Meta Incognita

JOHN MOSS

I

All the world is in motion, disclosure irrelevant. It is only the illusions of time and the mind that suggest this boulder against which I lean to ease the burden of my pack is still. While I do not say the boulder is alive, last year it was upstream—you can see a facet new to the sunlight, marking the direction of its turning in the spring flood. Yesterday it chuffed off another skin as the rain leached chemicals away and bits of lichen laden with minute particles washed downriver. In the last ice age it was sheared and tumbled to a ragged sphere; and time itself, beyond imagination, revels in the swirl of molten stone, caught solid as it cooled, a seam of igneous intrusion cutting against my thigh as I shift to release my pack. Just above me on the riverbank a pile of rocks in the shape of a person is in ardent conversation with the tundra. The water of the Coppermine at my feet is fast, the river deep and wide. If I were canoeing now, in harmony with the canoe and with the river, the landscape would receive our passing as a celebration, honouring our presence: in a canoe you catch the motion of the world. Standing, there is nothing still. Everything is true.

In the summer of 1995, near a lake which, with my granddaughter Clare in mind, I named Isungituq for the clearwater blues that spill into Kimiatuktujuk, called Cormack Bay on the maps, at the western end of Clyde Inlet, named for the river Clyde by Scottish whalers, on the northeast shore of Baffin Island, named after William Baffin who sailed by under the flag of the Virgin Queen, backpacking with my brother Steve, we discovered a pre-Dorset hunting site, the people extinct, named with a time-shifting prefix for a shire in England, the site untouched in a thousand years, the solitude inviolate except for a single rusting tin can half buried in lichen; and there were fifteen small fortresses of stone funnelling to a wall above a cliff so that fifteen hunters waiting and waiting for caribou to pass, waiting motionless for hours and days, could, year after year, on the leap of a signal, secure a season's meat and sinew and clothing and stories to take back to the village on the shore of Kimiatuktujuk, for these were the days when there were communities all year round, before the dispersal, the death of the people whose name we don't know, whose names we don't know; and as I lay

curled in one of their small stone fortresses, peering down the caribou path, knowing we had nearly walked by under the burden of our packs and seen nothing, I swore I would write this, that I'm writing now, about us: these hunters are kin—listen, if you have to go back before God to make the genetic connection, the bones of my people and of your people and of those of our unnamed ancestors merge with the echoing silence of this weathered and weathering land.

Listen.
I swore I would write this, but where do I start? At which beginning?

Between the progress through life and the pathways of thought which refuse and anticipate closure, a struggle towards definition in which to dwell, connection with a world of my own doing but not of my own making, often has led to the Arctic, where the nexus of language and landscape I find myself looking, find myself listening. As a solitary traveller on the Barrenlands in '96, walking south in searing heat at body temperature along the Coppermine valley, under a pack weighing out of Kugluktuk on the First Air scales at 122 lbs, half-again the pack-weight of Hornby at his legendary best, moving against the current, twice his age, with no canoe anyway, driven by narrative and the rhythms of syntax as surely as he or as Hearne or as Franklin on the same terrain, after six days, as the weather cooled to zero, walking finally out of the valley, cross-country away from the river, leaving behind like a visceral lament the urge to canoe, twenty-two rain-drenched days ahead on my journey, a pound lost for every day from my body, pack weight down to 80 lbs at the end, loose-filled with gear and a gnarled green ingot of copper the size of two clenched fists, then more than ever, walking the land, did I yearn, was I driven, to enter the story, to reduce from three to two dimensions of motion (think of it: on descent into a two-dimensional world, time, opaque, is faded to the utter limits of transparency, lines become passages, a map of the land is a labyrinth, ink an inukshuk, and from the position of text the contours of earth are impossible; in a canoe lateral progress on the surface of water is a lovely illusion, connections are made in the mind, and the protuberant world is reduced to abstraction). I used to think you could become what you write, find your way home on the page.

II

The Arctic is a landscape of lichens and mountains, snowflakes and icebergs, saxifrage, creeping willow, pebbles ground to gemstone perfection, and vast

formations of ice, contours of rock, sweeping geomorphic crenellations draped with greys and smokey greens, draped with the shadows of wind and the colours of snow. Inukshuit occupy a middle distance in the Arctic: in landscape where everything is large or small, from a human perspective, the inukshuk is a reminder of our human size.

Inuk-shuk: it is a pile of stones in the shape of a man, a person; it is without gender, although inukshuit raised in hunting grounds to herd caribou are more likely thought to be male and inukshuit on isolated contours consoling travellers are as likely female. I made this up out of my own experience of the world. The inukshuk, plural, inukshuit, is without gender.

Consider the inukshuk for a long time and you will come to understand the intricate nature of our human relationship to the land; longer, and your relationship will not be to the land but with the land. Consider it long enough and you will become the land.

Elusive sanctuary; a nation, your body, the country I dream of when I'm awake. When I'm asleep I dream of my own. The inukshuk is a kothan, a theoretical point that occupies space, neither centre nor boundary nor the distance between.

An irregularity on the ragged edge of the planet, where the eye forces land against sky, an inukshuk is affirmation that you are where you are. But it does not tell you where that is. It does not tell you where you have been. Nor where you are going.

The inukshuk is not a golem, gathered from the mud of a dry plain, without a soul, meant to avenge a solipsistic destiny. It is not raised up from the dust of the earth, or in the mind of its mentor, but is a construct of stone built to resemble a man or a woman, in the likeness of the people and of no-one in particular.

The inukshuk is not a totem, a human animal turned out in the balance of rocks, an emblem either of fear or desire; it marks neither lineage nor aspiration. Nor story nor rune. It is earth marking time.

Do not confuse the inukshuk with art. It is not marble or bronze or clay; it is a pile of rocks, only. But if Praxiteles looked long enough at even the most humble inukshuk he would weep with envy, Michelangelo would return to the Galleria dell' Accademia in the dead of night and complete Saint Mat-

thew emerging from the rock; Rodin, Epstein, Moore, Loring and Wyle would all of them weep with envy, and try even harder. The inukshuk is not art; it is stones piled in the shape of a human being; the shape of the land as a person.

At ninety-three years of age my grandmother, Isabelle Clare, who was born in the year of confederation, could tap out morse code on the maple arm of her big chair, her nails rapping in a rhythm that was comforting to me as a child, even though I did not understand the language. As nails and wood articulated words she mouthed, I thought I understood. If aunts and uncles suspected she was faking, she put their cynicism to rest the day John Aldis came to visit. He was a friend of my father and his own father had invented the Aldis lamp, a rapid-shutter lantern used to transmit semaphore in relative silence, in binaries of light. Even though my grandfather had learned communication as pure sound in the 1880's, as the first telegraphist in Waterloo County, she read his flickering signal across the room at conversational speed. She and John Aldis turned small talk into esoteric poetry. Or, like an inukshuk encountered by two travellers going in different directions, perhaps the flutter of light and muted sound was different for each of them. When she died, seven years later, I'm sure she was sending semaphore with her eyes—lying quietly in the hospital bed, her voice stifled by a massive stroke, blinking rapidly in articulated clusters before lapsing into stillness. Maybe completion for each of us ends in the act of transmitting.

Think of the inukshuk without words. Think without words, of language, perfect, without meaning. A pile of stone on the sloping shoulders of the world, without meaning.

Now we are getting somewhere. I echo a poem by a poet. I am not a poet. This is about inukshuit and I am writing it down as it comes, is given by my experience of inukshuit. I am writing out of an iconology I barely comprehend, so natural is it to my experience of the world and the world itself.

The inukshuk is not a symbol. It stands on its own. Otherwise, the snow-laden wind sweeping horizontally across the landscape in thin intricate lines would topple it, turn it into a pile of stones with only the shape of a human as an abstract form, no longer continuous with the land but artlessly sprawled on its surface.

The inukshuk is stoic in its refusal to identify the people or the land, each to the other. It does not mediate, nor does it by implication signify their

union, nor does it suggest their difference. Self-reliant and self-absorbed, an inukshuk represents only itself as inukshuk.

This does not get us closer to the original premise, that if you consider an inukshuk long enough you will become what you have been from the beginning. This is not the same as being, in the Cartesian sense, where you think you are.

Alden Nowlan said: I'll be disappointed if I go to Waterloo and don't see the battle. He wrote that in a poem, and didn't get to Waterloo. He died of cancer. Like and inukshuk, a place, at last.

It is difficult to conceive: no past, no future, only presence. I do not mean this to be personal. You make up your own life as you go along, sly nexus of memory and dream. The inukshuk is not a cipher in a panoply of inukshuit spanning time or tradition, a threnody of separable moments. Echoing silence, it signifies nothing.

Everything I've said about inukshuit I could have said about Canada, or about God.

Genet said of Giacometti,
he does not make art for the future;
it will take care of itself.
His sculpture is addressed to the past,
to remind the dead
they are not alone
and this, he said,
is our most certain glory,
this solitude,
this death.
That's what Genet said,
mostly in my words;
he had the idea right,
even if the words are wrong.
Art speaks not for the dead
but to them. That is the whole point.
Do you see? Art is a presence,
present; the iconotropic instant. There is no past,
no future. Art is an inukshuk,
where past and future meet.

An inukshuk out of context is impossible. Rock slabs cemented in place in an office tower foyer; stones, poised, among the stone walls twisting through my wildflower garden; simulated boulders stacked as a public monument, anticipating the war memorial at the other end of Elgin Street; are to inukshuit as breath to the wind.

Beside the rough gravel plowed through the landscape between Nanisivik and Arctic Bay on the Borden Peninsula, the north end of Baffin Island, there is a pile of rocks with a brass plaque commemorating the brief life of Terry Fox. This is not an inukshuk but a cairn which from a distance resembles a human, stooped under its own weight, seemingly frozen in place. Surely, I thought, running by on a marathon of my own, a country which celebrates such a man as its hero is worth its own history.

III

When I was seven we had a green canoe; swift it was, even when dry-landed and aslant to the shore; and on water, it was alive in liquid contemplation of the water's yearning for an edge to give it shape; and placed in Temagami, as it was, it shaped Temagami, and the wilderness rose up to it, no longer wild.

The canoe is poetry; the poem is a canoe. If you have ever wondered about the difference between metonym and metaphor, considering this an equation.

The canoe is two ended, end without end, always in motion; being in time, beyond apprehension, part of the world. There is a sweet side to the canoe, determined as much by personality and by weather as the canoe's design.

Our green cedar-strip and canvas canoe was my pet and companion. Before the canoe, the summer I was seven, I had a caterpillar, which was also green, and before that I had a pet grapefruit, and made coracles from the scooped-out rinds and watched them float away, their clothespin passengers paddling to the sea.

When I was seven, Bill Ernie Smith took my brother and me moose-hunting in memory of our grandfather Austin, his silent partner in the Temagami Canoe Company. Richard and I didn't know we were hunting moose; we thought we were going for the building of character. That's what Ernie told

our parents: for God's sake, George, he said, it's time. We flew in with a green canoe strapped to the Beaver's pontoons, to a lake that I've never been able to find on a map, and camped for a week on a lichened outcropping of smooth rock in the lee of a single red pine among cedars; and in the evenings we sang MacNamara's Band over and over and we smoked Ernie's pipe and he told us stories of his ancestors, the Scotch and the Ojibwa, until they became our own, and in the early mornings we paddled among the reeds, silently, and again in the evenings, silently among the reeds, until one morning or evening we saw a moose wading and quietly Ernie sidled the canoe into open water and when the moose was clear of the bottom and swimming Ernie unwrapped his gun and with a single shot killed it and we tied a rope to it and towed it to shore where we gutted it and carved the meat into crimson chunks and bagged these and scraped the guts back into the water; and that night we had tenderloin which was tough and tasted of smoke and salt and cedar and pine; and later that night Ernie told us again about our ancestors, including Austin and Grey Owl, Mennonites and Mohawks, and in the morning while we waited for the Beaver to land we sat on the folded tent and he told us about Baffin Island where he had worked in the twenties, which were his twenties as well, and I fell for the Arctic, truly in love, and Ernie, while he scared me a little at seven, has since remained part of my experience in what some call wilderness and I think of, perhaps because Ernie was building character, as home.

The essence of the canoe is motion. In no other human construct does form so nearly follow function; the thing cannot be separated from the thing it does.

The line flow, planes draw the eye around its curvilinearity. There is no perspective from which you can see it whole; seeing and what's seen are the same.

A.J.M. Smith writing of nature and the evocation of stark terror had never felt through the bottom of a canoe the water slipping by, never listened to its liquid hush brushing beneath fingers clasped around the paddle's shaft, the sinews of the wood of the shaft bending against the fingers with each stroke, connecting muscle to water, and mind to the river's flow, never smelled fresh water rising through the air from an upwind falls, visceral, unseen as thunder, never tasted his own sweat in the trundle and trudge of a portage, canoe balanced against movement as he stepped among moss-laden boulders, in moose-marsh up to the knees, never, never—nor Atwood, either; nor Northrop Frye. Not really. The garrison mentality is an academic

construct; nature as adversary a poetic device.

You must understand that the river here is wide and deep and fast. Opaque and very cold. Despite eddies and sluice holes, separating the molecules of water into arrows of direction and speed, in a continual gathering they eventually flow one way. Canoes were used once to cross, here, by travellers, walking to the sea. Now, canoeists from the south paddle the river's length.

It is creeks and streams and rivers and lakes and the edges of oceans that define us. From a canoe, Canada is inevitable. Think about this for awhile, preferably on open water. In swifts you'll need to focus on the fall of the land; in rapids, perception and the reality of water merge, you and the canoe merge, your attention will be called to other things: Canada is what you are, an affront perhaps but inevitable.

Three speakers at Canexus II, a conference on the Canoe in Canadian culture, declare themselves with manly circumspection, diffidence perhaps, to have been survivors of wilderness canoe trips. Survivors; the notion is savoured; heroic. Feel the rush of history, violence a vacuum, to endure is to prevail, their conquest of an emptied land anticipates the past more real than now. Name the landscape Barren, fill the Barrenlands with death; conflation; a narrative at Bloody Falls where I am camped, guts clenched, fear-filled, rehearsing murder as the Coppermine roars through my head, the presence of the past in the imagery of death as narrative takes shape between the raging water and the shore, awakening and sleep. The story originates where canoe and kayak meet, in the reaching shadow of tall ship far over the southern horizon. There is a body, one in particular: this is a story where the absence of good is more distressing than the presence of evil. It is Samuel Hearne's, although it has become our own, part of our enduring presence.

These are the facts. She, a lithe young woman dressed in the meticulously sewn skins of animals; he, in wool and leather, stands over her. It could be a movie poster from the early days of colour: he, a white planter/hunter while she, darker, sprawled against his legs, reaches upwards along his erect form, imploring/adoring. He is anguished by the importunity of circumstance, wanting nothing to do with her death. Her screams penetrate the general din because of their proximity and because they alone carry the high quaver of hope, refusal to believe. She will be raped while still clinging to his boots and he turns his head away, not wanting to witness the enraged genitals of her adversaries. It is better for him when they drive a spear into her. He tries to withdraw but still she will not let him go. He prays to no-one in particular

that she will die quickly. That is the best he can expect. When her screaming drops to a deep tremulous sob, then silence, he steps free from the garland of her arms. Since there is no-where to turn where there are not mutilated bodies of the woman's kin, he stays close by her remains. Her assailants move away to dispatch the few still quavering mounds, their own screaming now a hum that could be keening, could be mingled laughter. He stoops into his own shadow to look down at the young woman, a girl, really, and her face is still whole, although flecked with blood. He is embarrassed to find her attractive. Her eyes look into his, piercing the sky behind him, the sun.

We see nothing whole, except in two dimensions, in pictures, mirrors, memories and dreams. Perhaps that is why so few paintings of canoes were done by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, all of whom travelled by canoe, journeyed through what they gave to us as North, as if north were a place and not a direction, a region contained by their radical aesthetic, like a vast and variegated garden; perhaps they seldom painted their canoes because their form so nearly follows function, its essence was beyond their art, a slash of colour like a signature binding them to a landscape they were bound to hold at eye's length, to catch the entirety of their perception, to catch it all.

Tom Thomson died; canoeing. More likely in fact he was murdered, died reeling from the force of a fist when his head struck and andiron, breaking his fall and splitting his skull; dead painter's body slipped between waves, weighted, his swamped canoe plausible until he floated free, a few days later, and was buried in a stranger's grave, his casket sent empty for his family to mourn, fraud being a more reasonable risk than manslaughter. His canoe, an economy model, was silver-grey, but found its way into several painting, shadowed red, like a banner or a wound.

In Canada the canoe is inevitable. At Canexus II, I introduced J.J. Lentz of Washington to Bruce Hodgins of Peterborough; one of my signal achievements. The canoe is a story; its legends the text. Think of Bruce as the New Testament, sweet and wise, familiar with all the good and not so good places that have made of geography our history, of landscape our most ennobling narrative. And J.J., the same as when I last saw him forty years before, smaller perhaps but as splendid about the eyes when he talks of the land and canoeing, and as much the Old Testament as when he was twenty and I was sixteen and he was trip leader and old A.L. Cochrane was still alive, and Bill Mason hardly out of Pioneer Camp, on his way to lovely immortality.

Standing by the Trent Canal: watch the weekend paddlers paddling zig-zag courses in their rental canoes, clinging to the surface like long-legged flies. They are silent in the distance as syntax, and noisy up-close, sentences chattering, senses unuttered. In the leaves by the shore is the laughter of children; I was dreaming, my body was dreaming of yours, mind poised in contemplation, an inukshuk in conversation with the seasons we share.

It doesn't matter if you can't paddle straight, without shifting stroke from side to side: in a Canadian Heritage Moment, Buffy Sainte-Marie paddles away from the camera and no-one in the film crew tells her she doesn't know how.

Someone apparently said a Canadian knows how to make love in a canoe. That is one of those things people say. But consider: birch bark is pliant but rough; canvas and cedar, ridged like a rack; Grumman aluminum, searing; kevlar, abrasive; ABS, like a half-filled water-bed yielding in all the wrong places. And what about thwarts; what about the inverse ratio between passionate vigour and the chance of not tipping; what about bugs, loons with x-ray eyes? A Canadian is someone, the victim of generalizations, who knows enough about canoes to make love on the shore.

I canoe—the noun as verb, identity, action. This is not because I'm Mohawk, or because I'm Mennonite, Scots, American, German, English, and other genetic residue adhering to the twist of self-consciously Canadian DNA I conceive myself to be, but because the sweet urgency of a canoe slipping among the water molecules fuses mind and muscle with the world surrounding like the sustained follow-through of a perfect orgasm.

Canoe is a word; yes and the word, a canoe.

Farley was conceived in a green canoe; or so Angus said, and he was there. There is some dispute about whether or not his mother was a swan, submitting to myth in a flurry of white, or his father a god and Angus a cuckold, enthralled with bestiality, and not there at all.

Imagine a canoe, then consider what you are imagining. Who can tell the thing from what it does; canoe from paddler, paddler from the skin of planet earth on which we move within the silence of our imagining? Stop imagining; the landscape remains.

Canada is a canoe.

And yes, Canada is a word, a long-legged fly on the surface of time;
Our syntax is memory, and landscape the vocabulary
of our desire; but still we must write our own stories,
write ourselves in. Listen,
(we paddled our green canoe
through the rolling hills of Waterloo County,
approaching his retirement farm on the oblique),
the old man asked me, I was seven, to punch him on the chest
as hard as I could. I knew when my father and I boxed
never to hit hard; but
Commander Jock de Marbois had parried with taunts
and though I was wary
I whaled him one I would never forget
—I was seven—
and I haven't forgotten it yet.
Under his shirt he wore a body cast to the waist; which I hit;
he feign-flinched; then, appalled at my pain,
turned to my father, and a small boy danced
among shadows in the stadium of his eyes; and Jock,
half-way to being stone in the shape of a person,
never again looked at me directly, and when he died,
impoverished, was buried with full military honours.
He had once eaten human flesh, he said,
shipwrecked on the shores of a strange land
and I never did get to ask him
if it was Canada.

IV

Barrenlands; 1996. Listen to the historical resonance of the name, naming perception, extending limits across landscape, giving it edges; Barrenlands. Named for the sake of the story by Samuel Hearne, as narrative context, a dangerous place for story to happen, and as adversary in narrative action, a foil worth fighting; into the Barrens last summer I inserted myself like a page among the leaves of a text; as I wandered, when I tried to keep to the lines I was lost, when I followed a compass bearing, measuring from where I had been, the landscape refused coherence; but when I turned away from incipient panic, away from distance and direction, and addressed the land as a meeting with the world, all doubt about presence disappeared; while I didn't know where I was on the map, surrounded by open tundra and the

open sky, I walked on knowing I was where I should be; and in the evenings, writing my notes for assurance, renaming the Barrenlands of my own experience, I had to empty the word of its meaning, turn it away from the texts I carried to read in the late evening sunlight, softened by the walls of my tent, shake it free of history. You cannot be lost unless the past is more real than the present, maps more important than dreams.

This is something you need to know: 'the land' is Canadian—not two words but one; the land, with space between. In the elision of syllables the ear fills what the eye cannot see.

Listen to the land. That is not a play on words. Listen, the land. . .

the voice is your own: the land shapes silence as sculpture shapes air. The land as a word begins with the intake of breath; sound comes as the body exhales, the land, first in a whispering eddy, tongue touching teeth, then opens, curling round like a brief standing wave, breaks, rolls back on itself, a more solid echo of where it began, shored from each end by a contemplative pause. Listen: the land is a river.

No other people in the world say what we mean by the land; we are not bound by history nor by geography, nor by blood nor by ideology.

Baffin: July 1995: waiting for the ice to break. Jeshua Illuq is telling the story. We are sitting on the kitchen floor, eating boiled seal, cooked outside on a fire of dried Arctic heather and lumber scraps because it is better that way than on the electric stove. Jeshua is playing with stereotypes. Drawing chunks of meat taut between teeth and one hand, with the other we cut bite-sized morsels close to the lips, savouring fish-flesh aroma-taste, listening. Jeshua ascribes characteristics by nationality to parties he has outfitted; laughter is difficult with a sharp knife cutting close to the face and fingers dripping with grease. The Spanish are like this, and he invokes Spain with a gesture, a phrase; the French and the Germans, like this and like this. They're all the same, what they want from us, out on the land. To be with us, but not like us. The Germans, they could hold a riot in a tent and when it was over there'd be no litter. The French, they stare, they talk to each other. The Israelis talk and forgive us our silence. The English, they're like this, they come all that way and pretend not to notice. Americans are like this, they explain where they're from. —And what about Canadian, I ask, up from the south? He drinks deeply from a cup of seal gravy. —We're all pretty much the same, eh.

This year I took my vacation out on the land, said Matthew Coon Come, Grand Chief of the Quebec Cree, being interviewed on CBC about his role in a forthcoming documentary on political activism and the James Bay Hydro Project. I am a bushman, said Gary Potts, former Chief of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai, their principal land claims negotiator with successive Ontario Governments, during his closing address at a symposium entitled "Re-figuring Wilderness," held at the Wanapitei Wilderness Centre in Temagami. Bobby Kennedy wanted to raft the Whale River, to conquer the river, said Matthew Coon Come. Those who signed treaties, and we didn't sign, said Gary Potts, we thought we were signing to share the land, we thought the reserves would be for us only; exclusive.

Stella said: Mrs. Baker on Bear Island, she speaks Indian.
Mrs. Smith, she speaks Indian.
Jack Percy, he speaks Indian.
And Mrs. Jack Martin on Bear Island, I forgot, she speaks Indian.
Stella means Temagami Ojibwa, a dialect infused with Algonquian and English.
George Glover and Mabel Glover, they speak Indian.
Mrs. Arnold, she speaks Indian.
Mrs. Green, she speaks Indian.
Is that ten? I think there's ten of us, none on the land, I think ten of us left.
We speak Indian when we can.
And Mrs. Ross, down the hall, she speaks Indian.

You come across the water to what, in the tyranny of language over time, we call Canada; and you have always been in this place. After an eon, as the ice-age retreats, you envision yourself indigenous, the time of your presence no longer measured by ancestral memory. Your dreams are of nowhere else. To be human is to be who you are. For the rest, the newcomers, in a generation or two the dreams of elsewhere fade, become displaced fragments of history caught up in a surname, residual in the shaping of flesh to bone, slop of eyes, slant of vertebrae. When you cross the sea you become one of us. Even if you pause in the United States for a while, a decade, a century, when you set foot on Canadian soil your feet sink into earth and you walk submerged, the immense space of this place enclosing you like a lover, the land, this land, not an unwritten text pressing you down but a context, making you real. You have exchanged the gnawing awareness of your absence from history in the old world for an incontrovertible presence in the new, your being inseparable from the land where you are.

Picture this: the empty dark of a subterranean crypt. Suddenly the door is ajar; light from the windowless corridor throws a wedge of details into the black void. Eye sockets in a skull sitting upright on a shelf, lower jaw missing, catch in the cranial fibres an optic illusion, stare sightless into the light. The skull is damaged, surrounded by bones, arranged neatly. Each bone is inscribed with India ink, "T Thomson 56." This is our greatest painter, effacing human presence from the haunted landscape, himself effaced, shelved in the basement of a Toronto forensic lab, after forty years within the earth. Before he was murdered he painted a revolution. In the moment of dying, between fist smashing face, twisting in the interminable fall, and head snapping against iron, shattering the alcohol haze, in a final perfect vision before his corpse settled on the rough wood floor, he thought he had captured the land in a gnarled twist of visceral within the sockets of his eyes, encrypted in pigments of blood.

Meta Incognita. Elizabeth the First of England and other places named the land past which her modest armadas of exploration into the Arctic dared not venture, in a curious corruption of Latin and Greek, Meta Incognita, a phrase still used on maps of southern Baffin, which translates literally "beyond the unknown." *Ultima Thule,* a similar conflation of ancient words, ultima from Seneca and Thule, the name Pythias gave to the lands north of north, is a phrase still used by poets from away, by dreamers who dream of the Arctic within as a place beyond reach. The Arctic is place; north a direction. This is confusing to some people. The confusion itself is endemic, Canadian as air.

Imagine yourself; now imagine yourself in Temagami. Imagine a rambling assemblage of logs and verandahs, rampant with smells of old varnish and weather; an oversize cabin, fireplace monolith, ruminant moose head, requisite lake trout, pickerel, scales painted real, souvenir paddles on rafter beams older than dust; imagine generations of gentle conspiracy and the moment, here, now; Kay looking out from the pantry, from the sweet pungency of fresh oatmeal cookies, and Candy, smelling vaguely of skunk, searching at shin-level for Bruce or Carol, and John Wadland by the relic piano, his solemn smile reaching to the darkest corners of the room. This is a wilderness centre, Wanapitei, yet the notion of wilderness will admit no centre. You are here in this place in the heart of Canada. You are on the land. Where there is no centre there are no margins. You are here.

In these intense rooms of political and academic discussion... said Kay.... Refiguring wilderness is not an innocent activity, said Bev. New narratives

make old narratives new. . . .
When you enter wilderness it is no longer wilderness. . . said Bruce.
How are you going to put all the land in your grave when you go, because you're going. Gary said that.
Jonathan smiled, perhaps, hearing his own words echoed: act in the wilderness as if you were not there—uneasy, perhaps, with the aesthetics of erasure, permutations of presence and absence.
We could have done more, John said, in a requiem for the revolution. We could have done less.
Forgetting himself, Peter left behind his cap from the Wildcat Cafe.

Karen Kawawada, whom I say the next day paddling a new Temagami Canoe Company canoe on the Red Squirrel River, the company formed originally by my grandfather Austin and Bill Ernie Smith while they were making log cabins for summer visitors, for themselves, in the twenties, found the Wanapitei version of what you are hearing or reading prescriptive, my implicit refusal to be ethnic an ethnic affront. One is only ethnic elsewhere, I would say to her if I could. Ethnicity is an outpost in an alien world. Once here one is here. The land in the mind, not crenellations of the corpus callosum but condition of consciousness, is familiar as blood, as secret, quick, vivid when exposed to the air, freighted with details, vital with the din of genus and species. Ireland, said Alden Nowlan, is not my people's place of origin but their creation myth. Once here one is here. It is a matter of being.

Think of wilderness and the paradox of meaning, the land as labyrinth. At the heart of labyrinth is the way out. When you reach the centre you are on the outside.

Think of the land without meaning. With no margins there is no centre. The Minotaur, a gathering of shadows, in the absence of edges, is vanquished.

As a naked Canadian, I am too modest to cover myself. I am afraid you will think me vain. Not being able to tell my body from yours, I sometimes feel guilty loving you. In more innocent times, when language meant what it said, and of course it didn't but we thought it did, I could say of the land, I cannot tell where my love ends and the sky begins. I could say words like forever, like always, and they would describe my emotion. But it is enough that you, like the land, surround from within; paradox as a way of coping with complexity is very Canadian. Think of Gepeto, of Galatea, or of God; it is what we create that brings us to life.

We read whole lives, even nations, in the syntax of our imaginings; not in the narrative strategies of memory but in grammar itself, potential for order in the chaos within. This is the land, a condition of being, held for apprehension in the deep structures of the mind; the land suddenly familiar because it is there already, its presence innate, yourself a part of the landscape. The land is a text you read in the past tense: you do not read the past as a past that has not yet happened, for you are there, reading. You read the past as a future that has already occurred.

Away from the Barrens where last summer I walked on my own, empowered and harrowed, south past the Dismal Lakes, resplendent in the long Arctic sun, southwest to the source of the Dease, headwaters squeezed from the clenched knuckles of rock, east and then north, thigh-deep in hillocks of lichen, their damp crumbling the beginnings of soil, back through struggling spruce to the Coppermine valley, over transverse willow-choked gorges of tributaries, meadows of saxifrage and Arctic cotton, north to Kugluktuk on the ocean's rim, here where I dream in straight lines, contain memory in vectors of direction, here, although I was there in summer, in the mutability of snow, in the cold of the city, are reminders of language in time, the expression of presence, and poetry born of the land.

Robert Lecker has written a book on Canadian culture called *Making It Real*. Like all books of the dead it tells how to be dead while there is still time to think about it. Robert Lecker's words, imagine the land for the country to be, could never serve better the fusion of truth with the true than when, having lost my sleeping mat on northern Baffin Island, in my tent in a storm on the side of a Clyde River esker, I alternated between reading his book which was propped against a fold in my down-filled bag, text lit by the midnight sun, and lying on top of it, pages spread-eagled under my bum, while I rekindled warmth in contemplation, something real and of substance between me and the permafrost earth.

Every painted landscape tells a story, if only in the perspective of the viewer viewing. Inuit artists, new to the Western tradition, untrammelled by the tyrannies of Renaissance perspective, do not paint landscape paintings but rather landscape itself, the land as the landscape within. The best among them refuse the rules. Their paintings and drawings and prints neither connect us to the landscape nor separate us from it, but acknowledge land as a visceral presence, as real and arbitrary on the painted plane as a hand or a seal or a spirit bird.

The Arctic is the home of the Inuit; the land is their homeland. But just as a township is part of a country, a country a part of the world, it is the home of the Qallunaat as well, Canadians from the south who know the Arctic as an idea, a dimension of our experience of ourselves, although many may never have been there. We are a northern nation. More significantly, we are a northern people. The white of our flag is the winter. The Arctic is a condition of our imagination. As we become increasingly a part of the global community, as our history , written by geography, is rewritten by ethnic diversity, we cannot survive as a people without coming to terms with how we imagine ourselves. The white of our flag is the winter, but the Arctic has seasons. Those who live there know that. For the rest of us, who visit or who read, we must explore beyond winter, find what is there and what we think is there, find what we missed.

The land is not landscape. I sing of the landscape as land and hear in the echoing silence my voice. I will sing of the land, not of this land or of our land; neither Wordsworth nor Whitman, vanities nor visions—songs of the voice only. I will sing of the land, of myself among tall trees, walking, within the Vancouver city limits, and of skiing at Whistler; I will sing of driving a bus in the foothills of Alberta, and of careening down switchbacks on Mount Edith Cavell; I sing of myself in ripe prairie wheat, having crawled on my belly away from the Trans-Canada Highway among the soaring grasses, then risen to my full height far from the noise of traffic to survey the illusion of a golden world; I will sing of Ontario where I was born and my daughters were born, of Waterloo County where my ancestors came on foot as the ice age receded, by canoe as the British retreated, and in rapid succession by Conestoga wagon, by train, by streetcar and bus; I will sing of Quebec where I learned in the War as a child to speak French and at a St. Jean Baptiste rally a generation later, that English is a foreign language; I sing of the St. John River valley, of Fredericton, of pride and of guilt for being Upper Canadian; I sing of the red soil of the pocket province, of a lobster dinner by myself in a cellar restaurant in Halifax where I broke the rules and drank red wine, Fleurie, and was not ashamed; and of Newfoundland where I unexpectedly wept at L'Anse aux Meadows, not for the failed Viking settlers, their invasion a prelude, but for the Beothuk, the first of first nations to be annihilated, eight hundred years later; I will sing of myself in the Arctic, where in a vision brought on by exhaustion, emotional deprivation, visceral depletion, I discovered myself to be fiercely, I mean fiercely, Canadian.

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How do you find yourself in a first-person narrative? Look back where you have come from. You are walking against the current on the banks of the Coppermine, walking south from the Arctic Ocean. As you turn into the sun, the wind freshened. You smell salt from beyond the hills as the wind wisps across your right cheek and tucks around your face, drawing breath from your nostrils as it bends in the direction of your journey.

We are not the projection of a dream, destiny manifest upon the land; nor are we the gathering of historical detritus as are the corporate states of Europe; nor a country born from the memory of its antecedents, our politics genetic. We are, rather, what we have in common, paddling the same craft open side up; smoothing for awhile the earth's skin by our being here, travelling through.

Although spirit is as real as body and mind, I have never felt attracted to notions of God as a God; but as I lean against this rock or draw my paddle through the water, and the illusions of stillness and silence bend to opacity, break, and the entire cosmos stirs ever so slightly in my direction, I become what I am; and angels could not ask for more.

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