grief that she would often drive us all the way into town to tell my father, in a resigned undertone, so as not to upset us, that she was dying – so sure was she that her grief had become a physical affliction – that it had begun directly attacking her heart.

This was another complaint that my father could always allay. He would smooth out her hair over her temple and forehead, and kiss her in the particular place that he had designated, behind her ear, for the specific communication of his love – which he sometimes found hard to say out loud – and tell her, in no uncertain terms, that very soon they would sail together in *The Petrel* of the white sails, paid for by a month of celery. My mother would apologize, her heart appeased. She would run her hand over her face and, with a little laugh (which served to establish the event in the already distant past), say, "I hardly know what came over me." By this route she returned to her more usual self, and she would pile us back into the car and drive home. Of the event she would make only a small note in the journal she kept in which to record our lives: *another episode today*, she would write. Followed by a record, as near as she could render, of the last thing that she had thought of or seen before the exquisite pain had begun. *Tomato plant. Obscure memory of Aunt Rose.*

In this way my mother attempted to uncover a pattern or a system to her grief, but there never did appear to be one, and the pain continued to erupt equally from the sight of an old photograph as from an untwinned sock. But after each entry my mother would go on to conclude: *it should not happen again*. And this conviction – that unhappiness, in herself and later in her children, should be staved off, then eliminated entirely – originated from that same source within her that assured her that the progress that my father was making on his boat, and that my mother was making on my father, and that my father's words were making on her heart, would be measurable and lasting things, upon which each of us could build.

Though my father remained with us for some time after that – scuttling the soft waves beside us during our growing-up years, our noble père petrel, floating just above the surface, as though held there by the last and most remote suspension of our faith – the boat, after that first summer, was also abandoned. My father working on it only in fits and starts, and, except for a

single, brief renaissance which I have already described, this progress, too, ceased finally, long before I might have remembered it.

Still, the boat remained, perhaps especially for my mother, as though a physical memory; a last symbol of the one-time greatness of her expectations, and evidence that the future was still, in fact, in progress: that with the correct effort, tools and expertise it remained to be realized. Her optimism (having sprung from a deep well of unspeakable anger that at that time I could not guess at or understand), counteracted by the effect of the years which had by that time stretched the boat's boards nearly to bursting, was as impermeable as the toughest and most enduring stain.

When my father finally disappeared from us in the summer I was twelve – after years of false starts, in which he spent his winters out west, returning to us later and later each year with the spring – the boat was moved, along with us, to my grandmother's house in Orono. In fact, my mother brought with us very little else; only what she could fit into the back of the car (a small Honda, about to embark on its final voyage). The rest of our things were doomed to remain, haunting the house that my father had built, living in its nether regions among the exposed wiring. At least, that is, until the land was sold to the paper company, and the house, eventually, torn down.

Really, there was no single or specific reason that we knew that that departure was to be my father's last – his exit at that time had been no different than on any other occasion – but I recall that we were very certain, and that even Helen and I, who were still very much children then, turned resolutely, when he was gone from the drive, back to the house. That we gathered our things deliberately in the large canvas bag that my mother had provided, and which, on more ordinary days, we had used for excursions to the beach or to town.

In the same way, I suppose, that for the drowning man there comes, though several times he raises himself above the surface, the irrefutable moment in which it is certain that he will not raise himself again, and the last bubbles of his final exhalations arise and disperse, and an invisible seal is drawn across the waves ... we gave him up.

Somehow, though, long after we had turned away, a phantom faith remained in me, long after its object had been lost. It came in bursts, in brief hallucinatory flashes, like the intermittent blinking of a dead satellite which still rouses itself on faulty wiring as though it were a dying star. So that even in those after-years, when my father had disappeared completely beyond the line of our horizon, it seemed as though, on fine days, I could see him still – a faint outline, a trace of himself – buoyed by the stubbornness of my memory, walking tentatively along the endless and otherwise uninhabited waters of my childhood.

3

My father had discovered Henry after an eight-year search that began the day my sister Helen was born. Because my mother had planned her family carefully (there were exactly two years between us and our birthdays were in the spring), Helen and I were eight and six years old the summer my father drove us north to meet Henry. It seemed strange and it became a joke between the two men later, that it had taken my father eight years to track a man who lived – and whose family for generations beyond recall had lived – a four-hour drive away.

When we were young we called Henry our grandfather because we had no better term to describe the relationship. We did this for the benefit of other people, and never in front of him. “To stay with our granddad,” we told the kids at school when we left at the beginning of every summer for Casablanca. At the government house, though, he was always just “Henry,” and was not, in fact, related to our family at all.

In the small Maine town where we spent our early childhood, my father’s having “come from away” (among other of his eccentricities) was enough to set us somewhat apart, so it was in contrast to this that we respected the fact that Henry had, on both sides of his family, lived in Casablanca, both the old and the new, for what was as good as forever. No one talked anyway of where they had first come from, and it seemed that it was enough to say that they were an original family from the original town.

On that first trip to visit Henry, my father packed us into the back of his red Datsun with a cooler that he’d filled with sandwiches and beer, and we all drove together, my father, my mother, Helen and I, all the way to Casablanca. He made it a point, when he could, to pass by on our way the towns we liked to pick out on the map, the ones with the foreign-sounding names. Oxford, Poland, Norway, Paris, East and West Peru.

When we got out in Egypt for gas, my father said, “These Mainers have the right idea. You can see the whole world without leaving the state.”

My mother sat very still next to my father in the cab of the truck and every few minutes she turned angrily in her seat to rap three times on the glass. We knew what that meant. *Sit down. Don’t fight. Be careful.*

Still it could not interrupt the perfect pleasure and excitement we felt then, bouncing around in the back of the truck on our way to a place we’d never been, with a foreign-sounding name more exotic than most.

“Isn’t that the way of it,” Henry would say later, when they lived together in the government house (to snap my father out of a funk and get him laughing). “It’ll take a man most of a life to figure out that what he’s looking for is four hours away.”

In fits and starts my father’s search for Henry Carey – father of the late Owen

Carey – had been orchestrated in all the states of the union. He did not think to look in Canada. And though my father could recite with startling accuracy a description of the lake road, the dock, and the government house, long before he ever laid eyes on it; though he knew the inlets and coves where the remains of the old houses that could not be relocated were found, and could describe the lean of the semi-submerged steeple of the United Church with a borrowed gesture of his hand, he had no idea where it was, or if it in fact had ever existed at all.

“Pack some sandwiches then Henry,” my father would say, by way of a response, slapping his thigh and coughing out a laugh. “If it’s that close, man,” he’d say, “what are we waiting for?”

We stayed two weeks with Henry our first summer, and most of that time we spent out on the lake, fishing or otherwise just poking along the shore. Scrambling out onto the islands and imagining the original Casablanca that lay submerged below.

Dressed in bed sheets in Henry’s backyard, we play-acted the lives of the former residents of the town, imagining them preserved down there somehow. As if, like it was a ship, they’d gone down with it, and existed there still.

I didn’t imagine then that Henry, who was alive and watched television in the evenings and fixed – hunkered down in his wheelchair – the motors on boats, had lived in that make-believe town.

I collected rocks that first summer along the shore, carried them in my pockets home to my mother, and laid them on the table as my offering because she never came with us in the boat. “This one is for how much I missed you,” I said. “It’s the largest one. This one,” I said, “is for being happy, and this one is for being mad.”

“Why were you so happy?”

“I got to steer the boat a bit.”

“And why were you angry?”

“Helen wouldn’t play. This one,” I said, “is for feeling bad about how Henry always has to sit in a chair.”

Owen had been a friend of my father’s and then he was killed in the war.

We knew this only through my mother, because neither my father nor Henry ever spoke of Owen, and had perhaps forgotten (or so it seemed) the manner in which they were connected at all.

As to the linear details of the story, we knew only that much. Until I was a teenager, for example, I was under the impression that Owen had been a boyhood friend of my father’s, and that my father himself had never fought in a war. These misunderstandings were not the fault of my mother, as she herself knew even less than we did, never having had the added intimacy

of the long summer evenings and eternal, rainy afternoons in which we explored the peripheries of Owen's third-floor room. There, his collections of mica and rock crystal had been allowed to remain, as though through the centuries, lining the long windowsills and guarding the bookcases that housed adventure novels and instructional manuals for simple carpentry and windsurfing. These we thumbed through with the breathlessness of historians, absorbing the slightly damp smell of their thin pages through our fingers. When, from the sheer weakness of our wills, we took the mica from the shelf and – at the instant of contact – the dry leaves peeled and crumbled to dust, we placed it back as quickly as we could, as though we had been burned, and gazed in despair at our hands where the remnants of the rock remained, like a proof, on our skin.

After that first summer we spent all of our vacation months with Henry and my father. Even when he began going west for his winters, he still drove to meet us there. First from Alberta, and then from British Columbia. They too were exciting and foreign-sounding names when they arrived on the return addresses of his occasional letters.

Sometimes, during the long school-year months that we spent with our mother, I dreamt of joining him there.

The first summer we left her alone, to make us feel better, my mother joked at how exotic our lives had become. “The children will be summering in Casablanca,” she said in a fake English accent, and that night we ate off a tablecloth and she served us our juice in wineglasses, which we promised not to break. Then, when my father disappeared completely and my mother mentioned, not long after, our summering in town, our faces crumpled in a distress that was for my mother so familiar and sad that she quickly changed her mind. “No reason to interrupt *our* plans,” she insisted, hurriedly, and that summer we went up to stay with Henry just as we had done before.

So for the four years that spanned the summers I was twelve through sixteen and we didn't hear anything from our father at all, we continued to spend at least half of every summer at the government house in Canada. Just Henry was there, and his nurse, Susan, who watched out for us too – but only part-time. I imagined that my father must have found himself in a foreign city too distant, finally, even to write, and I stopped, in those summers, entertaining thoughts of joining him there.

It turned out that what my father had found was Fargo, North Dakota. The year I was seventeen, his first sober year that anyone could remember, he resurfaced, telephoning my mother from that town. Shortly thereafter he resumed his summers at the government house, with Henry.

We kept up with the two of them mostly by mail after that, because both Helen and I had summer jobs by then or other excuses that kept us away. We didn't, after my father's return, spend much time at the lake at all.

It seemed, because of this, very sudden that my father grew old. It was Helen, finally, who noticed. She said, “He doesn’t have anything keeping him there anyway. This year he might as well stay.”

There really wasn’t anything that tied my father to Fargo. It had been an accident in the first place that he’d ended up in the town. He hadn’t, originally, even intended to pull over, for food or for gas, but by the time the palace was sold he had stayed ten years. In that length of time it was true he’d acquired many friends, but they were mostly old drinking buddies from the period of time at the beginning of his stay before he got sober. When he did, those friendships dwindled, and by the time he left they had turned into a “checking up” on the guys now and then. He had his AA sponsor Gerry there – that was something – but they rarely saw each other either. “Don’t need him like I did,” my father told me. “I think the guy’s in rougher shape than me.”

And, of course, he had those two and a half welded-together trailers.

So in the end it seemed that my sister Helen was right, after all – as she often was, or assumed herself to be. My father loved the lake, and he loved Henry; they were, and had been for as long as I could remember, the best of friends. Even their brief political spats seemed between the two of them recreational and benign. Sometimes my father would even interrupt his own argument by saying, “I don’t like disturbances in my place. You either lay off politics or get out.” He would say this in his Humphrey Bogart voice. Our whole family could quote *Casablanca*, practically from beginning to end. We’d learned it as kids, after our first trip up to the lake with my mother and father. I think everyone in *Casablanca* knew that movie pretty well, but my father knew it better than anyone. He was best, too, at impressions. Especially of Bogart. He had a memory for that sort of thing.

It was Ingrid, though – “It’s a crazy world ... anything can happen” – that was his favourite. He’d put on his high Bergman voice when he said it, and sometimes just repeat it to himself, over and over. Like maybe Henry would have said, “Ye think this rain’s gonna last all week?” And my father would wander around in his Bergman voice saying, “It’s a crazy world ...”

Other times he would look up at the sky if an airplane was overhead, or out the window, if a seaplane landed out on the lake, and say in another fake, falsettoed voice, “Perhaps tomorrow we’ll be on that plane ...”

He got a lot of mileage, anyway, out of that film.