

# LITERARY LANDSCAPING

## A Symposium on Prairie Landscape Memory and Literary Tradition

The following forum involved participants in *Writing Saskatchewan*, a literary symposium held from June 18-21, 1987 in Fort San, Saskatchewan. The conversation took place over two days and was taped in Wood Mountain Lodge at the Echo Valley Centre. Robert Enright, the editor of *Border Crossings*, was the moderator.

### LORNA CROZIER

is a poet who was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. She is the author of several books of poetry, including *Crow's Black Joy* (NeWest, 1978), *Humans & Other Beasts* (Turnstone, 1980), *The Weather* (Coteau Books, 1983) and *The Garden Going On without Us* (McClelland & Stewart, 1985). She also co-wrote a collection of poems with Patrick Lane, called *No Longer Two People* (Turnstone, 1979). She has been nominated for the Governor General's Award for Poetry and is the recipient of a Saskatchewan Department of Culture and Youth Poetry Award. Lorna Crozier lives in Saskatoon and teaches at the University of Saskatchewan.

### PATRICK LANE

who received the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1978, is the author of 16 books of poetry, including *Albino Pheasants* (Harbour Publishing, 1979), *Old Mother* (Oxford, 1982) and *A Linen Crow, A Caftan Maggie* (Thistle-down, 1984). He is one of Canada's most respected poets. Born in Nelson, British Columbia, he has lived in Saskatchewan for the last eight years, most recently in Saskatoon where he teaches at the University of Saskatchewan. Currently, Patrick Lane is completing a volume of selected poetry for Oxford University Press, which will be published simultaneously in Quebec.

### FRED WAH

has published 11 books of poetry, including *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, for which he received the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1985. He was a founding member of the literary magazine, *Tish*, in the 1960s and is today a contributing editor to *Open Letter*. He is also the managing editor of *Swift Current*, Canada's first electronic literary magazine. Fred Wah has taught writing at the David Thompson University Centre and currently teaches in the Applied Writing program at Selkirk College and at the Kootenay School of Writing in Nelson and Vancouver.

### DAVID WILLIAMS

is the author of the Lacjardin trilogy of novels, *The Burning Wood* (1975), *The River Horseman* (1981) and *Eye of the Father* (1985), all of which were published by Anansi Press in Toronto. He has also written a critical book called *Faulkner's Women: The Myth and the Muse*, as well as numerous articles. Born in Souris, Manitoba and raised near Lac Vert, Saskatchewan, David Williams also earned a Pastor's Diploma from Briarcrest Bible Institute. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts and has taught in the English Department at the University of Manitoba since 1972.

BC: I want to get from all of you your first memories of landscape.

LANE: I'd like to hear what Fred would say, because he lived in the prairies and then left at a crucial age and never really came back. I want to know if this place was formative for you.

WAH: I have always been concerned with landscape and place. Then, for many years in British Columbia, I got hooked into notions about the spirit of place. But I more or less came to the prairies for myself in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*; the title poem wasn't intended as a title poem for the book, it just emerged as a response to the landscape thing. I was carrying this landscape around almost subconsciously, sort of over my left shoulder. And I have the feeling that it still owes me. I even say in the title poem that the landscape owes me, it owes me an imprint of itself.

BC: When Ed Dyck writes in his introduction to *Essays on Saskatchewan Writing* that there is an extra-literary dimension to "prairie," is that what he is talking about? That the space is so powerful that you can't avoid ingesting it?

LANE: I've written poems about the prairie and have used the prairie experience because my parents came from Alberta and I grew up there. My people were prairie people before they were B.C. people, and while I'd like to think I carry around a history of the place in some kind of generative way, I don't really think that's the case. The landscape over my left shoulder is the southern interior of B.C. which I can't leave. Even when I write poems about the prairie, I am carrying the load of the interior landscape. What I found the two places have in common when I came here was that both were inhabited by people similar to the ones that I grew up with, people who were mixed farmers and loggers in the southern interior of British Columbia. Their small-town world was precisely the same as the small-town world of the prairie.

CROZIER: What I noticed when I edited this new anthology of Saskatchewan poetry, which starts with Newlove and then works its way up to the present, is how much people felt at home in this landscape. I guess I'd always known that because I have always read widely in prairie literature, but until I encountered this huge swatch of almost 200 books, I hadn't been so conscious of it. We grew up with descriptions of this place telling us it was hostile, forbidding and that people were uncomfortable here. It was an impression created by a number of things: the early fiction, by explorers, by the Depression and by poets who simply passed through the prairies, like Peter Stevens. He wrote a poem called "Prairie Negative," in which each of the stanzas begins with a negative; no gulls here, no trees here, no shore here. I saw the poem again in Ricou's anthology, *12 Prairie Poets*, and I said, bullshit. What do you mean, no gulls here? They're behind every bloody tractor in the country and in the city they're in every A & W bin, picking over old hamburger buns. What do you mean, no trees here? He's talking about one very small strip in Saskatchewan that doesn't have trees. No shore here; you've got the goddamn Saskatchewan River going through the city where he taught for I don't know how many years. That kind of negative description has hung over us for so long that we almost bought it. But I realized, when I surveyed prairie poetry and when I looked at my own stuff, it was obvious that we have found this place to be beautiful. Newlove's got the line about driving out of the cities and recognizing how beautifully the prairie

fits the human, and that became a running theme throughout the anthology. Sure, there's loneliness and desperation here, like there is everywhere in the world, but there is more a sense of the poets' feeling at home in this place, which I found quite wonderful.

WILLIAMS: I was accidentally born in Souris because my folks were still in the Airforce. I was six weeks old when we went home, to where my father and mother both grew up, south of Melfort. I love that landscape; it's hill country first, then bush country, then solid bush country. It was carved out and everything was logged. It's also lake country. We lived on top of a high hill with the lake to the north of us, and another lake and the town across the other way. I feel profoundly in love with that home country. I can remember combining on that northern quarter, up on that hill looking down over those lakes and that town, and lying down on that earth and seeing it with really authentic eyes. It is a real place but the impression I had then was Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey with a sense of elevated thoughts. I was only 16, right. Later, when I first read Faulkner, with his red hill country and crop-sharers, while it wasn't my country, at least I learned you could make your own country out of it, you could record it, you could make it real. Later, when we had to go down onto the plains around Moose Jaw, how I hated that country. It was the nakedness, it was the terrible sense of exposure. A few years ago we were driving back from Dinosaur Provincial Park and I just had to go through Abbey and Lancer where Sinclair Ross was living, the place where *As For Me and My House* was really set. Even with all the dust storms and the wind coming up off the great sandhill, I still loved that landscape because the book had given it to me and made it home. Later, when I was going to Norway for the first time on the track of certain devilish ancestors, I found out why they had left North Dakota and those plains. It was to go up into that lake and bush country. That's probably why my great-grandfather suddenly sensed his home on the south shore of Lake Kipabiskau between Melfort and Tisdale. So it's not surprising that I hadn't been able to write about Manitoba all these years, until suddenly I realized that the novel I am working on begins in a landscape, Victoria Beach, which is bush and lake. Because that old love won't go away, I'm now able to begin connecting the two places.

BC: It is interesting that when all of you talk about the landscape, you talk about it both through remembrance and through the experience of having encountered it in literature as well.

LANE: When I came to the prairies I had two physical perceptions that I had not known before, and both of them occurred here in the Qu'Appelle Valley. One was that you can see the lightning and not hear the thunder. This was an astounding piece of knowledge to me because you can see so far. I got really intrigued and then disturbed by this. I finally found out that you can see 21 miles before the curvature of the earth takes away the object. You can see lightning from 50 miles away, but you don't hear anything. Now, growing up in mountain country, the experience was different; if you could see the storm, you could hear it. The other perception I had was that prairie people go downhill to get enlightenment. In every other part of the world, people climb mountains to get enlightenment. But on the prairie they go down into little valleys because, in a sense, they already live in the highest available perceptual space. They live on the tops of mountains, so they spend most of their life going straight

downhill. Before I came here, Lorna would say how wonderful it was on the prairies and then the first thing she'd do is take me into a coulee. Down we'd go and I'd say, "This isn't the prairie, this is the bottom of the mountain."

BC.: Let's talk about theories of landscape and psychology. Even though the kind of dialectic that Laurie Ricou sets up in *Vertical Man, Horizontal World* is a bit too tidy, it is part of the intellectual baggage we carry with us. Is it one way of describing our relationship to prairie space?

WAH: I think it's an imposed intellectualization. I haven't noticed the vertical/horizontal thing in the writing of my contemporaries on the prairies, just as I haven't noticed Atwood's survival thesis to be generally true for western Canada. My sense of landscape comes from two things. From landscape, one gains particularities that are almost indefinable in the writing. They're too general to talk about in literature because they're on the tips of our fingers. You know, the feel of a frozen pond on the prairies will be with me all my life. I can describe it in a poem or something, but that doesn't get rid of it. The actual physical presence of it is going to be with me all my life. I think we all have these particularities of place. So I am interested in what Pat said about formative years, because that's the thing we carry with us. The other thing that we have, and this is perhaps more literary or intellectual, is the notion of landscape as *landschaft*, the German notion of landscape as all you can comprehend in a single view. If you have any sense of the prairies, either from living here, or from coming here, then that notion gains a really powerful possibility.

CROZIER: I want to go back to what you said earlier about the body being involved in your writing and in your knowledge of place. I think for me what is so significant about this landscape is something as simple as the light, the feel of it on my skin and the feeling of knowing that I'm home. When we got off the plane from Chile and I stepped into that Saskatoon light, it was like a huge mother had opened her arms to me. I felt this incredible release. I was talking to Joe Fafard about this one time after having seen my first real van Gogh—it was *The Bridge at Arles*—and I said the way that he captured light reminded me of Saskatchewan and Joe said, exactly. That's one of the main reasons why we stay here and both of us recognized that.

WAH: That's fascinating. Today at lunch Anne Szumigalski said that one of the most important things about living here, as opposed to living in Britain, is the winter light. She said she couldn't live in Britain now because of her need to see winter light coming off the snow.

BC.: Well, has that provoked a kind of radiant poetry or radiant fiction? How do you then make art out of that response to the particular qualities of this landscape?

CROZIER: It does sound silly, but I really do think it is illuminating in both literal and metaphoric terms.

WAH: But I think it's more subtle. You have that sense of light and you take it to language. You see, you come as a sensory, organic being to language. If you're European, if you grew up on the shores of the Mediterranean, then you bring that experience to language.

LANE: It may be significant that the short story and the poem have been dominant forms in prairie writing. Post-war Canadians, by and large, have concentrated on spare forms. Maybe the novel is written less here than today's discussion

called the "linked" short story, because of a seasonal response to the landscape and to the inclement environment in which we live. You have to make spare statements because you don't have a lot of time to make any statement. We may be biologically responding to place by making the forms that suit the environment.

BC.: Rudy Wiebe would agree with you in one sense by saying that you can only capture this space by laying down "great steel lines of fiction." He accepts the connection between space and literary form, but he says we should go for the big statement, not the truncated one. David, you've written a trilogy of novels. Has the landscape informed your writing in any way, or directly affected its form?

WILLIAMS: Well, before I wrote *The River Horseman* I had to canoe up the Saskatchewan River. That was a mind-blowing experience in a lot of ways because you had a sense that you were re-entering all that history. It's the people who've lived here who have been important for me. I remember the same thing with *The Burning Wood*, the sense of the importance of the Cree Sun Dance, of the centre lodge pole. I have a totally different attitude to trees than lots of prairie people. I had a cousin who absolutely hated trees, as did his dad, because they were still clearing land and picking roots. Here I was romanticizing the trees because they represented another religion to me, another world view. The existence of another mythology meant there were multiple interpretations of this place. The same thing happened in trying to rewrite the Norse myths in another book. Goddamn if my grandmother didn't get born near Valhalla, North Dakota. A name like that is a perfect accident. The Metis called it St. Joseph; the Norwegians moved in and said, no, this is Valhalla. So North Dakota was a dead place for me until I suddenly read the *Volsunga Saga* and found out that the story kept happening. Sigurd really did ride through to bring a fire to Brunhilde and for me, all that happened in bloody Saskatchewan. So the place became a home territory as well as a mythic territory, and it didn't have to be bounded by any particular local attitude.

BC.: The recognition of that mythic dimension comes out of other literatures. Would you have come to that on your own without having read a great deal?

WILLIAMS: No, of course not. As I said, the discovery came with reading the *Volsunga Saga* and recognizing that it happened here, too, in this space.

LANE: But there's another side to this question of the inherited languages, stories and attitudes that we bring to place. When people from the West came out to the Okanagan Valley to retire, the first thing they did was to cut all the trees down. They went out there with saws and cut everything down so they could see, so they could have light and space around them. What they found disturbed them deeply. It was very, very important to them to make a landscape that was identical to the one they had just left. This ignores the fact that, as Anne Szumigalski said, two-thirds of this province is covered with trees. But we have also malformed this place to turn it into where we had come from. And we continue to do that. In attempting to make this place into a memory system that could incorporate the Indian, John Newlove does precisely the opposite. "The Pride" is one of our great poems and it's also one of our most racist poems, in that it imposes upon the environment and the people who inhabit it a European sensibility and a European way of looking at land.

WILLIAMS: That's the danger, Patrick. But the other side of the story is that at some point you discover that the inherited language and the inherited myths don't fit the landscape. Suddenly the landscape forces you to revise. You have to destroy the old story and release all the energy that's been hidden. My greatest frustration in trying to write through this particular myth was that Wagner had closed off the story. It couldn't be written anymore, it was the end of the world. And yet the complete openness of the world here allowed ways to open the myth. I'm just saying that the influence of landscape upon mythology is precisely that un-naming, or that deconstruction of an old world view of things. You suddenly rediscover those myths, the hidden faces, the unknown side of those stories, and in the process they are made new again.

BC: This isn't a problem peculiar to writing. The central dilemma for visual artists has been to find the language which makes sense of the space they live in. I mean, old notions of landscape depiction don't work here. None of the conventions work. Trying to use 19th-century English watercolour techniques when you're looking out at that flat prairie landscape is an invitation to madness.

LANE: Critical conventions don't cut it, either. Fred, you're right in saying that Atwood's survival thesis doesn't work here. Out in the west, a much better word would be endurance. Perseverance and endurance.

WILLIAMS: I think of the Faulknerian ring of endurance.

LANE: I think our perception of things in the west is very similar to the perception in the American south.

CROZIER: That's why American southern literature is so important to the west. That's part of the influence on prairie short-story writers.

WILLIAMS: We've got the same sense of family, of genealogy, of the rural influence.

LANE: The hatred of a central form of government imposing its will upon us.

WILLIAMS: It's also the bible belt with a refined populist sense, more than one of landed aristocracy.

CROZIER: And we share racism as well. Saskatchewan has one of the biggest native populations on a per capita basis in all of Canada, so racism is very much a part of this fabric.

WAH: I want to get back to the thing about the language the artist uses to try to deal with the landscape. When I went back to B.C. after living in the States during graduate school, I started dealing with the mountains there. I was very concerned with trying to find the language which would deal with that landscape. It led me to translate those interior lake Salish texts and to the pictograms. I was looking for words, for syntax, for something that would let my body deal with language.

LANE: And you went to an absurd reduction, you went to a picture on a stone and said, this is where I have to start.

WAH: Right, the most legitimate accounting of the landscape that I could come up with was Indian pictographs.

BC: Writing on landscape, interestingly enough, is about as literal as you can get.

WILLIAMS: Something that Fred said earlier is really crucial to me. You mentioned a travel narrative—William Bartram in

Florida—as a crucial example of how not to respond to place and I think you're quite right. But look at a positive example like Washington Irving, this pseudo-British gentleman living in the Hotel Savoy, who takes a tour of the prairies and publishes in 1835 his best book. And the reason I think he wrote such a brilliant book was that he went to a mentor. He goes to a Metis. It's a French-Canadian Metis who is telling him the names of things and it revolutionizes his vision. He falls in love with the open sky and with the landscape, and he tries to learn the names. A basic elemental thing about our prairie is that so many of our place names are not European: Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Winnipeg. One of the big reasons we're such a *joke* in Toronto or elsewhere is because of our funny names.

LANE: We not only chose English names, we also chose names like Climax or Forget.

CROZIER: Imagine a town called "Pense," Saskatchewan. Thought, Saskatchewan. It's interesting how you take things you grew up with for granted. When we were in Chile little biographies were sent around and mine said Lorna Crozier was born in Saskatchewan. Almost the first question people would ask me after the reading was, "How do you say the place you're from?" And I would tell them. Then I'd say, "Now try Saskatoon, Saskatchewan," and they were so thrilled with the sound. It was a sound that had never entered their ears before. And it's beautiful, the cadence of Saskatoon, Sask-at-che-wan. It's a found poem, right?

WAH: I'm intrigued by this question of place and nurturing. I'm somewhat alienated from my formative landscape, but Lorna and David, you two aren't. You've been nurtured in it and have continued to write in it. I wonder what subtle things that you deal with in language come from that? I get a much different feeling, say, when Lorna Crozier writes about the weather in Saskatchewan than I do when anyone else writes about it.

LANE: When I read *Waiting for Saskatchewan*, I felt an emotional explosion which is one of the exciting things about the book. There is a kind of ecstasy there, a release inside the poems. Reading your previous books, I didn't feel the same kind of release. I felt different forms of ecstasy—intellectual or aesthetic. But in the Saskatchewan book it's emotionally and physically unprecedented. And it's not a confessional mode I'm talking about here. It's a sudden embracing, a re-landscaping of place.

CROZIER: And there's a moving out, there's more of a moving out than looking in.

WAH: Well, it was a very emotional, highly personal release and I couldn't have had it, curiously enough, without having come back to the prairies.

LANE: In the poems your words have got physical sensations built into them.

WAH: I don't know how they came out with the physical thing built into them, but that's what I'm saying. I think that we bring to language from our experience something that is indefinable.

WILLIAMS: Fred, you've got echoes of Chinese and Swedish behind that language. I've got echoes of Norwegian and German behind mine and some Ukrainian. I wonder what pressures the ethnic languages bring to bear on the English you write.

WAH: My grandparents spoke Swedish, and my father and his parents spoke Chinese. I had to go to Chinese school for a little bit and I think it's made me an awkward speaker. I've always felt awkward about English. I felt that I would never be a good English speaker because my father and my Swedish grandparents felt that. They were always embarrassed about their English and my father was always embarrassed about his English. So I felt embarrassed about mine, too. I thought, "Well, of course, it's because I'm a half breed." So I've embraced an English which is strange, weird, deconstructed, non-syntactic. I've embraced a more highly personal, jazz-oriented kind of language.

CROZIER: One thing we haven't talked about is the sound of landscape. The prairies and the ocean are definitely noisy landscapes. I mean, here the wind is always in your ears. I remember reading about high-frequency therapy where you listen only to high sounds, which supposedly release you from stress, make you more creative and so on. I had a discussion with Caroline Heath about this once. We were trying to figure out why there's been so much good writing in Saskatchewan, particularly good poetry, and we finally concluded that it may be something as simple as the fact that we all have the wind in our ears. I don't mean using wind as a word or an image in the poem. But that the wind inside our heads actually produces a rhythm. We need a psycho-linguist to look at what this is doing and no one has done that yet. But I keep coming back to Rudy Wiebe's wonderful line, "Where is the voice coming from?" I think that's the question we're all looking to find the answer to.

WILLIAMS: "Who has heard the wind?"

CROZIER: Actually, "Who has heard the wind?" is a better question than "Who has seen the wind?" That takes us to Steiner's whole thing that where poetry ends, light begins.

LANE: I've walked down the streets of Regina and about twice a year the wind stops. I'm talking about an actual physical sensation. When it happens, everyone stops walking and they all look around and say, "What's missing?" I'm not making a joke here, I have observed this phenomenon. Everybody stops walking because they don't know how to anymore. In the mountains you don't get wind, so your world is built upon silence. The prairie is built upon constant sound. The wind is always making noise and it drives me crazy. I mean, I build fences, I build boxes and they're hiding places from sound, not from the movement of air.

CROZIER: It's funny how we think of the place we live in, how we deal with its space. When we lived in Regina, my dentist had his office on the seventh floor of a downtown building and he had windows on three sides. I could see the end of the city and the prairies from any one of them. It was wonderful. I thought, "I'm in the middle of Saskatchewan's second largest city and I can see where it stops in three directions." From that height Regina looks like a monopoly board, hotels and houses, right? It always amazes me whenever I drive into it because it's a surreal city, suddenly it just pops up for no good reason. You always feel like you're driving across the moon and then you come upon a space station.

WILLIAMS: That's why the city disappears in Geoff Ursell's novel, *Perdue*, it just vanishes in that blaze of light. You come out of that potash mine and it ain't there.

BC: What about the question of the kind of people the prairie

produces, what about their emotional make-up? There's a strong suggestion that characters in prairie novels—from Sinclair Ross to Margaret Laurence—suffer from acute emotional reticence. The suggestion seems to be that this economy is determined by the sparseness of the prairie geography. Now is that a literary convention or is it an accurate reflection of the way in which westerners have been shaped by the space around them?

WILLIAMS: You named two Scots. Seriously, I think the question of voice has changed very much as we've been influenced by multicultural voices. We don't have to be laconic, clipped, hidden and repressed any more.

CROZIER: I don't think prairie people are withholding. I do think character is determined by space, but I don't think we've discovered yet what we've become because of space.

BC: A poet like Anne Szumigalski has said that rather than finding the prairies and its inhabitants spare and dull, she found evidence of intense community and intriguing characters.

CROZIER: And story and rapping, the whole Kroetschian thing of bartalk. When we were first living in Winnipeg, and Cooley and you were there, all of us from Saskatchewan, Patrick couldn't believe how fast we talked and how we were constantly interrupting one another. We're not very good examples of the prairie laconic. Where are all these silent, steadfast prairie people? I've never met them.

BC: Well, they're in the novels of Robert Stead and Martha Ostenso.

CROZIER: No, I mean, where are they in the real world? Outside of the literature, where are those people?

BC: You know, what's interesting about this conversation is that at every turn it has gravitated towards the way in which people inhabit the prairies. What about the connection between space and character? Has there emerged out of our fiction and poetry a kind of character unique to the geography we occupy?

WILLIAMS: I would go to hockey as the most obvious analogy, in that we raise characters who have defeated all the elements. There's no such thing as the progressive insanities of the pioneer in this country, unless you call playing hockey the way we do, insane. But there is a testiness of character, a strength and a kind of endurance that will defeat any obstacle. There's every reason to see why the NHL keeps drawing players from Saskatchewan and Alberta.

BC: That's Wallace Stegner's notion in the epigraph to *Wolf Willow*, isn't it? This is a land to mark the sparrow's fall.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, but we can go back to a point Fred has made, the observation that we don't have nouns in our landscape. What he was really discovering is that we have verbs of landscape. I think Stegner got it all wrong when he said that eternity is a peneplain, because eternity is where nothing happens. Everything is frozen. And, like Yeats, we all want to get out of such a sucking place. The prairies are a dynamic place, a verbal place, a place where people's strengths are always being tested. So this story of failure and victimization is one of the most deeply false stories we have.

BC: Its dynamism is apparent in other ways as well. I'm thinking of a poet like Andrew Suknaski, who uses a polyphony of voices and what seems to be a vast and willfully disconnected range of intellectual influences.

WAH: I think Suknaski's fragments aren't so much evidence of a general breakdown, but they're the fragments that rise to the surface in an ongoing journey. Even his logic is becoming fragmented and that comes out of the intensity with which he's lived his life and made his work.

BC: There's the opposite response, too, isn't there? Think about R. F. Rashley, a poet who emphasized the significant fragment out of a lean and minimal sensibility. His understanding of prairie space as it emerges in *Rock Painter* is as valid and moving a description of how we live here as any offered by Suknaski or Newlove.

CROZIER: Yeah. One of the things I discovered in editing the anthology was that people often dealt with the space here by focussing on the smallest thing. So Rashley summarizes all of Indian history out of his discovery of a chokecherry pit in the fire.

BC: The anthropology of the miniature, a reduced archaeology?

CROZIER: Yes, and the number of miniatures in Saskatchewan poetry, for example, is overwhelming. I was surprised when I read through the work. But there's another kind of presence here that I'm more aware of now, a presence that has more to do with animal husbandry than archaeology. I think part of the spirituality of this landscape comes from the creatures that inhabit the natural world. I know I'm running the risk of sounding Thoreauvian, but I'll say this anyway. Perhaps because there aren't a lot of trees in the part of Saskatchewan I came from, you really do see the creatures when you get out of the city. You go for a walk, and you see gophers and shrews and coyotes and foxes and deer. When you drove between Swift Current and Maple Creek you were almost guaranteed to see a herd of antelope. In the middle of winter you'd see 150 drawn together near the road. So besides Wiebe's questions asking, "Where is the voice coming from?", the other question that turns around in my head again and again belongs to John Berger: "What does it mean when an animal looks at you?" I think there really is something profound that happens when an animal looks at you. And for me the spirit of this place—this may be another miniaturization—is focussed when I meet a fox on the trail and he stops to look at me as I look at him.

LANE: We locate the human and the animal within the word landscape...

CROZIER: Yeah. Bronwen Wallace, the poet from Kingston, was in town the other day and we had an afternoon together. I didn't take her to the Mendel Art Gallery where there was an interesting show; I didn't take her to any other galleries, either. I took her to the dam to see the white pelicans.

LANE: And there's something beyond that. We're conscious of there being an imaginative life inside a rock or a stone. We don't fully know why we pick up rocks on a beach and put them in our pockets to carry home, but I think we do it because we sense rocks are holy.

WILLIAMS: That's the other difference between prairie people and mountain people. Those who go up onto hill tops are all transcendentalists. We happen to believe in an immanent theology, it's all here and now. If it ain't here, it ain't nowhere.

LANE: That's not true. As a matter of fact, the interior of B.C. was full of this same sort of consciousness.

CROZIER: I want to say something before I forget about this whole idea of the formative first place, which Eli Mandel

talks about so wonderfully. I think it's in his essay called "Writing West." Wherever Patrick goes, it's the first place. Like China. I got postcards from China saying, "Lorna, this is exactly like the Okanagan." When we were in France, Patrick turned to me and said, "Lorna, this is exactly like the Okanagan." In the mountains of Chile, I was so thrilled that I said to Patrick, "We should take stones home from the Andes," and he said, "No, Lorna, these are just the Rocky Mountains, only further south."

LANE: I said it's the same in British Columbia. I said we can pick up rocks this summer when we drive out to see the kids.

BC: Is the prairie a landscape which breeds a special kind of spirituality? What are you talking about when you refer to immanence, when you make reference to some sudden realization of the value of place? You're talking not necessarily like theologians, but certainly like devotees.

WAH: I think it's important to go to the Native voices, because they are our precursors here and they have something to say. It's necessary for me to investigate the Native voices and not appropriate them, and that's a difficult juggling act sometimes. But I feel that there is a spirit of place and certainly a spirit of landscape, and in British Columbia, revealing that to myself has been my most important concern as a poet. As far as Saskatchewan goes, that thing on my left shoulder is one of the angers I have to shake loose from. I'm not talking religiously, but certainly spiritually. It's a deep feeling and I'm just trying to shake it loose so that it will reveal itself to me. I don't know where to go but I do know I can't go to either my Swedish or my Chinese ancestors, because they came with their own baggage and I don't want that.

LANE: You know, when we talk about landscape, and the psychological and spiritual reactions we have to it, we forget a central thing: that our landscape is urban and citified now and we only make forays into that old pastoral space. When we drive out of Regina, suddenly we invoke the natural order of things.

WAH: But you don't want to go and live with the fucking pelicans that Lorna took you to see. You carry them around and they become the baggage. Those little things are the key, you know, the piece of grass, the wind, that touch of bark, that stone.

LANE: The buffalo stone which Lorna took me up to see.

WAH: Those pile up, they become the baggage. I mean, it's image-making.

LANE: Look at Joe Fafard. Joe Fafard makes a landscape out of cows.

WILLIAMS: Out of clay.

LANE: Okay, out of clay. He makes a landscape out of clay that he makes into cows, and then he covers them with ceramic colours. But one of the dilemmas that Joe has always faced is that he cannot surround his cows with landscape. The cow itself is the landscape. This drove him crazy. Joe is a man who gave up painting at a crucial point in his life and turned to ceramic art as a way of expressing himself. A few years ago he returned to painting, something he hadn't done since art school. And what he tried to paint were landscapes. He looked at these paintings for about three or four months, looked at them from all kinds of angles. They were beautiful paintings, but he realized there was something missing. Finally, he picked up his brush and put a cow into the middle

of the landscape. So the first painting had a little cow in it. The next painting had a bigger cow. He told me about how he painted them. We were looking at the back of one cow where a bit of white came over and it looked like Florida, or something like that. And he said, "I was painting North America, I was painting a map of North America. I just left out Canada. Canada's on the back of the cow, the other side of the cow." And then he stopped painting and went back to ceramics. He was revitalized and he could again make sculptures. But his perception of landscape was wonderful.

CROZIER: Joe's a good example of the issues we've been talking about. He turns everything into Saskatchewan, including the world and including the moon. His *place* becomes everywhere.

BC: The artist as explorer...

WILLIAMS: I want to turn this around on you. I don't know if it's because you're poets and I'm a novelist, or because you're townies and I'm a farm boy, but the explorer metaphor is really too exotic. Exploring is going out to find something undiscovered, something that can be sent back as a report. It's not really inhabiting, it's not really investing in that place. Now, in another way, we've been managing space for a hell of a long time as farmers with the wheat pool. We manage space and its product and we learn how to ship it. And you know they talked that wheat pool into being. If you know anything about the farm at all, you know that you get together in the wheat pool office—not only in the beer parlour—and it's one of the great centres of conversation and tall tales. So it wasn't only that the institution was talked into being, but that it's where all those lives continue to

come into some kind of significance, where there is a *shared* story. So my preference as a novelist is the *domestic* metaphor; it is the one that makes more sense to me. *Wild Geese*, the farmer is set up against a migratory image—he's got to go out and shoot the goddamned ducks because they're eating his grain.

LANE: We inhabit our space more than any other province in Canada. This province inhabits its whole space. Now, British Columbia doesn't even begin to inhabit its space, it clusters in small bottoms of valleys and along the coast. Here, every inch of ground is occupied by the human.

BC: Or at least worked by the human.

LANE: Yeah, worked by the human, but actually occupied. It's only recently that these farms have started to disintegrate, and these farmers have left and now live in towns. They come out and work the land. It's a distancing away from the farm. This has only happened in the last 15 or 20 years. Up to that point, you couldn't find a square inch of the bottom third of the province that didn't have people on it.

WILLIAMS: An astonishing thing happened in western Canada in the '30s. We went from one family per 160 acres to one family per 116,000 acres, an enormous depopulation. And it's stayed that way.

LANE: And the towns have disappeared as a consequence, too.

WILLIAMS: But then if you lived in one of those small towns, you lived with images of a decaying town, the vanished pool room, the lost cafes, the closed-down garages, the missing school. What we're doing as writers is we're trying to re-create those places, haunt them into being somewhere. ♦



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