



ALICE MUNRO

Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage | Runaway | Dear Life

Edited by Robert Thacker

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Alice Munro

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Alice Munro

*Hateship,
Friendship, Courtship,
Loveship, Marriage,
Runaway, Dear Life*

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*To Virginia Barber,
Who Helped Make Alice Munro's Stories*

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SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Each study in this series presents ten original essays by recognized subject specialists on the recent fiction of a significant author working in the United States or Canada. The aim of the series is to consider important novels or story collections published since 1990 either by established writers or by emerging talents. By setting 1990 as its general boundary, the series indicates its commitment to engaging with genuinely contemporary work, with the result that the series is often able to present the first detailed critical assessment of certain texts. In respect of authors who have already been recognized as essential to the canon of North American fiction, the series provides experts in their work with the opportunity to consider their latest novels in the dual context of the contemporary era and as part of a long career. For authors who have emerged more recently, the series offers critics the chance to assess the work that has brought authors to prominence, exploring novels that have garnered acclaim both because of their individual merits and because they are exemplary in their creative engagement with a complex period. Including both American and Canadian authors in the term "North American" is in no sense reductive: studies of Canadian writers in this series do not treat them as effectively American, and assessment of all the chosen authors in terms of their national and regional identity, as well as their race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, religion and political affiliation is essential in developing an understanding of each author's particular contribution to the representation of contemporary North American society. The studies in this series make outstanding new contributions to the analysis of current fiction by presenting critical essays chosen for their originality, insight, and skill. Each volume begins with a substantial introduction to

the author by the study's editor, which establishes the context for the chapters that will follow through a discussion of essential elements such as the writer's career, characteristic narrative strategies, themes, and preoccupations, making clear the author's importance and the significance of the novels chosen for discussion. The studies are all comprised of three parts, each one presenting three original essays on three key recent works by the author, and every part is introduced by the volume's editor, explaining how the chapters to follow engage with the fiction and respond to existing interpretations. Each individual chapter takes a critical approach that may develop existing perceptions or challenge them, but always expands the ways in which the author's work may be read by offering a fresh approach. It is a principle of the series that all the studies are written in a style that will be engaging and clear however complex the subject, with the aim of fostering further debate about the work of writers who all exemplify what is most exciting and valuable in contemporary North American fiction.

Sarah Graham

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this volume first came from David Avital at Bloomsbury Academic—I am grateful that he suggested it and then helped me make it happen. Throughout, he has always been interested and encouraging. So too has Mark Richardson—also at Bloomsbury—been throughout. Sarah Graham, Series Editor for Bloomsbury Studies in Contemporary North American Fiction, has been a delight to work with too: encouraging, helpful, and precise.

My planning for the volume took a great leap forward when I attended the Alice Munro Symposium sponsored by the University of Ottawa in May 2014. Most of the contributors here attended and spoke there too, so I was able to talk to them about plans, enquire about possibilities, and commission specific chapters. I am very grateful to each of the contributors here, and I especially appreciate their prompt responses to my many, many requests. I want particularly to thank Lester E. Barber who, when he learned of my difficulties in obtaining another essay, enthusiastically stepped in on very short notice with the essay included here. I appreciate his willingness, his speed, and his fine work.

Among those gathered at the Ottawa Munro Symposium—stunningly planned by Janice Fiamengo and Gerald Lynch of the Department of English there—were her longtime agent, Virginia Barber, and three of Alice Munro's editors: Ann Close (Knopf), Douglas Gibson (first at Macmillan of Canada and then, after 1986, McClelland & Stewart), and Daniel Menaker (one of several she has had at *New Yorker*—other longstanding editors are Charles McGrath and Deborah Treisman). The four people gathered in Ottawa offered a singular panel focused on working with Alice Munro over the years; they were a one-of-a-kind gathering, replete with wit, humor, and pleasure over having been lucky enough to have worked so closely with this great writer, Alice Munro.

Acknowledging the many, many kindnesses and helps these same people have extended to me over the years of our association, I join with them, and with all the contributors gathered here, in acknowledging the profound clarity and unsurpassable artistry of Alice Munro. As I've written many times before and probably will write yet again beyond this volume, her work most truly is "a fine and lucky benevolence" (*Something* 43).

Introduction: “Durable and Freestanding”: The Late Art of Munro

Robert Thacker

*No writer of fiction of comparable genius has
depended so much, for so long, on short stories alone . . .*

RANDALL JARRELL, “ON PREPARING TO READ KIPLING” (1961)

The fall of 2012 saw the publication of Alice Munro’s *Dear Life: Stories*, her fourteenth book. While such things are uncertain, just as everyone’s “dear life” is, it will likely be Munro’s last book. As has long been her practice, *Dear Life* is mostly made of stories that readers had seen before in periodicals—six were in the *New Yorker*, two in *Harper’s*, another two in *Granta*, and one each in *Narrative* and *Tin House*—but as a collection, a whole gathering, it offers a different feel. One borne of arrangement and created experience. As the tenth story, “Dolly,” ends there, its narrator speaks of the “rage and admiration” she feels toward her longtime partner, Franklin, over a detail from what has just occurred there: “It went back through our whole life together.” The reader then turns to the facing page, one headed “Finale,” and finds the following author’s comment:

The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the

first and last—and the closest—things I have to say about my own life. (254, 255)

With this coda, Munro leaves her seventy-one-year-old narrator in “Dolly” to offer another one, not a persona, apparently herself, beginning “The Eye” with these sentences: “When I was five years old my parents all of a sudden produced a baby boy, which my mother said was what I had always wanted. Where she got this idea I did not know. She did quite a bit of elaborating on it, all fictitious but hard to counter. Then a year later a baby girl appeared, and there was another fuss but more subdued than with the first one” (257).

There at the end of her last book, Munro’s “Finale” seems an audacious act. It both concludes another stunning collection of stories and is offered as the finale of a singular career, but its audacity is seen best in this transition Munro creates between the end of “Dolly” and the beginning of “The Eye.” Leaving the elderly narrator of “Dolly” behind, Munro returns to what very much looks like herself with the four “works” of the “Finale.” This is a transition, a creation, which Munro has been making since she began publishing in the 1950s. The “not quite stories” in the “Finale” take Munro back to herself as a child viewing the corpse of a person she had known for the first time (“The Eye”); back to herself as a young teenager dealing with traumatic, repellant thoughts which brought on sleeplessness (“Night”); back to herself remembering the placating voices of airmen possibly about to be lost in the war, left forever young (“Voices”); and finally, Munro moves back to herself again to memories of her mother, this time wondering what Anne Chamney Laidlaw really knew about an apparently crazy neighbor who once appeared at their house and frightened her mother when Alice was yet a baby: “Perhaps it was her daughter . . . she was looking for in the baby carriage. Just after my mother had grabbed me up, as she said, for dear life.” “Dear Life.” *Dear Life*. Wondering about these circumstances, Munro comments that “the person I would really have liked to talk to then was my mother, who was no longer available” (318).

I begin this introduction with Munro’s audacious artifice in her last construction of her family, and especially of her mother, because the act is so very indicative, so very apt. More than that, the “Finale” to *Dear Life* seems an inevitability in late Munro: once again, she goes home to Ontario, to details of her own experience

there. When she got an idea for a story in something she read in the paper which actually occurred in British Columbia and set it at the heart of "The Love of a Good Woman," the titular story of her 1998 collection and one that signals late Munro, she moved the action back to Huron County, Ontario to the time of her own birth. When she came to write "Family Furnishings" (2001), a singular story and a frightening one too, it features a clear-sighted and caustic narrator who reminds one of young Alice Laidlaw, intent on her artistic vocation, at the University of Western Ontario in 1950. That story was in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), the first of the three volumes taken up here, and there too are other narrators who remind of Alice Munro, first young mother and eventual divorced wife ("Nettles," "Post and Beam," "What is Remembered"). But there also are stories in that collection which offer no apparent connection to Munro's own life: the title story, one that Mona Simpson, in an influential and retrospective review of Munro's career to that point in the *Atlantic*, saw as based on a "fragile, perhaps pathetic act of hope" (134); and "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," the late story which has become something of an urtext in the depiction of dementia and which was made into a significant feature film, *Away From Her* (2007). With her next collection and the second volume treated here, *Runaway* (2004), Munro persisted in combining the discernably autobiographical (the "Juliet Triptych"—"Chance," "Soon," and "Silence") with stories that bear no such relation ("Runaway," "Powers") and another, "Passion," which has received singular critical attention.

Late Munro was disrupted some by her next collection, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), a "family book"—as Munro once described it to her editor—which she had contemplated since the late 1970s. It too is audacious, for it combines researched family history with Munro's own autobiography, and is also the site for memoirs ("Home" [1974], "Working for a Living" [1981]) that had appeared in print some time since but had long been held out of one of her signed collections; there too are autobiographically inflected fictions ("Hired Girl," "Fathers," "Lying Under the Apple Tree"). While it did not fulfill some reviewers' expectations for Munro, and was thought for a time to be her last book, *Castle Rock* will likely ultimately be seen as among Munro's most important—it offers too much of what she sees as narrative to be otherwise and shows too well what she has learned about the writer's life. The

next collection, *Too Much Happiness* (2009), saw Munro return to fiction, per se, but there again she may be seen experimenting: its opening story, "Dimension," takes up a subject—the life of a woman after her partner killed their three children—that many have said only Munro would even attempt, let alone accomplish; and she returns to herself at the University of Western Ontario during 1949–50 in "Wenlock Edge," a slightly bizarre erotic entanglement, a tribute to A. E. Housman, and another probing of her own ambitions and "wickedness" (Wenlock 91).¹ And she persists in the long view of life which characterizes late Munro: with stories like "Face," "Fiction," and a much-revised "Wood" (first published in the *New Yorker* in 1980 and passed over in the making of her collections for almost thirty years since). Perhaps anticipating the "Finale" she would offer in *Dear Life*, "Wood" is in effect another Huron County, Ontario introduction to another Munrovia audacity: "Too Much Happiness" is based on historical research, but there the subject is Sophia Kovalevsky, a nineteenth-century Russian mathematician. Hardly the sort of subject anyone, and most especially some of the reviewers of *The View from Castle Rock*, expected from Munro. Even so, Kovalevsky's final words are reputed to have been "Too much happiness" and her story, as rendered by Munro—who concentrates on a short period before, and includes, Kovalevsky's death—takes the reader back into the nineteenth century. Munro's readers had been there before, but to Ontario ("Meneseung," [1988], "A Wilderness Station" [1992]), not to Europe. Following *Too Much Happiness*, Munro produced the third volume we are considering here, *Dear Life*.

Alice Munro over Ontario

I have in my possession a photocopy of a page from a book proof which was faxed by Munro's agent, Virginia Barber, to Alfred A. Knopf, Munro's U.S. publisher, on October 30, 1989. It is the last page of one of the Munro stories that I just mentioned, "Meneseung." That story is a meditation on Almeda Joynt Roth, a nineteenth-century "lady poet" from rural Ontario whom Munro imagined and created as a separate character although she bears a relation to two historical prototypes. "Meneseung" was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1988 and was just

then about to be republished in a revised version in *Friend of My Youth* in the spring of 1990. Menese-teung is the Ojibwa name for the Maitland River which flows past the farm where Munro was raised in Lower Wingham, Ontario and then west to empty into Lake Huron; that river has often figured in her stories. "Menese-teung" has proved to be one of the stories from the 1980s which has gotten marked critical attention and, more significantly, in its indeterminacy it points toward late Munro, the writing we take up here.

In the story, Munro creates a first-person narrator who is researching Roth's life, one bent on discovering what, in another story, Munro called "the mystery of [her] life" (Moons 33). Thus we readers discover Roth along with this person. That person, most probably, owes much to Munro herself, for she has done such research into her own family's history and into Irish emigration to Canada (See Thacker Booming). The fax I refer to, evidently taken from Munro's own Knopf proof, shows her rewriting the story's ending; Munro removes a phrase and two sentences and then tries to combine their details into a final paragraph; she crosses that paragraph out, and then writes the final paragraph which closes the story in *Friend*: "And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly" (Final page; *Friend* 73). The two sentences that Munro removed had been added since the story's first publication in the *New Yorker* and so too have these, although they bring together the ideas expressed in the omitted passages and use some of the same language.

This sort of rewriting down to the last possible moment is characteristic—all of Munro's editors and agents have remarked on it and she, for her part, has spoofed herself by sending versions of endings which she has called "final, final, final." During a brief period in 1973–74—just as she was leaving her marriage and youngest daughter in British Columbia and returning to Ontario—Munro experimented with metafictional techniques. In "Home," a memoir first published then, Munro wrote of her depiction of her home in Wingham, where her father then still lived with his second wife, offering this metafictional comment as her final paragraph: "I don't want any more effects. I tell you, lying. I don't know what I want. I want to do this with honour, if I possibly can" (153, original emphasis). Subsequently, she has recanted these

techniques, for the version in *Castle Rock* has been shorn of its original metafictional commentaries, and fair enough. Yet I do not believe that she has recanted these sentiments, her own misgivings about artifice amid her own honorable intentions. As a writer, from the very first and throughout, Munro has wanted to do what she has done with “honor.” And she has, certainly. Such ambition is seen in the perennial rewriting and doubtless stems throughout her career from her material, often autobiographical, and the ways she has approached that material. In 1987—that is, just as Munro was writing the story that became “Meneseitung”—Constance Rooke published this observation:

More than any other writer I know, [Munro] has made us see how human beings turn life into anecdote—and how creatively, how perfidiously we mine our familial pasts in order to present to others a beguiling persona. She celebrates this tendency, and she castigates herself for it as well. Against her knowledge that we must construct ourselves in this fashion, Munro places her desire to be faithful to the past. She is concerned about exploiting it, about using the other to serve the self. And while she knows that art is a salvage operation, and therefore an act of love, she knows too that it lies and that we cannot finally disentangle the generous and self-serving elements of art. (158–59)

Returning momentarily to the “Finale” in *Dear Life*, Munro herself told me that all of its events happened (September 6, 2013). Even so, the very existence of that “Finale,” and what Munro wrote in introducing it after the long career she has had, confirms Rooke’s analysis. It also suggests that, given what Munro has written about and how she writes—and here the ideas of honor and the ethical implications of autobiographical writing come directly into play—generic distinctions between and among her stories do not ultimately mean very much. As Dennis Duffy has recently written, “Munro emerges as a producer of multivalent narrative, in which the factual and imaginative exist within an equivalency. . . . That is, she emphasizes that as a writer she produces narrative, period; questions of factuality and historical reliability are not central in the stories’ presentation to the reader. Any questions raised by generic differences between narratives are sidelights, avenues to be explored once a reader has absorbed the initial impact of the story

at hand" (Alice 202). That is, in Munro, the world that the story creates for the reader is the world: that's all there is.

Duffy is writing here about Munro's historicism in "Too Much Happiness," and he is among those critics who have also probed her creation of a knowable sense of history, of individual biographies imbedded within that history, and of the difficulties inherent in discovering those biographies, in "Meneseteung" (See Duffy Too Little; see also Houston). Just as "Meneseteung" points toward the philosophical and technical considerations which characterize late Munro, there are other stories from the 1980s which should be seen in the same way. "White Dump" (1986), the concluding story to what has been seen as Munro's first really coherently impressive collection, *The Progress of Love* (1986), is one such story. It is one of Munro's first completely subtle stories dealing with the genesis of female adultery, noting at one point the nascent moment when the affair begins ("the way the skin of the moment can break open" [*Progress* 308]). In passing, Simpson quotes Allan Gurganus writing that "adultery in Munro is chaotic but usually worth it"; he goes on to call her "our greatest and most subtle surrealist," a pointed observation that Charles E. May also draws upon here (Simpson 131). The story features a day's birthday celebration in July 1969, the time of the first moon landing, in which family members take a ride in a small plane down the Rideau Lakes of Eastern Ontario. They are piloted, as it turns out, by the man who was about to begin an affair with Isabel, the mother, ultimately breaking up the marriage. Among other things that day, they see a "glint lake"—that is, a lake which straddles the geologic transition from the St. Lawrence Lowlands to the Canadian Shield (*Progress* 304). The story ends with the close of the birthday celebrations, everybody tired but happy. That evening, straightening up the family cottage, Isabel glances at the open page of the book that her mother-in-law had been reading, one that she reread every summer, *The Poetic Edda*; she picks it up and reads a verse on the open page: "*Seinat er at segia; / svá er nú ráðit*. (It is too late to talk of this now: it has been decided.)" (*Progress* 309).

Julie Rivkin also quotes this passage as she begins her analysis here of Munro's use of the classics, also citing at the outset Horace's famous "seize the day" ode in "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" and linking it to Willa Cather's use of Virgil in *My Antonia* (1918) before detailing, as her subject, how Munro

works through the impact of classic literature in what has been called Munro's "Juliet Triptych" in *Runaway*—"Chance," "Soon," and "Silence." These three stories were first published together in the same 2004 summer fiction issue of the *New Yorker*. About this time too, Munro wrote "Wenlock Edge," a story which implicitly deals with A. E. Housman, whose *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) Munro has said she has long known very well, much of it by heart. Elegizing him, W. H. Auden called Housman "the Latin Scholar of his generation," also a poet, one who "put the money of his feelings on / The uncritical relations of the dead, / Where only geographical divisions / Parted the coarse hanged soldier from the don" (182; see Thacker One). With Housman and Auden, and with her intertextual references to classical literature, late Munro offers a long view of human existence—that to be human is to be human, regardless of where one happens to live or in which era one lives.

But if such a long literary awareness is to be found in "White Dump," so too is what should be called Munro's geological sensibility, another long view. Ontario landforms and landscapes have featured in Munro's writing from the beginning—there is a story published in 1955, "The Edge of Town," in which the setting is of more importance than the characters—and a geological sensibility is readily evident in "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the first story in Munro's first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). When Munro returned to Huron County in 1975 it was to reconnect with Gerald Fremlin, a physical geographer and someone she had known in university. Her first project after moving to Clinton was a series of descriptive vignettes, which she titled "Places at Home." These were never published in the book of photographs that they were intended for, but it is clear that Munro's work on them reintroduced her to her home place in tactile and important ways: no longer remembering Huron County through memory and over distance, as she had from British Columbia from 1952 to 1973, "Places at Home" is the text of her initial rediscovery (See Thacker *Alice*, 294–301).² Many of these vignettes were incorporated into *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978; published outside of Canada as *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* [1979]). Throughout, this book shows evidence of Munro's rediscovery of Huron County after her return there. More than that, it also offers larger evidence that this process was a struggle for her: very late in the publication process, Munro had her publisher take the book off the press so

that she could restructure it, rewriting significant portions; she paid for the changes herself (See Thacker *Alice* 348–50).

Among the "Places at Home" vignettes were one titled "Pleistocene" and another called "Drumlin." The first became a story entitled "Characters" (1978) which, though not included in either version of *Who*, treats of Flo and Rose and might have gone there. It focuses on a Mr. Cleaver, a teacher who was among those who "had surfaced during the war, [had] come out of bush schools and decayed branch offices, to take the jobs of the men who went off to fight." He is introduced in this passage: "*Pleistocene*, said Mr. Cleaver, and wrote it on the board, as if the grandeur of that word alone could compel them. He was a teacher despised for his devotion to just such words and facts, his hysterical susceptibility." Munro continues:

"What do you see here?" he said to the senior class, and drew on the board, with startling unappreciated facility, a map of Southern Ontario. He was scooping out the shorelines with coloured chalk, in unexpected places. Here were the lakes of former time, the old abandoned shores, that they had never heard of and were not likely to remember. Lake Algonquin, Lake Iriquois. The Champlain Sea and Tara Strands. He wanted to rip the moment open for them, make them a present of the shifting startling past. (72)

None of the students responds ("Nobody had respect"), so Mr. Cleaver becomes exasperated, yells at individuals, calls two "Corpulent nitwits," but ultimately continues with his own enthusiastic fascination, as Munro paraphrases as she described Cleaver back at his map: "Here is the landscape under the one you see, he went on telling them. Here is where it changed its mind, and here, and here. All these forgotten decisions to settle us where we are today. The lakes and shores we map and name but never saw, that nobody ever saw" (73).

This detail is illustrative, for "Characters" is more about how someone like Cleaver is seen, and largely unappreciated, in the non- and often anti-intellectual rural society Munro was born to. He is one of the characters Munro is describing. One Saturday, stopping by Flo's store while Rose was studying for her exams—the pair of protagonists Munro makes central to *Who*—Mr. Cleaver said that

he “was going to hike up into the drumlin field.” Flo, who Munro sets against him as a person who dismisses intellectual enthusiasms, “didn’t bother to ask what a drumlin field could be” (79). Yet Rose, who was a member of that senior class, years later, shares the forlorn memory of Mr. Cleaver when he is discussed at a school reunion she has happened upon when visiting her hometown to look after Flo. “A brilliant man in his own way,” they said, and he “is polished and regretted.” Munro concludes “Characters” as she began her first description of Mr. Cleaver, with an italicized geological term:

Drumlin was a word Rose ought to have thanked Mr. Cleaver for, if she had been given to thanking. A celtic word, he said. *Little hill*. It made a hill sound smooth and hollow, and continued to remind her of what she used to hope for when she was little, though she never really expected to find it, at the base of hills: the little, grassy, perfectly fitted door, that can only be opened from the inside. (82)

This final image—the “grassy, perfectly fitted door” at the base of a drumlin—is one that Munro would return to in “What Do You Want to Know For?,” a memoir she would publish in 1994 and include in *The View from Castle Rock*. There the hill with the door is not a drumlin: it is a crypt, one she and Fremlin discovered and then worked very hard to learn the provenance of—and they did so successfully, as Munro recounts.

“What Do You Want to Know For?” includes an assertion, offered as the last sentence of the long quotation I am about to offer, that ought to be seen as another coda in Munro. Just as the “Finale” of *Dear Life* should be. That sentence is: “It’s the fact you cherish.” The two paragraphs leading up to that sentence reveal Munro explaining in her own words what I am describing here as her “geological sensibility.” Toward the beginning of “What Do You Want to Know For?,” describing the landscapes of Huron County and Southwestern Ontario, Munro concludes her descriptions by describing her favorite landform; the kame moraine, she writes, “is the one I’ve left till last,” saying that “end moraines are hilly in what seems a reasonable way, not as smooth as drumlins, but still harmonious, rhythmical, while kame moraines are all wild and bumpy, unpredictable, with a look of chance and secrets.” Just after

this, there is a break in the text, and Munro continues with two salient paragraphs:

I didn't learn any of this at school. I think there was nervousness then, about being at loggerheads with the Bible in the matter of the creation of the Earth. I learned it when I came to live here with my second husband, a geographer. When I came back to where I never expected to be, in the countryside where I had grown up. So my knowledge is untainted, fresh. I get a naïve and particular pleasure from matching what I see on the map with what I see through the car window. Also from trying to figure out what bit of landscape we're in, before I look at a map, and being right a good deal of the time. It's exciting to me to spot the boundaries, when it's a question of the different till plains, or where the kame moraine takes over from the end moraine.

But there is always more than just the keen pleasure of identification. There's the fact of these separate domains, each with its own history and reason, its favorite crops and trees and weeds—oaks and pines, for instance growing on sand, and cedars and strayed lilacs on limestone—each with its special expression, its pull on the imagination. The fact of these countries lying smug and unsuspected, like and unlike as siblings can be, in a landscape that's usually disregarded, or dismissed as drab agricultural counterpane. It's the fact you cherish. (*View* 321–22)³

Reading Munro, from first to last, throughout, we may see facts being cherished. As I have said, often the facts involved are autobiographical or biographical. The death of Anne Chamney Laidlaw in early 1959 after an almost twenty-year struggle with Parkinson's disease brought Munro to write "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960), which she once described to an interviewer as her "first really painful autobiographical story" (Metcalf 58). Her mother has been a repeated presence in many stories since, and she is still there in "Dear Life" in *Dear Life*, both as remembered presence and as the author of the titular phrase, repeated. So she has been throughout. So too is Munro's father, Robert Eric Laidlaw, who figures in "Night" in the "Finale"; he has been a remembered presence since the early 1960s ("Boys and Girls" [1964] in *Dance*, for instance) and he too was subject to an elegy story, "The Moons of Jupiter" (1978), as well as elegy memoir, "Working for a Living."

Yet facts may be seen being cherished irrespective of which crux is being examined. Reading among and between and within Munro's stories, connections are always being made. Earlier I mentioned a phrasing from "White Dump," "the ways the skin of the moment can break open." Following the line of Munro's long view based on the classics and her geological sense back to "Characters"—first called "Pleistocene"—we find Munro writing of Mr. Cleaver that "he wanted to rip this moment open for them, make them a present of the shifting startling past." That was written and published several years before "White Dump." And the ride over the Rideau Lakes her characters take there is one Munro took herself: she wanted to see what a glint lake looked like from the air, looking down, she wanted to know and cherish that fact, before she used it in her story (June 14, 2010).

A deepening geological sensibility: "Axis"

When Munro left her marriage and returned to Ontario from British Columbia in 1973, she faced several crossroads: she had never been really on her own; she had to decide where to go and what to do; and she would likely have to find different ways to go about her writing. Her relations with her daughters had to be redefined (the oldest was about twenty, the second a teenager, the third just about seven). She needed to support herself. After *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), she had a sense that the type of writing she had been doing—fiction derived from memory and distance—was "sort of played out" (September 6, 2013). And Munro recalls in "What Do You Want to Know For?," before her reconnection with Fremlin happened, she "never expected" to come back to Huron County, "in the countryside where" she "had grown up." Yet that was what happened by August 1975. Recalling this time in 2013, Munro has said, "Well obviously I'd gone as far as I could with [her prior type of writing] and then, when I got to know Gerry . . . the world he opened up for me was just marvelous. I had never taken [geology] in school and . . . it was wonderful to me, but I didn't think immediately of it going into my writing. . . . It was what he could teach me that was very exciting to me then" (September 6, 2013). When she described her flight over a glint lake for "White

Dump," Munro commented, "but of course the idea of there being such things all comes from Gerry" (June 14, 2010).

Thus the landforms and landscapes of Huron County, which Munro had long revered, became both a new fascination and a new direction as she returned there to live in 1975. The geological history of the region was revealed to her by Fremlin during their drives about the countryside and, almost immediately, Munro began writing differently, drawing on and elaborating what she had discovered. I have noted such concerns in "Characters" and "White Dump," and pointed to them elsewhere, but they come together best in "Axis" (2011), an anomalous story in the late Munro oeuvre. It was published in the *New Yorker* but, though originally slated for inclusion in *Dear Life*, was ultimately left out in deference to Fremlin.⁴

"Axis," once again, takes Munro back to her time at the University of Western Ontario 1949–51. It begins, "Fifty years ago, Grace and Avie were waiting at the university gates, in the freezing cold." They were waiting for a bus, "forty miles to go for Avie, maybe twice that for Grace." "Serious students," they "were carrying large books with serious titles: 'The Medieval World,' 'Montcalm and Wolfe,' 'The Jesuit Relations.'" But more than this, and more significantly, each of these characters echoes Munro herself: "They were both farm girls, who knew how to scrub floors and milk cows. Their labor as soon as they entered the house—or the barn—belonged to their families. They weren't the sort of girls you usually ran into at this university." Not sorority girls, bent on finding a husband in the business school, Grace and Avie are scholarship girls majoring in history, destined probably to teach: they "admitted they would hate that," Munro writes (63).

The plot of "Axis" focuses mostly on a visit that Royce—Grace's boyfriend, a veteran, and near philosophy graduate—makes to her on the farm during the summer. Still a virgin, Grace has a plan to capitulate to his advances there while Royce is visiting. In a wonderfully comedic scene, the couple is caught in bed by Grace's mother who is outraged at the discovery. Royce dresses and leaves, apparently scorning both mother and daughter, angry and now forced to hitchhike back to the university town where he still lives. Munro describes the moments as he takes his leave:

When Grace heard him zip up his bag she turned over and put her feet on the floor. She was perfectly naked.

She said, "Take me. Take me with you."

But he had gone out of the room, out of the house, as if he hadn't even heard her. (67)

At one point in the composition process, Munro thought of "Take Me with You" as a possible title for the story and queried Ann Close, her editor at Knopf, about the possibility. That title would have emphasized the elements of romance in the story, and there is also a subplot involving Avie and her boyfriend Hugo, with whom she gets pregnant by and marries.

But the story is called "Axis." The reference is to one of two major geological facts of Southern Ontario: the Frontenac Axis. Late in life, toward the end of "Axis," Royce and the by-then widowed Avie inadvertently meet on a train heading east from Toronto toward Gananoque, his destination, and Montreal, hers. He tells her about his life, she hers. He taught geology, never married; she had six children, was a housewife and mother. Recalling their time together in college, Royce also tells her that, traveling on a bus on his way to visit Grace those years ago, he looked out the window and saw Avie on the street in the town where she lived; after acknowledging and dismissing his connection with Grace then, he continues: "Anyway, I saw you there on the sidewalk talking to somebody and I thought you looked just irresistible. You were laughing away. I wanted to get off the bus and speak to you. Make a date with you, actually." Looking back now, Avie is torn; Royce wants to know if she thinks it a good thing that "we didn't make contact?" and Munro writes "She does not even try for an answer" (68). Royce leaves this question alone and closes his eyes, telling Avie to be sure to wake him "before we're into Kingston if I've gone to sleep," he says. "There's something I want to be sure to show you" (69).

What Royce, the geologist, wants to show Avie is the Frontenac Axis. The train stops in Kingston and:

When the train starts up again, he explains that all around them are great slabs of limestone packed in order, one on top of the other, like a grand construction. But in one spot this gives way, he says, and you can see something else. It's what's known as the Frontenac Axis. It is nothing less than an eruption of the vast and crazy old Canadian Shield, all the ancient combustion

cutting through the limestone, pouring over, messing up those giant steps.

"See! See!" he says, and she does see. Remarkable. (69)

From this scene, Munro cuts back to a letter Avie received from Grace after she had married and moved to Northern Ontario where Hugo was teaching. Grace congratulates her and then tells Avie that she has dropped out of school, "due to some troubles I have had with health and my nerves" (69). Avie recalls a conversation with Grace about colitis, but the "tone of Grace's letter seemed off kilter, with some pleading note in it that made her put off answering." Back on the train, wondering this over, Avie "asks Royce if he heard anything from Grace, ever." He replies no and asks why she thinks he would have. "Axis" ends:

"I thought you might have looked her up later on."

"Not a good idea."

She has disappointed him. Prying. Trying to get at some spot of live regret right under the ribs. A woman. (69)

In his chapter here on Munro's techniques and "To Reach Japan," J. R. (Tim) Struthers argues that in Munro's work metaphor transmutes into allegory, and her use of the Frontenac Axis in "Axis" is a vivid illustration of just what he means. Royce's enthusiastic exclamations as he points out evidence of the "eruption of the vast and crazy old Canadian Shield" (analogous to her earlier similar phrasings, Mr. Cleaver wanting "to rip the moment open for them," to the narrator in "White Dump" speaking of "the ways the skin of the moment can open") points to another experience he has during his visit to Grace, whom now he little remembers. Getting out of one of the cars he had hitched a ride in, Royce experiences his first geological epiphany:

Then he got out, and he saw across the road in the cut of the highway a tower of ancient-looking rock that looked quite out of place there, even though it was capped with grass and a small tree growing out of a crack.

He was on the edge of the Niagara Escarpment, though he did not know that name or anything about it. But he was captivated. Why had he never been told anything about this? This surprise,