

Narrative Community in Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams*

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TO DATE, THE LONGEST SUSTAINED WORK of criticism on Edna Alford's *A Sleep Full of Dreams* comes from Louis MacKendrick who devotes five pages of his 1989 essay to the sequence. His essay briefly discusses eight of the ten stories but has little to say about the sequence as a whole or the dialogue between the individual stories in the sequence. Somewhere between academic criticism and popular review, MacKendrick's essay gestures toward the importance of Alford's two books, *A Sleep Full of Dreams* and *The Garden of Eloise Loon*. Ironically, readers are left with the feeling that they are watching a post-mortem performed; the very fact that *A Sleep Full of Dreams* is re-reviewed eight years after its publication says a great deal about its status as a fatally neglected text.

One can only speculate as to why Alford's fiction has been unduly overlooked. On the one hand, it may have something to do with the status of short fiction in Canadian literary studies at large and a lingering assumption that the short story is not a valid form in its own right but "the recognized proving-ground for aspiring novelists" (McPherson 720).¹ Yet, the short ficti

on of both Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro (two writers whom Alford claims as influences in an interview with Doris Hillis) has inspired numerous articles. The critical difference here is that the short fiction of Laurence and Munro falls into two distinct categories: the short story collections (like *The Tomorrow Tamer* and *The Love of a Good Woman*) and the short story sequences (like *A Bird in the House* and *Lives of Girls and Women*). *A Sleep Full of Dreams* is difficult to categorize because it displays more unity than a collection of stories but less than one would expect from a sequence of stories linked by a localized setting and a single character that matures over the course of the sequence.

It would be unfair to read *A Sleep Full of Dreams* as if it attempted but failed to achieve the unity of sequences by Laurence or Munro. In a review of *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, M.G. Osachoff observes,

Five of the stories were published in various journals, and each of the ten could stand alone. Therefore, the unity that we expect of a novel is not found here, and because Arla does not appear in all the stories, the book does not have the unity found in short story collections by Laurence, Roy and Munro, though the quality of Alford's writing is good enough to compare with that of these older writers. (165)

The review goes on to point out that the prime weakness of the collection is Alford's failure to develop the character of Arla; but even this criticism rests on generic grounds: "perhaps only in a novel could such character development be possible" (165). As the above quotation attests, Osachoff offers some praise but remains uneasy about the generic status of *A Sleep Full of Dreams*. It lacks the unity of a novel; it cannot even be said to possess the unity of collections by Laurence, Roy or Munro. Osachoff can describe *A Sleep Full of Dreams* in terms of what it is not, but she cannot quite pin down what, exactly, it is.

Alford, David Carpenter, Andreas Schroeder, and Guy Vanderhaeghe have attempted to define their use of the short story sequence (sometimes referred to as the linked short story or short story cycle) in a series of essays collected under the rubric of "Fear of the Novel — the Linked Short Story in Saskatchewan Fiction." Carpenter describes a continuum that would position *A Sleep Full of Dreams* somewhere in between the short story collection (that is, a collection in which the individual works are not explicitly connected) and the novel, "with its commitment to one main plot and the destiny of one or more main characters" (155). This continuum is an open system that speaks to Alford's desire for a system that demonstrates "a respect for the form itself and the possibilities suggested by the variation in the process of linkage" ("Fear" 174). Revaluing the short story sequence was the central project of Robert Luscher's essay of the same year, "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book" (1989). Luscher describes how "By operating without the major narrative unities of the novel, the writer of the short story sequence courts disunity in order to achieve 'victory' over it by setting up a new set of narrative ground rules that rely heavily on active pattern-making faculties" (158). Until we set up new ground rules, Luscher argues, we will invariably read short story sequences as failed novels.

More recently, Gerald Lynch has offered the first book-length study of the Canadian short story cycle in English, *The One and the Many*. Lynch prefers the term short story cycle because it "best captures the form's dynamic of recurrent development" (193). Although Lynch prefers the term cycle over sequence, he remains committed to the same

programm as Luscher — that of cultivating an appreciation of the short story cycle that does not depend on “its approximation of the achievement of a novel...[and] the extent to which it is unified by place, character, theme, or style” (Lynch 22). But, whereas Alford and Luscher both theorize an open system that allows for “variation in the process of linkage” (“Fear” 174), Lynch’s categorization of short story cycles “in terms of what lends the cycle its primary coherence, what holds it together in its cyclical form” (20) is, by its very nature, a closed system. Lynch identifies two major types of short story cycles: those unified by place and those unified by character (less prevalent, he observes, are those cycles held together by “consistent thematic concern” or “consistent style or tone” [20]). *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, he argues, is one of those cycles in which the unifying structures of place and character overlap: “it is both the character of Arla Pederson and the setting of an old folks’ home that lends unity to the cycle” (21).² This formulation presents one central problem: it fails to account for the presence in the sequence of “Half-Past Eight” and “Under the I” — the two stories where Arla (the day nurse at the Pine Mountain Lodge) does not appear as a character and the central action takes place outside of Pine Mountain Lodge. To accept *A Sleep Full of Dreams* as a cycle linked exclusively by place and character inescapably marginalizes two of Alford’s most intriguing stories.

I would like to suggest that *A Sleep Full of Dreams* must be read as an experimental text: Alford courts disunity within the sequence of stories — that is, she limits the centripetal power that a unified setting or a sustained development of Arla’s character would lend to the sequence. Correspondingly, she increases the importance of imagistic links between the stories to offset the centrifugal forces that threaten to undermine the sense of connectedness she is trying to achieve.³ These associative or imagistic links work to simultaneously bind the stories and the women of the stories together. And preserving the character of each individual story is of primary importance when one considers the relation of form to subject matter: i.e., when the stories are considered as narratives of individual women within the institution of a nursing home that heaps them all together and effaces their histories.

As a genre, the sequence represents the manner in which these women have been compartmentalized (they are literally shut away in individual rooms) while allowing for a sense of community (between the individual women and the stories themselves) to develop.⁴ Although Arla appears more often than any other character in the sequence, each individual story centres on the life of one of the Lodge women. This is not

to say that Arla is not a member of the Lodge community — she is as much a subject of the institution as the women that she cares for. Rather, I mean to caution against reading *A Sleep Full of Dreams* as Arla's *Bildungsroman*. To do so would, first of all, represent the women of Pine Mountain Lodge as props in Arla's development. And, as Osachoff suggests, *A Sleep Full of Dreams* is a failure when read as a *Bildungsroman*; one would expect Arla to be a more fully developed character. Sandra Zagarell has defined a new genre, the "narrative of community," as comprising works that "take as their subject the life of a community (life in 'its everyday aspects') and portray the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity" (499).⁵ I propose that *A Sleep Full of Dreams* should be read as a narrative of community and that Arla must be understood as "part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit" (Zagarell 499). On a thematic level, what distinguishes *A Sleep Full of Dreams* from other narratives of community is that the community it portrays (a retirement home) has rarely been depicted in a sustained way or with such stark realism. On a structural level, *A Sleep Full of Dreams* is exemplary in its use of imagistic links — what Luscher would describe as one of the "active pattern-making faculties" that writers of short story sequences must rely upon.

A close reading of *A Sleep Full of Dreams* reveals the extent to which Alford is experimenting with stories that are "associatively linked, linked imagistically" (Kruk 4).⁶ Alford states that *A Sleep Full of Dreams* was "conceived as a group of stories" (Kruk 2) gathered around "trigger images" that serve as an organizing principle; she later states that "for the story to come together, I have to have that gathering image" (Kruk 2). What emerges is Alford's interest in images: "imagistic links," "trigger images," "gathering images." The strength of these imagistic links allows Alford's narrative to sacrifice unity of place and character. While it is my ambition to chart some of imaginative links in *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, the sheer number of transitions and redirections in the text should qualify this essay as a provisional mapping. So, rather than attempting an exhaustive catalogue of imagistic links in the sequence, I would like to plot some of these links and discuss how these redirections are complemented by shifts between different narrative points of view. Both strategies redirect attention from Arla back to the women of the Lodge and compel the reader to view the Lodge community in its totality. The reader is empowered within this paradigm; the stories in *A Sleep Full of Dreams* become a sequence only once the reader begins to actualize the links between the in-

dividual stories. But along with this empowerment comes an interpretive burden. The transitions, redirections, and shifts that characterize *A Sleep Full of Dreams* make it impossible for the reader to adopt a passive reading strategy: the stories hold the reader's attention on a structural level. One cannot rush blindly through the narrative when the subject matter becomes difficult. The reader must either abandon the book or fully engage with the day-to-day lives of its subjects. Anyone who has read *A Sleep Full of Dreams* or remembers visiting a chronic-care facility for the first time will almost certainly appreciate how difficult it is to overcome the urge to bolt for the exit.

The opening story in the sequence, "The Hoyer," is one of the most challenging, both in terms of its arrangement of narrative points of view and its subject. Within this one story, the reader is privy to the insights of Arla, Miss Bole, Lyanda Weatherby, and a narrative voice that remains distinct from all three.⁷ The title apparatus (a hoyer is a crane-like apparatus that hoists a nonambulatory person in a canvas harness, thus permitting them to bathe) is shown from all four perspectives. Arla appreciates the practical applications of the device and sees it as "a kangaroo with a pouch for her joey or the mythical stork" (14). For Miss Bole, "the machine looked for all the world like a large bird of prey, a vulture or a hawk with a hapless bloody victim tangled up in its claws" (13). Miss Bole's perspective is underlined by a subsequent description of the machine offered by the narrative voice: "In effect, it owned three arms and three legs if you didn't count the chains and claws" (15). Finally, the reader, like Lyanda Weatherby, cannot help but remember the hoyer as "a sinister metallic machine" (23).

The narrative mode that is used so effectively in this context has been termed the "third person central" by Rudy Wiebe (qtd. in Hillis 9) and it allows Alford to access the viewpoint of Arla while maintaining a critical distance. As we shall see, at times this distance threatens to collapse, and it is only through a concerted effort that Alford keeps the narrative from becoming Arla's story. As I have suggested, there may be an inclination among readers to attribute too much importance to the role of Arla as a unifying device in *A Sleep Full of Dreams*. This is interesting, given that we are never permitted to move beyond an ambivalent identification with Arla. While we are encouraged to sympathize with her for being overworked and undertrained, the outright hostility (at times, this hostility borders on abuse) she shows toward her charges is always problematic.

From the perspective of Miss Bole, we learn that "when angered, the girl ignored the ladies, prodded and pushed them like lumps of bread-

dough" (11). While Arla frequently oscillates between feelings of sympathy and callous indifference toward the Lodge women, she most often comes down on the side of callous indifference. It is not that Arla is malicious by nature — as we shall see in the final story in the sequence, she is capable of great compassion. The fact is that Arla frequently abandons her efforts to understand the Lodge women, making her a failed interpreter — a less than ideal reader, in other words. The third-person narrator can access Miss Bole's deeper feelings, allowing the reader to understand her as something more than an "old creature" (MacKendrick 111). In stark contrast to Arla, the narrator sympathizes with Miss Bole's condition:

She looked angry, but actually, if the truth were known, she was in pain. She had always been modest and genuinely shy. She was not one of these women who coquettishly pretend their modesty in bed. This was one of the reasons she had never married. (10)

Arla cannot move beyond the more obvious reason that Miss Bole never married: "The other reason was only too obvious to Arla as she surveyed with disgust the limbs attached to Miss Bole's many-folded trunk" (10). Eventually, Arla comes to the conclusion that the reader has been prepared for — that "Everybody is full of secrets" (25). Although Miss Bole may appear angry, the truth of the matter — that she is in real emotional pain — is a secret to which the reader has been privy from the very beginning. This double vision places readers in a position where they must continually challenge the assumptions of Arla; we, as readers, must look deeper than Arla is prepared to look.

The case of Miss Bole's paintings effectively marks the limits of Arla's perspective. Although Miss Bole informs Arla that she used to paint (one of her paintings even won a prize at the Beiseker fair), she upstages that fact with a story about a girl who had her arm torn off by the Ferris wheel, where it "hung there dripping more'n an hour before they could catch it and take it off a there. The folks all stayed and watched" (9). From Arla's perspective, this aside is merely an attempt by Miss Bole to postpone her trip to the bath. The reader, however, cannot fail to notice how Miss Bole's description of the hanging, dripping arm prefigures her own hanging, dripping posture in the hoyer after she has taken her bath. With this in mind, Miss Bole's story must be read as an imaginative displacement of her own shame and anxiety over having become the object of an unsympathetic gaze.

It is, however, several pages before the image of Miss Bole in the

hoyer is introduced; one must read the parable of the dismembered arm very closely if one is to move beyond Arla's interpretation of events. Likewise, if one keeps Miss Bole's paintings of "scenes . . . around the home-
stead" (16) in mind, it becomes clear that the tension between Miss Bole's gothic stories of dismemberment and her precisely rendered landscape portraits is central to her characterization. Not surprisingly, Arla is aware of the paintings hanging over Miss Bole's bed, but "never really looked at them" (26). It is only with the arrival of Mrs. Weatherby from the Department of Cultural Affairs that Arla and the reader learn that Miss Bole is famous for painting "meadows filled with flowers so perfectly executed and flawless that for a long time the critics didn't consider them seriously at all" (26). For Arla, this information radically alters her perception of Miss Bole, and she spends some time preparing Miss Bole for her visitor and dressing her in a "flowered gown" (24) for the occasion.

If one recalls the narrator's description of Miss Bole as a "human pendulum" (14), then Miss Bole's transition from happily singing "like a trilling bird" back to speaking in "the deep-throated purring voice [she] used to tell her stories" (25) is only natural. However, after the good will that Arla showed toward Miss Bole, she is surprised that Miss Bole would remind her about a recent accident with the laundry press, given that she "had to take the wet laundry downstairs, past the mangle" (26). It is impossible to fix Miss Bole as a static personality: she is at times sympathetic, at times contemptible; she shows herself to be capable of great sensitivity in art and basic cruelty in life. Arla prefers to either idealize or ignore the women of Pine Mountain Lodge; Alford carefully demonstrates the dangers of both responses, and the women of Pine Mountain Lodge emerge as imperfect and fully formed individuals.

At the beginning of "Mid-May's Eldest Child," Arla views Miss Moss as a giant-killer, capable of defeating "both matrons . . . a social worker from the City and Dr. Jeremy" (29) in argument. Because of her fondness for the older woman (Miss Moss says the things Arla wishes she could), Arla plans an excursion to the barbershop, followed by lunch and a walk in the park with her charge. In organizing this adventure, Arla bends the rules for Miss Moss; one will recall that Arla also bestowed small favours on Miss Bole when the two were (briefly) on good terms. The parallels between "Mid-May's Eldest Child" and "The Hoyer" can be extended: in both stories, Arla idealizes an elderly resident of the Lodge; this idealization gives way to a sense of disillusionment that finally becomes resentment. As the reader's identification with Arla's perspective becomes more and more ambivalent, the structural importance of

imagistic links increases. The opening lines of "Mid-May's Eldest Child" introduce the first of several imagistic links between individual stories in the sequence. When Arla steps off the bus in "Mid-May's Eldest Child," she "peeled off her bulky-knit cardigan and swung it over her shoulder, retaining only a two-finger hold on the red woolen collar" (27). This image of a two-fingered grip is tied to the earlier description of Miss Bole's misshapen right hand, which had "only two fingers, bent together, both curled and with narrow thick talons on the end of each" (10). Additionally, Arla's dizzy run "between a clump of lilacs and a bed of tulips and daffodils" (28) invites the reader to imagine that Arla has run off into one of Miss Bole's paintings of "meadows filled with flowers" (26). The pair of associative links achieves an uncanny effect: for an instant, Arla morphs into Miss Bole. With this imaginative redirection, Alford shifts the focus from Arla back to the women of the Lodge.

Although Arla herself does not express any sense of identification with the other women of Pine Mountain Lodge, she remains subject to the same institutional authority. This subjugation should lead Arla to identify with Miss Moss's resistance to the matrons, social workers, and doctors of the Lodge. Instead, Arla invests Miss Moss's words with an idealized form of authority that functions independently of their speaker. Having built up Miss Moss as a "high priestess of poetry, of beautiful well-formed syllables" (36), Arla is forced to watch this idealized portrait deteriorate when the exertion of walking through the mall takes its toll on the older woman. From that point forward, Miss Moss's "speech was splintered, like the speech Arla remembered from the burnt-out old schizophrenics at the government hospital, hebaphrenics, they had called them, more shattered than split" (36). The final failure of Miss Moss's linguistic power comes when her walk through the park does not produce a spontaneous recitation of Romantic poetry but an eruption that "slithered from the old woman's mouth, curdled, milky, sour-reeking, onto her navy linen jumper" (40). In this example, Miss Moss's advanced age physically limits her capacity to craft her matchless rhetoric or to recite her favourite poems, "enunciating perfectly, giving each line its just metrical rendering" (32).

The deterioration of Miss Moss's health over the course of the story is paralleled by the deterioration of Arla's estimation of Miss Moss. Initially, we are told Arla "liked Miss Moss, had taken special care of her ever since their first meeting almost two years before" (29), but by the end of the story Arla feels betrayed and even angry that Miss Moss has not been able to enjoy her carefully planned outing. Arla frankly dismisses Miss

Moss as “just an old woman. That’s all she was” (39) and finally lashes out, using Miss Moss’s favourite poet, Keats, against her:

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever,” she recited to herself, her voice mocking the old woman’s, her mouth twisted, her eyes glazed with anger — “its loveliness increases; it will never / Pass into nothingness; but still will keep / A bower quiet for us and a sleep / Full of sweet dreams and health and quiet breathing.” (40)

Arla rejects the argument of Keats’s *Endymion* — that things of beauty are immortal since they live in the memory. There is, however, no reason to suppose that the consolatory power that Miss Moss ascribes to reading and reciting poetry will be in any way diminished by this temporary loss of her faculties. If we read Arla as the central figure in this story, the message is profoundly negative: she rejects the consolatory power or art in a world where death and dying are never distant, and she loses the compassion she initially showed toward Miss Moss. It is, in effect, Arla’s failure to develop as a character that is dramatized in this episode.

Alford’s characterization of Arla is a balancing act: she wants to keep her readers critical of Arla, but she must be careful not to turn Arla into a simple villain. Readers of *A Sleep Full of Dreams* must be able to identify with Arla if they are to confront their own preconceived notions about the elderly. So, right when the negative characterization of Arla has reached its critical threshold, “The Visitor” displaces Arla’s position as the central character. The story’s opening lines describe the sound of the Lodge residents waking up: “In the early morning the only sounds were an occasional nasal snort or the scraping of phlegm from an old throat” (41). This image is set in direct opposition to the lines from *Endymion* (lines spoken by Arla) that bring “Mid-May’s Eldest Child” to a close with a picture of “a sleep / Full of sweet dreams and health and quiet breathing” (40). There is a precedent for this system of imagistic linkage between the previous two stories; what is new is that Arla is notably absent from the scene (she has been present in the opening pages of both the previous stories). As a result, our first impressions of Myrtle Emmerson and Sophie Theisan are not coloured by Arla’s commentary — we are introduced to both women by their first names, which gives the story a level of intimacy that was previously absent. While readers will find it difficult to fully identify with Myrtle on account of her pronounced racist attitudes, they will likely empathize with her because she is the victim of financial exploitation (at the hands of the Lodge matrons) and because she is an unrecognized poet. Ultimately, the tensions and contradictions in

Myrtle's characterization permit her emergence as a multifaceted personality.

Myrtle's story once again recapitulates the sense that "Everybody is full of secrets" (25). What sets this story apart is the extent to which Myrtle's secrets remain secret. The story ends, not with the arrival of a Weatherby figure to rescue Myrtle's poetry from anonymity, but with her transfer to a mental hospital. Sophie is the only character permitted to view one of Myrtle's published poems, but she can only return it with "a puzzled, sad expression on her face" (50). Since Sophie cannot read English, the reader is similarly denied access to Myrtle's poetry; thus, the limits of third-person central narration come into view. Nevertheless, the mere mention of poetry is a tantalizing detail (especially given the importance of painting and poetry in the lives of Miss Bole and Miss Moss), and we are subsequently told that Myrtle "took the tattered newsprint and placed it carefully in her drawer on top of an odd assortment of papers" (50). This episode hints at another side of her that we will never be able to fully understand — a drawer full of poetry that remains unread. Fittingly, the image we are left with at the end of "The Visitor" is that of Arla as she "hurried toward Miss Thiesan" (56), burdened with a secret. Arla knows that the Lodge matrons have taken bribes from Myrtle and then sent her off to a mental institution, but she has no one to tell — except, perhaps, Sophie (the story ends before Arla catches up with her).

The image of Arla hurrying at a task is carried over into the next story: the opening of "Communion" describes Arla as she "hurriedly stacked cups and saucers on a tray" (57). This transition shifts Arla, who had a peripheral role in the ending of "Visitors," back to the position of primary identification in "Communion." Although "Communion" juxtaposes Arla's private "communion" against the public rites that Reverend Paul performs for Mrs. Pritchard, the focus of the story is Arla herself; over the course of the story, Mrs. Pritchard speaks only twice (58-59). Arla's position as the privileged subject of "Communion" reveals one of the distinguishing features of third-person central narration: the narrator often fixes on one particular character — in this case, the first named character.⁸ Arla's importance is compounded by the transition between stories — a transition mediated by a pair of Arla's "hurried" actions. Since Arla's presence in the opening of the story inevitably draws the narrator closer to Arla's perspective, the only effective means of distancing the narrative from Arla is to remove Arla from the narrative itself. This escape from Arla's monitoring gaze is exemplified in "Half-Past Eight" when Tessie Bishop and Flora Henderson escape from the Lodge to attend the

opening ceremonies of the Calgary Stampede. Just when the sequence seems poised to develop Arla as a central character, “Half-Past Eight” steps out.

The opening of “Half-Past Eight” uses an imagistic link with “Communion” to redirect the narrative focus away from Arla. The first lines of the story describe one of the Lodge ladies as she applies her makeup: “Tessie took her tube of ‘Scarlet Fire’ lipstick and removed the lid. The lipstick was old and stale and had that sickly sweet smell peculiar to the cosmetics of the aged” (66). This image recalls the description of Arla in “Communion,” with “dark blood on her fingers” that bears a “sick, sweet odor” (63, 64). The imagistic links between stories should be familiar by now; beginning a story without Arla and on a first-name basis with the characters is not unprecedented either, as we have seen in “The Visitor.” But Arla never appears in “Half Past Eight” — it is Tessie Bishop, a peripheral character in “The Visitor,” who becomes the central character and takes the sequence in a different direction. In a move that empowers Tessie and her companion, Flora Henderson, Alford sacrifices the unity that Arla’s character and the setting of Pine Mountain Lodge lend to the sequence. Just as Tessie and Flora do not conform to preconceived notions about the elderly, so too does the story itself flaunt its refusal to conform to the unifying strictures of the short story sequence. Alford herself describes how she made an informed choice to sacrifice unity in the sequence in order to allow for the individual agency of Tessie and Flora:

When Tessie Bishop and Flora Henderson slip the traces and bolt for the Stampede Parade and the Palliser Hotel, their story bolts the form, goes AWOL as well. I had initially intended this story to be told from within the Lodge with more emphasis/dramatization on the consequences of their escapade, but they escaped. I let them. Worse than that, I went with them. And I’d do it again, regardless of the formal, aesthetic consequences. (“Fear” 177)

If Alford had followed her original plan, Arla and the Lodge would have remained central to the story; instead, she has chosen to destabilize both figures, having Flora describe Arla as that “Goddamn stupid nurse ... [who] hasn’t got the brains she was born with” (70) and allowing Tessie to reduce the Lodge to “where we live” (77).

“Half-Past Eight” is not so much unconventional as it is aggressively anti-conventional; in addition to flaunting formal conventions, the story destabilizes preconceived notions about elderly women. Alford takes the

stereotype of the sexless old woman, turns it on its head, and sets it spinning. In a brilliantly orchestrated scene, Tessie and Flora socialize over drinks with Hank, “an old man in a brown straw cowboy hat, a western tie and a big belt with a large brass horse-head buckle” (76). Tessie flirts with Hank and when she finally thinks that he has signalled his sexual interest in return, she is surprised to find that the hand on her thigh belongs to Flora:

Hank had just come back from the washroom and had poured himself another glass of beer when Tessie felt the hand on her stocking, moving up her thigh. She leaned toward Hank, then straightened abruptly. Both of Hank’s hands were occupied — a half-full glass of beer in one and a Player’s cigarette in the other. She had just watched him light it. She turned on Flora. (79)

In this one scene, Alford manages to reinscribe the sexuality of the elderly without casting heterosexuality as the normative role. The suggestion that Flora is a lesbian had previously been raised by Tessie, who often catches a faraway look in Flora’s eyes when she talks “of a raven blue beauty who had worked in her house, on the top floor of the hotel” (74). Upon returning to the Lodge, Flora attempts to wake the other residents from their sleep, pounding on doors and singing a song from her younger days — “The Mother-fuckers’ Ball.” She destabilizes the heterosexual assumptions in the song when she, as speaking subject, claims

the best damn piece of all
was my goddamn mother-in-law
last Saturday night
at the mother-fuckers’ ball. (80)

Having written the lesbian subject who desires her mother-in-law back into this barroom song, she interrupts herself, claiming, “most of these old dames don’t make it to seven-thirty let alone half-past eight — and the worst of it is that they wouldn’t know what to do with *it* even if they could get holda of some” (82; emphasis added).

The breaking down of stereotypes in “Half-Past Eight” simply would not have been possible if Arla had been the central character in the story. The uneasy transition into “Fall Cleaning” is made via a radical shift in the meaning of “it”; whereas the word was spoken in a sexual register in the closing lines of “Half-Past Eight,” “it” becomes a signifier for material belongings when Arla reassumes her central role in “Fall Cleaning” and claims, “Whoever said you can’t take it with you didn’t

know the half of it, Arla thought. Most people couldn't even get 'it' to the gate" (83). "Fall Cleaning" begins with Mrs. Tweedsmuir's unsuccessful attempt to interrupt Arla and Matron Benstone as they clean out her room. Mrs. Tweedsmuir has managed to hoard away "bundles of string, a set of insoles, corn-plasters by the dozen, ribbons of all colours and fabrics, old calendars and ancient, yellowed copies of *The War Cry*" (83). All of these items are deposited in the dumpster, and the reader is left to surmise that the board Mrs. Tweedsmuir lays along her windowsill because "it keeps out the draft" (84) is thrown out among the other garbage. The draft of cold fall air that enters the room is finally responsible for the death of Mrs. Tweedsmuir; even Arla notices that in the morning Mrs. Tweedsmuir "drew her breath through networks of phlegm growing in her lungs like thick patches of weed on the bottom of a lake" (91). On the day following the death of Mrs. Tweedsmuir, Arla is left to clean out the remainder of her belongings. After she leaves the room for the last time, the narrator lingers for a moment to underline Arla's negligence: "The room she left behind was clean and quiet. Sunlight flickered through the green and red and white blotched curtains. A cold fall breeze fluttered them, lapping them in and out against the screen" (93).

The narrator makes plain connections to the reader to which Arla is not privy. Arla identifies with the impulse to hoard material goods – she herself is "collecting the Royal Albert 'Wild Rose' pattern" (88). What she cannot understand is the impulse toward the "hoarding of worthless garbage" (88). She fails to recognize that the difference between "garbage" and Royal Doulton is wholly subjective. Further, Arla does not draw the connection between the pioneer spirit that she frequently ascribes to the women of the Lodge and Mrs. Tweedsmuir's refusal to throw anything away. Significantly, all of the food that Mrs. Tweedsmuir hoards away is kept in half-pint sealers; in an exercise that mirrors fall canning, she turns her closet into a pantry for her "preserves." Although Mrs. Tweedsmuir's impulse to do her fall canning remains the same as ever, the combination of her mental condition and the limited food stuffs that she has access to produces a bizarre batch of sealers filled with orange peels, peppermint, and sour milk. Viewed from Arla's perspective, this is indeed a story about fall cleaning; for Mrs. Tweedsmuir, this is a story of fall canning interrupted.

While the reader can see the story from both angles, Arla has yet to assume the perspective of a Lodge woman. It is only in "Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday" that we first see signs of Arla identifying with one of her patients. The central action of the story begins when Arla leaves the

catatonic Mrs. Langland standing naked in a pool of her own feces. She returns to find that Mrs. Langland has slipped and fallen and now lies prone on the floor. There is an uncanny moment of connection between the two women as they lock eyes: “[Arla’s] face looked like a blank sheet of paper, her eyes large, almost silver, mirroring the eyes of the old woman lying on the floor” (114). In this moment of identification, Arla sees herself reflected in the older woman: “Arla couldn’t say exactly what it was she recognized ... but she knew it was somehow part of herself” (114-15). To atone for her earlier negligence, Arla “resolved to treat Mrs. Langland more kindly” (119). This resolution does not last and Arla’s frustration with Mrs. Langland gives way to a violent struggle to fit Mrs. Langland’s foot into her shoe; as Mrs. Langland “curled her toes into hard, high lumps,” Arla becomes “brutal ... determined to force the rebellious toes into their proper places” (121). It took an extreme display of abjection from Mrs. Langland to establish a sense of real (if transitory) connection between Arla and the older woman. Once their positions are reversed and Arla is compelled to kneel on the floor and wrestle with Mrs. Langland’s feet, the moment of connection is severed. At the end of “Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,” Arla appears as compassionless as she was in the opening story, making it difficult to argue that she has undergone any real emotional development. Without this character development, the unity of the sequence begins to break down; Alford pushes this sense of disunity even further in what is the strangest story in the sequence, “Under the I.”

Alford’s penultimate story is experimental in several ways: it takes place outside the Lodge, adopts a male subject as the central character, and assumes the conventions of a ghost story. Mrs. McNaughton returns from beyond the grave in order to achieve what she never could in her lifetime: to win the Bonanza jackpot at the Legion bingo night, a matter that Alford treats without bathos. Mrs. McNaughton does not win, but we are meant to take her parting words seriously: “I’ll be back next week. I won’t rest till I win” (134). Alford ascribes individual agency and strength of will to Mrs. McNaughton, and Harold comes to realize “that he had been right in the first place about the will of the old ones, more right than he wanted to be” (137). “Under the I” begins with the image of Harold Sampson stamping his work boots free of snow, his “large hands ... clenched in fists, red from the cold” (122). This composite image (feet and clenched hands) is no doubt intended to recall how “Mrs. Langland curled her toes into hard, high lumps” (121) in the closing lines of “Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.” In terms of his point of view, how-

ever, Harold has much more in common with Arla than with Mrs. Langland, enjoying the same liminal insider/outsider perspective. Like Arla, Harold finds himself in the middle of a community he cannot fully comprehend: “Harold hated the bingos. Mostly women who were strangers to him yacking, smoking, drinking coffee and shrieking ‘BINGO’ so loud you’d think they’d just jumped over the moon instead of winning \$13.50 in quarters” (124). The critical difference between this story and the stories in which Arla appears is that we never get the sense that Harold himself is being observed — he is the privileged observer among “table after table of human robots” (128). The final indeterminacy of the story (it is impossible to say whether Harold imagined the entire episode) is directly related to the limits of Harold’s perspective — a kind of variation on the trope of the unreliable narrator. This one-sided story finally gestures towards the necessity of a narrative form that incorporates multiple perspectives and highlights the degree to which the previous stories, even when they privilege Arla’s perspective, simultaneously critique her attitudes.

“Under the I” ends with Harold focusing on the “spray and hiss of flakes against the glass” (139) as he drives home from bingo. Arla appears at the beginning of “Companionship” as if she might have walked in from the same storm with “snowflakes intact on . . . [her] coat” (140). The image of these snowflakes as well as the temporal continuity suggested by the seasonal snowstorms draws the two stories closer together. There are other continuities between the two stories: both Harold and Arla initially doubt the strength of will of the older generation before they come to realize that Mrs. McNaughton and Mrs. Dawson can make their presence felt from beyond the grave. Standing over Mrs. Dawson’s deathbed, Arla claims, “The worst of it was she found herself furious with Mrs. Dawson who lay motionless, though in pain. She wouldn’t fight. Now she was giving up, after all those years, all those hard times she had come through and told stories about” (149). But Mrs. Dawson does reach out from beyond the grave, and in the closing lines of the story Arla can sense the presence of her departed friend: “She looked over her shoulder, furtively, not so much because she felt foolish and was afraid someone had heard her singing, but because she felt she was not alone, because she felt the presence of someone or something walking with her” (155). While Harold is haunted by his encounter with the ghost of Mrs. McNaughton, Arla is reassured by the spirit of Mrs. Dawson walking by her side.

“Companionship” also delivers what has appeared in flashes but never in a sustained way: a sense of connection between Arla and one of

the Lodge women. This sense of connection is literally realized in the “strange, but in its own way, graceful, shuffle-rhythmed waltz” (142) of Arla and Mrs. Dawson. It is Mrs. Dawson who leads, placing “her left hand firmly on Arla’s shoulder,” despite the fact she “was very short and stooped and had to reach a difficult distance” (142). The creativity of Mrs. Dawson finds an outlet in her crocheting, as well as her dancing; the doily she crochets for Arla is identified as “a variation of the ‘Snowflake’” (148). It is significant that Mrs. Dawson’s crocheting is a personalized “variation” on a familiar pattern: she is not merely reproducing a pattern but creating something original. When Arla brings home the doily that Mrs. Dawson knit for her, her mother is “properly impressed with Mrs. Dawson’s handiwork” (148), but both her mother and her father are far more impressed by the diamond on her engagement ring — what her mother calls the “biggest chunk of ice I ever saw” (148). Arla finally decides to exchange her ostentatious engagement ring for “a decent bed” (155) and in so doing exchanges a conception of her and David as wife and husband for the more egalitarian model of companionship that Mrs. Dawson describes: “Yes, I had a companion once. We were together for forty years, and they were good years, good years” (147). For Arla, the word “companion” itself comes to supplant the ring as the symbol of her future relationship with David: “Companion. That was the word Arla lifted out and turned over and over in her mind, studying it from every angle, like the ring. . . . She found herself taking the word out whenever she started to worry about David and their future together. Companion. It was all a matter of perspective” (147). The perspective embodied by the word is, along with the snowflake doily, Mrs. Dawson’s gift to Arla; together, the word and the snowflake displace the weighty “chunk of ice” and the threatened loss of self that it implies.

Up until this point, I have maintained that Arla does not mature over the course of the sequence. Most of the stories highlight Arla’s failure to learn something from each of the Lodge women. Clearly, this final story problematizes that claim: as Arla walks away from the Lodge, she has learned from Mrs. Dawson’s “stories full of secrets” (146) and she is prepared to assert her own desires and pursue her own happiness. This is less the conclusion of a *Bildungsroman* than it is the beginning of Arla’s development as a person — a development that is projected beyond the close of the sequence. The natural sense of closure that is evoked with the departure of Arla is offset by the open-endedness of what her departure means. Her decision to quit comes abruptly, “quite without warning to herself” (154), and highlights the degree of social privilege and autonomy

she holds compared to the Lodge women. Arla can choose to leave the Lodge but the women — disempowered by ageism, poverty, and sexism — cannot follow her.

Finally, I think Arla's choice to leave the Pine Mountain Lodge behind functions as a kind of *mise en abyme* of how we, as readers, should finally leave *A Sleep Full of Dreams*. Given the difficult subject matter, many readers may have found it relatively easy to put down *A Sleep Full of Dreams* between stories and never return to it. Arla's reasons for staying on at the Lodge are complicated: as much as watching the women dying upsets her, she cannot answer David's question: "If you're so upset about it Arla, why don't you leave?" (21). The question stands as a kind of challenge throughout the text, but it is not until Arla is sure that she is leaving the Lodge on her own terms that she can tender her resignation. Arla finally leaves her job at Pine Mountain Lodge as we leave this narrative of community — this "family of stories" (Kruk 3), as Alford calls it — with a heightened sensitivity toward the women of the Lodge, or others like them. For these stories (and here I find myself in complete agreement with Osachoff) will continue to "resonate in the mind for a long time" (165).

NOTES

¹ McPherson made this claim in the 1965 edition of *Literary History of Canada*, and W.H. New has observed that "When the second edition ... appeared in 1976, these generalizations were excised, and some account was taken of the 1960s activities in the genre" (249-50). For a historical review of the short story's reception in Canadian literature, see the essays by New and Frank Davey listed in my bibliography.

² Although Lynch only gives passing mention to *A Sleep Full of Dreams* in his introduction, he affords Alford a place among the most capable practitioners of the short story cycle form (xiv).

³ If we ascribe value to unity in short story sequences, *A Sleep Full of Dreams* is a disappointment. However, following the work of Robert Kroetch, we have been invited to see narrative disunity as a typically Canadian strategy for resisting totalizing metanarratives of nationhood. In this argument, it follows that disunity, "this very falling-apart of our story is what holds our story together" (21-22). While Kroetch is primarily concerned with how disunity and self-reflexivity function in the postmodern novel and the narrative long poem, I believe we can apply his Bakhtinian model to the short story sequence.

⁴ Alford chose the sequence form because it represents the sense of "compartmentalization" that is central to the stories: "It's there in the form. You will go into one room and then into another room and into another room. It was suggested at some points that I might want to write a novel out of the stories. But I was absolutely determined that it be presented in this form. The form to me was integral to this book" (Twigg 3).

⁵ While many of the narratives of community that Zagarell discusses are sequences of short stories, she uses the term "narrative of community" to define a thematic category. I believe that the use of the terms "short story sequence" as a descriptive definition of the genre and "narrative of community" for its thematic resonance is complimentary.

⁶ Alford notes that her subsequent collection — *The Garden of Eloise Loon* — is based entirely on these associative links. Without this insight, one would likely read her second sequence as a loosely arranged collection, which is to miss the experimental aspect of Alford's writing.

⁷ Here and elsewhere, I have chosen to refer to each of the characters by the name he or she is most frequently called. While choosing "Miss Bole" over "Jessica Bole" runs the risk of recapitulating her status as the subject of an institution and not an individual, I do not feel that distorting this process of subjugation serves a valid purpose.

⁸ I say "often" because there are exceptions; Joyce's "The Dead" represents perhaps the most famous example of a third-person central perspective that does not fix on one character.

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