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Abstract

Face it. The west is male. Masculine. Manly. Virile. Not that it had much choice, the prairie lying there innocent under its buffalo beans, its own endlessness. It did not need designation, being enough, always enough. It posed, still poses, indifferent, for the obsessed camera of art, of fiction. Its indifference has mythified its physical strength, but has contributed to its perversion in the world of Canadian literature; the art that has defined it is masculine and it appears to have defined its art as a masculine one. Name the west's fiction. Grove, Mitchell, Ross, Wiebe, Kroetsch. Laurence of course, not so much an afterthought as an anomaly.

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The impact of landscape on artist or artist on landscape is unavoidable. The two are cellmates, as countless case histories have already established.¹ In landscape, however, the crucial point is the vantage from which the viewer sees the world. One must look at landscape from within landscape. What one sees is determined by position; the scene varies accordingly. There's a hell of a difference between the landscape a person sees standing on a hill and what the same person sees from the bottom of a coulee a few hundred feet away. Position dictates point of view and position's influence has been neglected.

The landscapes that we inhabit inevitably shape us, our vantage determined by the hill on which we stand. I grew up, not on the prairie, but *in* the parkland of Alberta, a vantage both narrow and unlimited. The back quarter of our farm was the highest point for some miles. It didn't seem to be a hill, but it rose gently so that when you reached the fenceline, the whole country was spread beyond you. This would not be important if all you could see was more of the same of where you were, but what becomes important in landscape is contrast, and what I could see from the back of our field was the south end of Dried Meat Lake as it narrowed itself back into being the Battle River. Stone picking in stifling August, the gritty summerfallow mushrooming rocks where the drag of the stoneboat had

already passed, that glacial lake signified escape. When I was discing, the glimmer of that blue water beyond the orange fender of the phlegmatic Massey Harris looked like where I wanted to go. If I had dared to drive the tractor through my father's and then several neighbour's fences, I suppose I would have reached the lake, eventually. It was only six or seven miles away. But would it have looked the same? Experience tells me it was a reedy, sucker-infested lake, good for neither fish nor swimming. It was infinitely more enticing as landscape, not something I was in but beyond. When I stood on its shore, it was nothing much more than water, a different thing altogether. Landscape is technically a stretch of inland natural scenery as seen from a single point. A scape is a scene of land or sea or sky but the archaic meaning of scape is to escape, an escape, or means of escape. Landscape beckons escape; escapade. The prairie cannot escape the image that has been imposed on it. Art shapes place and place shapes art, but here, it is as though the signified is in bondage to the signifier.

Look at the vantage that defined prairie. Name the west. Explorers: David Thompson, Alexander Mackenzie, Peter Pond. As McCourt would say, 'men of action who wrote as they lived, with a strict regard for essentials'.² Missionaries: Lacombe, Rundle, McDougall. Scoured deep lines into prairie soul, cornering the poor benighted heathen in the wilderness. Whiskey traders, mounties, the CPR, settlers; in that order. Writers. Inevitably writers. After realism, history, revolution, rebellion; eulogizing saloons and cemeteries, churches and police barracks. Men. Male vantage, advantage. Rearranging prairie to suit their particular vantage, although Edmund Collins, Torontonian, was the only one who admitted it.

I have, therefore, arranged the geography of the Territories to suit my own conveniences. I speak of places that no one will be able to find upon maps of the present or of the future. Wherever I want a valley or a swamp, I put the same; and I have taken the same liberty with respect to hills or waterfalls. The birds, and in some instances the plants and flowers of the prairies, I have also made to order.³

All arranged to suit the 'conveniences' of the male ego passing through prairie on the way to an ultimate frontier.

In the real west, men are men, and life a stern test of man's real attributes. The fabric of this living breathing landscape has been masculinized in art, descriptive passages of a land instinctively female perceived by a jaundiced male eye. Description, description, and more description, an over-looking. Prudence, caution. They are afraid to enter the landscape. They describe it instead. To get inside a landscape, one needs to

give up vantage, give up the advantage of scene or vision and enter it. To know prairie, one has to stop looking at prairie and dive.

The prairie might have been indifferent but it had an undeniable impact. Grove's essential conflicts between human desire and the stubborn resistance of nature centered on it. So did the patriarchal view of the prairie as 'a clean naked land where a man might make his own way in his own way, rear his family, worship his gods, cherish the customs of his fathers while evading their oppressions, and live in peace with his fellow men'.⁴ Man, man, man. The land was blameless but man dragged his baggage with him. The prairie, in bondage to an image, remained indifferent.

Collins, Connor, Grove, Stead, Ross. Ross tried, in *As For Me and My House*,⁵ tried to enter a woman as a means of entering the prairie, but she is impossibly male and her dilemma is artificially solved, by another woman dying in childbirth. Death seemed the only entrance. After them came the spiritually ambitious. Mitchell: a boy and his dog and death and the prairie. The prairie, indifferent. And Rudy Wiebe:

To touch this land with words requires an architectural structure; to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or a skyscraper over and into space.... You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design.⁶

He begins well, his idea initially right, but the metaphor is male, impossibly male, without entrance. This landscape has been garrisoned by the art that represents it. Man and his straight line — steel, yet — horizontal world cannot contain or even predicate the female curve of prairie, let alone enter it.

Entrance. Perhaps the male writers have all been hoodwinked by Grove:

Somewhere towards the end of my outward drive, to town, I saw a man; and what is more, he was ploughing straight over the crest of a hill to the west, coming, when I caught sight of him, towards my trail. The town which I was approaching lay on the railway, in the dry belt of the country; the general verdict was that the surrounding district was unfit for farming. The mere fact, therefore, that this man was ploughing as he came over the crest of the hill was sufficiently arresting and even startling. Besides, outlined as he was against a tilted and spoked sunset in the western sky, he looked like a giant.⁷

This phallic protuberance not only completely underwrites Ricou's study of man and landscape in Canadian prairie fiction, *Vertical Man, Horizontal*

World,⁸ but has once again imposed image on the prairie. The metaphor, undeniably masculine, of a man like a giant outlined against the sky, once again a black line breaking up space. There is no entrance here, only imposition, juxtaposition, the hammer blow of an extrusive shape.

So where, in this indifferent landscape, are the women? Characters and writers, women too re-arranged. At first, no 'bad' women, but saints and mothers, pillars of strength and towers of ivory. What can a writer do with them? They have to be in the story. But there has always been one ultimate solution. They can die in childbirth; and they do, over and over again. Besides, this event gives the real characters in the story, the men, a tragic past. There are plenty of schoolteachers, an occasional harridan, Mrs Abercrombie in *Who Has Seen the Wind*⁹ as the wicked witch of the west, the hennaed Clara Vogel (who ever after made me think of henna as an obscene sexual word), sisters and mothers the perfect rationale for shooting and killing in the Northwest Rebellion ('we must protect, etc. etc.'). and of course, Judith dying in childbirth in *As For Me and My House*. Symbolic rape everywhere. Lilith figures, stealers of men's sperm in the night, thieves of potency, their place in man's game only one of distraction. Tenders of fowl, too small a task for great heroes; or their kerchiefed heads clustered outside the beer parlour, which by law they are not allowed to enter. Enter.

Where? Where, in this landscape constrained by male vantage, does the woman writer of the prairies enter? In 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: *An Erotics of Space*', Robert Kroetsch claims that 'the basic grammatical pair in the story-line (the energy-line) of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be *on* a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be *in* a house is to be fixed: a centering into stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine.'¹⁰ The essay goes on to fix woman in this inviolable house (that man has of course erected for her) as muse, unapproachable, mysterious, sitting Cassandra-like in the center of man's extrusive structure. The construct is a marvellous one, a perfect excuse for everything. The lady for whom the quest is made; it's for the sake of woman as muse that men commit insanities. It's for the sake of woman as muse that men have made the prairie culturally insane. But muses are static, make nothing. The landscape and its rendering shapes the eye of the viewer. How can we enter fiction if we are fixed as mothers/saints/whores, muses all? Through that indifferent landscape. It is, after all, a curve; despite those black steel lines, an undulation. We can get into it, enter this world, because it belongs to us.

Here we are in the house, this house that the elements of wind and dust will wear down, this male structure. We don our disguises, pull a hat low

over our eyes, and leaving by the back porch, flatten ourselves against the earth. We're spying out the lay of the land, slipping behind poplars, raising our heads carefully over a hill, none of this standing and displaying ourselves against a flaming sun. Keep low, stay down. We have an apron full of alternatives, all of them disguises, surprise weapons. We are beginning to dot this landscape but we can't be seen. Refusing to be silhouettes, we enter the fiction of the prairies. There were others before us who developed strategies. We have a range to choose from, alternatives. Passwords that will enable us to gain access, entrance. Look out.

PASSWORD NO 1: *WASH YOUR NECK*

Of reform and revolution, reform is certainly the most desirable. Revolution says, 'Wash your own shirt'; reform says, 'Wash your neck'. Nellie McClung scouted the territory, dedicated to the causes of women's suffrage and temperance. Writing is always a means to an end, conversion of course. Her stout assertion was: 'I have never worried about my art. I have written as clearly as I could, never idly or dishonestly, and if some of my stories are ... sermons in disguise, my earnest hope is that the disguise did not obscure the sermon.'¹¹ Ironically, her certainty that the intemperance of men would be resolved by women's suffrage was both right and wrong. Those women clustered outside the beer parlour entered it.

PASSWORD NO 2: *KNOCKED UP*

Live in a world of heartless silhouette, enforced control of fertility (the straight furrows of crops over the land), and passion, tilled so narrow, will rebel. Judith Gare in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* does not oppose the earth but binds herself to it; 'here was something forbiddenly beautiful, secret as one's own body'.¹² Her illegitimate pregnancy, with which she leaves her unhappy home, is a response to the winged formation of the wild geese that fly at the beginning and the end of the novel. Escape and entrance. But Ostenso and McClung were early spies. They alone could not shift the image bondage that was already in place. The black, steel lines ignored them, or tried to. There was a long silence and then a curious paradox, a strategy from within.

PASSWORD NO 3: *STAY IN THE HOUSE*

'Stay in the house,' said my mother. 'Don't you go off where I can't find you; peel those potatoes, stay in the house.' Kroetsch's muse, hunched over, peeling spuds, shelling peas, washing eggs, scrub-brushing the linoleum. Hell of a position for a muse. I'd rather be a hoo-er. It took Margaret Laurence to use the house, all of her characters, Hagar and Stacey and Rachel and Vanessa and Morag, caught in the house but using the structure of house to enter fiction, the still-indifferent landscape beyond the house a reverberation of the fiction within. Laurence was the breakthrough spy.

Now there are spies everywhere, inside and out, the ranks furtively but steadily enlarged, the prairie as curve emerging through the eyes of the words of women. We still crouch low, approach the brow of a hill furtively. Nobody knows we're here; we have entered the landscape of the prairies. We don't stick out. Our subterfuge is complicated, unfixable, we snigger in our sleeves while we mouth the old banalities, while we flap our aprons at runaway steers. We have found our own geography of love and fear, and live now within it, burrowed like insistent gophers, no masculine gun can dislodge us all. And we have new passwords.

PASSWORD NO 4: *BREAK OUT*

Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* is not fiction but drama, a re-enactment of Lizzie Borden's breaking out. Not just getting out of the house but getting out of the country, looking at our house from across the border. Lizzie Borden articulates the rebellion against 'stay in the house'.

LIZZIE: I want out of all this ... I hate this house, I hate ... I want out. Try to understand how I feel.... Why can't I do something? ... Eh? I mean ... I could ... I could go into your office.... I could ... learn how to keep books?

MR BORDEN: Lizzie.

LIZZIE: Why can't I do something like that?

MR BORDEN: For god's sake, talk sensible.¹³

When attempts to persuade fail, there are other ways to leave the house. No one is expecting it, they're unprepared.

Lizzie Borden took an ax,
Gave her mother forty whacks,
When the job was nicely done,
She gave her father forty-one!
Forty-one!
Forty-one!¹⁴

Or else, no one believes it possible.

THE DEFENSE: Gentlemen of the Jury!! I ask you to look at the defendent, Miss Lizzie Borden. I ask you to recall the nature of the crime of which she is accused. I ask you — do you believe Miss Lizzie Borden, the youngest daughter of a scion of our community, a recipient of the fullest amenities our society can bestow upon its most fortunate members, do you believe Miss Lizzie Borden capable of wielding the murder weapon — thirty-two blows, gentlemen, thirty-two blows — fracturing Abigail Borden's skull, leaving her bloody and broken body in an upstairs bedroom, then, Miss Borden, with no hint of frenzy, hysteria, or trace of blood upon her person, engages in casual conversation with the maid, Bridget O'Sullivan, while awaiting her father's return home, upon which, after sending Bridget to her attic room, Miss Borden deals thirteen blows to the head of her father, and minutes later — in a state utterly compatible with that of a loving daughter upon discovery of murder most foul — Miss Borden calls for aid! Is this the aid we give her? Accusation of the most heinous and infamous of crimes? Do you believe Miss Lizzie Borden capable of these acts? I can tell you I do not!! I can tell you these acts of violence are acts of madness!! Gentlemen! If this gentlewoman is capable of such an act — I say to you — look to your daughters — if this gentlewoman is capable of such an act, which of us can lie abed at night, hear a step upon the stairs, a rustle in the hall, a creak outside the door.... Which of you can plump your pillow, nudge your wife, close your eyes, and sleep? Gentlemen, Lizzie Borden is not mad. Gentlemen, Lizzie Borden is not guilty.¹⁵

If she is guilty, we are guilty too.

PASSWORD NO 5: *PAY UP*

Women pay. Have always paid. In Betty Lambert's novel *Crossings*, a B.C. novel but Betty Lambert a writer who grew out of the prairie, the main character keeps a running total of what she has paid for everything all her life. Her very escape is characterized by payment:

About three days before I got married, she gave me a bill. An itemized list from the highschool years: Kotex. Lustre Creme. One sanitary belt. One brassiere. All the things she'd had to buy besides food, which the Welfare paid for anyway. I never thought much about the bill, just paid it. Jocelyn got a bill too, when she finished university. And Francie got hers before her wedding. They paid too, without thinking.¹⁶

You pay to escape the house, to enter the landscape. Or you make others pay, as in Lambert's magnificent play, *Jennie's Story*,¹⁷ where Jennie eats lye because she cannot escape and cannot enter the landscape. Eating lye. Why couldn't she have just died quietly, in childbirth? Never. If we have to die, we won't do it quietly.

PASSWORD NO 6: *NURSE THEM*

You breathe a sigh of relief. At last, instead of spies skulking around the prairie planting land mines, a woman we can recognize, a nurse. *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, Edna Alford's collection of short stories about a young nurse, seems to be content to say inside, practicing an art that women should practice, taking care of the sick. But Arla does not nurse war heroes and prospective bridegrooms, but old women chained to wheelchairs and hoyer and canes, waiting for the ultimate escape of death. They have fought for suffrage, they have been knocked up, they have paid, and rather than being a living example of 'stay in the house', they force Arla to look out of the window, to spy out escape routes, to masturbate the future. She is nursing her own nursing, she will escape not intact but more knowledgeable, with more tools to enter the landscape. She quits the nursing job having achieved knowledge. 'On the street she found herself singing the Tennessee Waltz, almost out loud. 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.'¹⁸ A spy released from the house, entering that indifferent landscape with the arsenal of presence.

PASSWORD NO 7: *MYTHOLOGIZE MEN*

There are ways, like nursing and staying in the house, of reflexive subterfuge. Mythologize the same men who have muse-mythologized women, make a new mythology of them. This is a spy's hidden dagger. However well-intentioned we may be, as is chronicled in Atwood's essay, 'Writing the Male Character',¹⁹ we are, by turning the tables and making men our muses, playing a dirty trick. It never turns out the way it's supposed to. I've done it myself, using my character J.L. from *The Tent Peg*.

I have sometimes thought that I should make a list of all the men who have made love to me, who have laboured over me in some predestined effort to arouse beyond all others. Although I could make a list of details, I could never range their faces side by side. There is no clear face, only shapes of faces that transform themselves to shadows when I peer more closely.

I do remember certain parts. No, not their cocks, although I have stared at enough in an effort to understand the male scepter. It is their feet that never fail to amaze me, their feet that I remember. Hardly an object of erotic interest and yet as much a signature of the man as his name. If I feel a spark of tenderness for a man, it will be because of his feet. The variety is endless; narrow fragile feet, quick intelligent feet, neat meticulous feet, kicking furious feet, mathematical thoughtful feet, smooth feet and feet with toes that carry tufts of hair, bogey-man feet, careless laughing feet, graph and slide rule feet, Bible-thumping feet, paper and pencil feet, suffering victim feet, logic philosophy feet, telephone directory feet, executive washroom feet, achieving immigrant feet, proud assuming feet, feet that wear brogues and sandals and ski boots and oxfords and tennis shoes and grips and hiking boots.

Some of them even tried to make love to me without taking off their socks.... I can tell how the cocks will perform by the feet. A man who will not let you touch his feet is afraid of women.²⁰

There are other reflexive subterfuges. Our furtive becoming has found a training ground in every old imposition, turned them into new emergence, mergence an entrance into prairie landscape. We can dance, we can plead illness (I have a headache from that colossal joke you've made of the prairie), we can marry the muse, or his feet, we can even, in spite, die in childbirth, leaving the extrusive hero with a tragic past but no one to look after him and a colicky baby for him to look after.

ONE FINAL PASSWORD: *EXPLODE*

In her little known but extraordinary novel, *The True Story of Ida Johnson*, Sharon Riis lays out for us the ultimate way to enter the prairie. Destroy the house. Ida is a waitress in Longview, a village on the edge of landscape, between prairie and mountain. She married because she had to, fourteen years old. But she refuses the myth, refuses to die in childbirth; instead, not even bothering to be furtive, she leaves the house and sinks into the landscape.

I couldn't get to sleep. I kept thinking dear Ida dear Ida dear Ida like an old crazy stuck record. And the wind goddamned wind Alberta wind blowing cans around the incinerator and a door somewhere banging like a song. There was no moon. I went outside thinking I heard someone call. Well, I don't know what with that wind. Still, somebody calling me. Ida. Ida. Like a whisper so it's stupid to think. In all that wind

who could hear a whisper? I thought it was Lucy. The black scared me and the wind and the sounds I couldn't see. Then suddenly everything still and clear, fear lifting like a fog. I went inside for the break knife and put it back for the meat cleaver. I killed him first. Quick. Not a sound. A clean clean perfect clean slice down through the throat past the throat through the neck not quite through. Clean. And his blood so red and thick I didn't know. I kissed him. Blood thick in my mouth and my nose, in my hair. Thick and red and good. The babies. Clean quick slice slice like a butcher. I'm a butcher. Everything red and clear as a bell. I turned the gas on. I had a shower and set my hair. I did a manicure under the dryer. Clean nightgown white and crisp and cool. Derek's coat, matches and a pack of Players in the pocket. Outside. I lit a smoke and threw it in the door. The sky was red and clear as a bell.²¹

You may feel that my spies, both writer and character, are violent, unredemptive. Only remember that they are spies, spies in an indifferent landscape up until now defined by other eyes. The male west has to be earth-quaked a little, those black steel lines and the looming giant toppled. Not destroyed, oh no, but infiltrated. I have a counterpart to Grove's arresting plowman.

It is winter in Alberta. It is twenty below. There is a house, that famous house, leaning into howling snow. There is nothing around the house, no trees, it stands alone, withstanding, the landscape surround undulating away in waves of snow. You cannot enter this landscape. It is certainly impossible, frozen as it is. There is one extrusion behind the house, a clothesline, its three t-d poles crucified against the whiteout sky. The sheets pegged on the line do not flap. They are frozen, caught in billow. A woman, muffled in clothes, her head covered, comes out of the house. She advances to the clothesline and with some clumsiness because of her gloved fingers, breaks the pins away from the stiffened cloth. The sheets are like sails, like sheets of plywood, the woman cannot fold them or drape them over her arm, she must somehow stack them rigid and unwieldy against the side of her body. When she turns from the clothesline, the crackling sheets surround her, seem to be moving her in a stiff, sailing advance. The sheets are white, the snow is white, the cloth rigging obscures the woman's green parka. She should be taking them into the house, to thaw them, to iron them, to cover mattresses so that sleep will smell of snow and winter perfume. The disguised sheeted woman moves through the snow, she is surrounded by sheet and snow, she has no outline, she is dwindling into the white with her sheets, vanishing into the storm's curve, you should see her against the black square of the house door she will fumble open, you wait but it never opens and that blurred figure vanishes into the curve of the cool, sweet-smelling, clean-sheeted, indifferent prairie.

NOTES

1. See especially Edward A. McCourt, *The Canadian West in Fiction*, Revised (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1970) and Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man, Horizontal World* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1973).
2. McCourt, p. 9.
3. Edmund Collins, *Annette the Metis Spy* (Toronto: Rose Publishing Co., 1886), p. 142.
4. McCourt, p. 70.
5. Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, New Canadian Library, 1968).
6. Rudy Wiebe, 'Passage by Land' in *The Narrative Voice*, ed. John Metclaf (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 259.
7. Frederick Phillip Grove, *In Search of Myself* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1946), p. 259.
8. Laurence Ricou, op. cit.
9. W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind?* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1947).
10. Robert Kroetsch, 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space' in *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1979), p. 76.
11. Nellie McClung, *The Stream Runs Fast* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1945), p. 69.
12. Martha Ostenso, *Wild Geese* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1925), p. 67.
13. Sharon Pollock, *Blood Relations* (Edmonton: Newest Press, 1981), p. 40.
14. Pollock, p. 68.
15. Pollock, p. 36.
16. Betty Lambert, *Crossings* (Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1979), p. 68.
17. Betty Lambert, *Jennie's Story* (Toronto: Playwright's Co-op).
18. Edna Alford, *A Sleep Full of Dreams* (Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan, 1981), p. 155.
19. Margaret Atwood, 'Writing the Male Character' in *Second Words* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), pp. 412-30.
20. Aritha van Herk, *The Tent Peg* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981), p. 149.
21. Sharon Riis, *The True Story of Ida Johnson* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976), p. 60.