



# Garden of Dreams

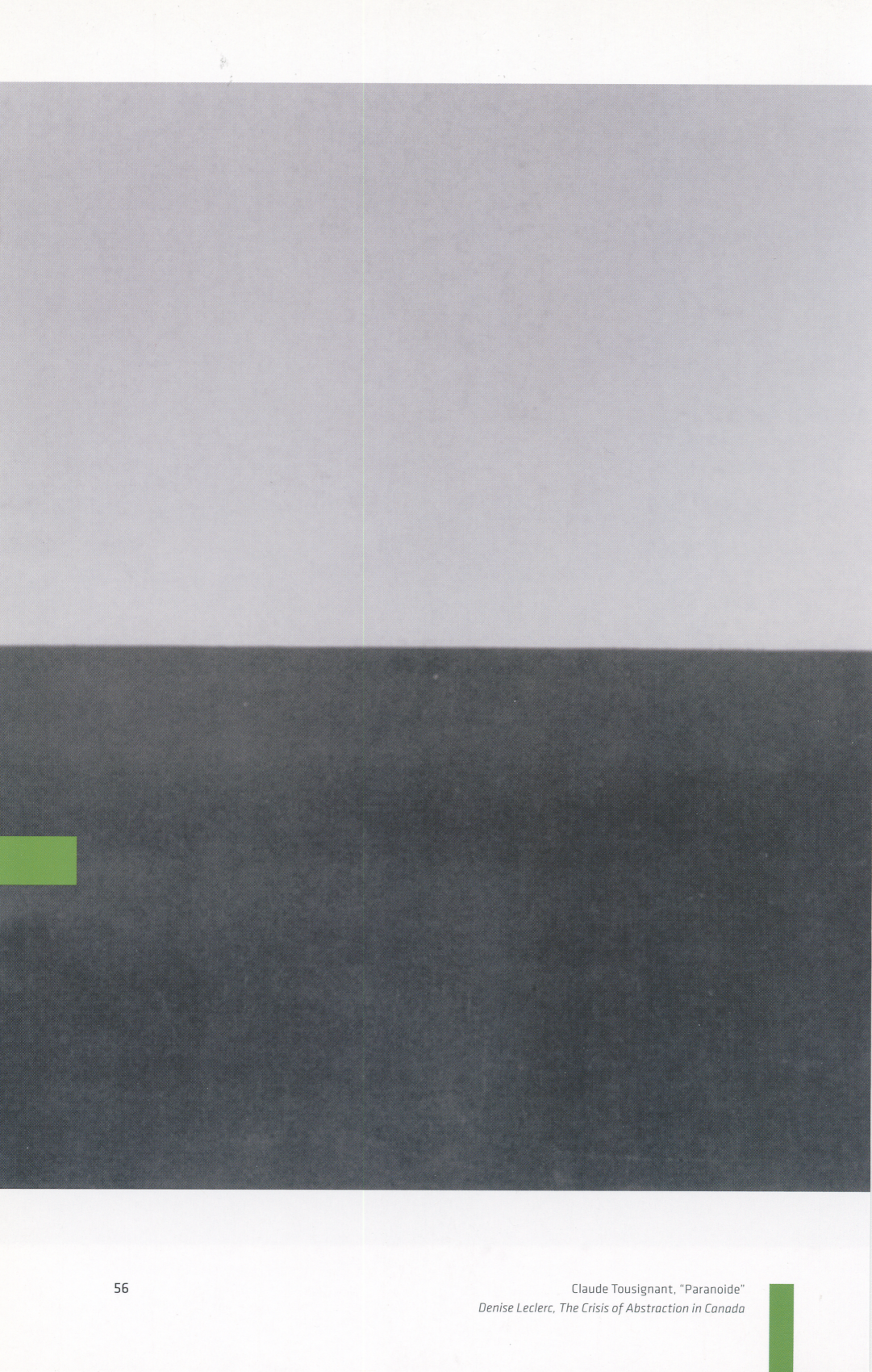
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Rob Kovitz







... in their dreams gods have appeared, calling to them ...

*Gustave Flaubert, The Temptation of St. Antony*

... he dreamed always a far interior that he might in the flesh inhabit. He dreamed northwest, that is undeniable. Only let me assert: it was I who sent him there.

*Robert Kroetsch, Gone Indian*



1.

By a Plain I mean lands bearing grass.

*David Thompson, Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812*

We looked out and beheld a sea of green, sprinkled with yellow, red, lilac, and white ... As you cannot know what the ocean is without seeing it, neither can you imagine the prairie.

*George M. Grant, Ocean to Ocean*

Compared to trees, shrubs, or forbs, grasses seem unfathomably plain. They fail to inspire interest or stir the imagination. We look at prairie and we see a great emptiness, a void that staggers the psyche and leaves much too much room for a mind to wander.

*Randy Winter, Nature Notes*

Looking toward the setting sun, there lay stretched before my view a vast expanse of level ground; unbroken, save by one thin line of trees, which scarcely amounted to a scratch upon the great blank ... There it lay, a tranquil sea or lake without water, if such a simile be admissible, with the day going down before it: a few birds wheeling here and there, with solitude and silence reigning paramount around. But the grass was not yet high; there were black patches on the ground; and the few wild flowers that the eye could see were poor and scanty. Great as the picture was, its very flatness and extent, which left nothing to the imagination, tamed it down and cramped its interest. I felt little of that sense of freedom and exhilaration which the Scottish heath inspires, or even our English downs awaken. It was lonely and wild, but oppressive in its barren monotony.

*Charles Dickens, American Notes*

That country is notable primarily for its weather, which is violent and prolonged; its emptiness, which is almost frighteningly total; and its wind, which blows all the time in a way to stiffen your hair and rattle the eyes in your head ... Not many cars raise dust along its lonely roads—it is country people do not much want to cross, much less visit ...

The geologist who surveyed it in the 1870's called it one of the most desolate and forbidding regions on earth.

*Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow*

For Europeans and eastern North Americans, arrival on the plains was almost as strange as landing on the moon, as the novelist R. M. Ballantyne intimated in the 1840s. Ballantyne's analogy may seem fanciful, but it was endorsed in our own times by the directors of NASA. So that the astronauts chosen for the moon landing might have some idea of what it is like to confront an alien environment, they were required to read Walter Prescott Webb's classic study of the settlement of the American West, *The Great Plains*.

*Ronald Rees, New and Naked Land*



You may travel weeks, and you will see it the same. I often think the Lord has placed this barren belt of prairie to warn men to what their folly may yet bring.

*James Fenimore Cooper, The Prairie*

2.

The geography of any place results from how we want to see it as much as from what may be seen there.

*J. W. Watson, The Role of Illusion in North American Geography*

Have come to Prairie Land at last—a grassy, weedy plain interspersed here and there with streams, swamps and woody patches. The soil looks rich.

*Alma Criddle, Criddle-De-Diddle-Ensis*

Hail to the World's great garner,  
The fair Canadian West,  
Where the golden grain on the boundless plain  
Heaves like an ocean's crest.

Star of the British Empire,  
The haven for those who roam,  
The refuge for stranger exile  
Who seeks for a friend and home.

The brightest gem of the Occident  
Has ceased to be but a dream,  
As to east, to west, to north, to south  
She empties her golden stream.

Food for the great world's millions  
She pours from her fertile breast;  
This land with a mighty future,  
The fair Canadian West.

*George Livingstone Dodds, The Canadian West*

'What an observer!' cried Bouvard.  
'Personally I find him fanciful,' Pécuchet finally said ... Why inflate something that is flat and describe so many idiotic things!

*Gustave Flaubert, Bouvard and Pécuchet*



# CANADA WEST



CANADA ~ The New Homelands



The more distant and inhospitable the land, the greater the blandishments necessary to attract settlers to it. Cold, dry, treeless plains half a continent and—for Europeans—an ocean away were hardly alluring, the offer of free homesteads notwithstanding. According to Ray Billington, the American historian, the effort to settle the Great Plains inspired the greatest advertising campaign ever to influence migration. Even the Garden of Eden, Billington remarked wryly, would have looked seedy compared to the images of the West conjured up by the promoters ...

Drawings, paintings, and photographs of the prairie made or taken after 1880 affirmed the image of a land that was both productive and picturesque. The pattern was set by F. B. Schell, who did the illustrations for *Picturesque Canada*. Schell's drawings show wooded stream courses and settled, productive landscapes. Horizon lines set high diminished prairie space, and foregrounds filled with flowers and clumps of grass masked the emptiness of the landscape ...

Schell's methods of reducing prairie space became standard in the promotional material. Drawings, paintings, and photographs in posters and pamphlets issued by the government and the C.P.R. seldom betrayed the true nature of the prairie. Landscapes were limited, inhabited, and productive. Captions from the photographs in Sifton's *Atlas* are instructive: "Representative Homes of Those Who Have Succeeded," "Some of the Great Mills and Elevators," "Giant Roots and Vegetables," "A Western Canadian Orchard." Occasional drawings in the sketchbooks of the special artists who worked for the illustrated magazines showed expanses of empty prairie, but if submitted to their editors they were never published.

*Ronald Rees, New and Naked Land*

### 3.

I've never gone out into the landscape and worked directly from it. I find it too confusing because I get caught up in the details.

*Otto Rogers, landscape painter (b. 1935, Kerrobert, Saskatchewan)*

Anything higher than a stalk of corn was visible for miles. A scraggly tree way off in the distance had the decisiveness of one clear fact.

*Denis Johnson, The Name of the World*

To encounter treelessness of such distance has often moved eastern travelers—and sometimes natives—more to discomfiture than rapture. Of the prairie, Willa Cather wrote in *My Antonia*: "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out." The protection and sureties of the vertical woodland, walled like a home and enclosed like a refuge, are gone, and now the land, although more filled with cellulose than ever, is a world of air, space, apparent emptiness, near nothingness, where once the first travelers could walk for twelve hours and believe they had taken only a dozen steps.

*William Least Heat-Moon, Prairieerth (a deep map)*



it is  
a country as wide as dreams are  
full of the half-formed  
unsuspected  
ruthlessness  
around the corner of things

...  
nothing is as it seems

*bpNichol, You Too, Nicky*





I heard his flat grass bored him so he hired Asian landscapers to make it undulate—had to be Asian. You seen them bonsai trees? he'd said.

*Marc Nesbitt, The Ones Who May Kill You in the Morning*

4.

The preceding story lays no claim to value or accuracy in its descriptions of the North-West Territories. I have never seen that portion of our country ... 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.

*J. E. Collins, Annette, The Métis Spy*

We left behind one by one  
the cities rotting with cholera,  
one by one our civilized  
distinctions

and entered a large darkness.

It was our own  
ignorance we entered.

I have not come out yet

...

Whether the wilderness is  
real or not  
depends on who lives there.

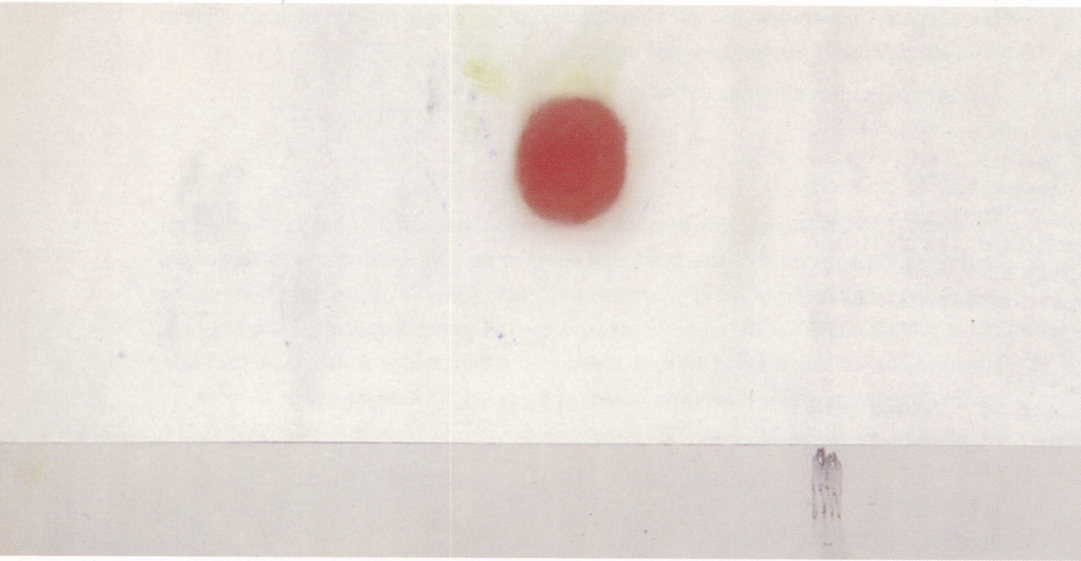
*Margaret Atwood, Further Arrivals*

The theory was it was cheaper to live on land, but to have to live off the land is an entirely different story ... Very few had farming backgrounds. They had worked in factories or lumber yards. And they arrived on land that wasn't the easiest to farm, even if you knew what you were doing.

*Kim Guttormson, The Interlake*

When I bent  
to pick, my hands  
came away red and wet





In the dream I said  
I should have known  
anything planted here  
would come up blood

*Margaret Atwood, The Journals of Susanna Moodie*

5.

Unable to deny that rainfall might be only marginal for agriculture, the government sought to eliminate a source of potential embarrassment by suppressing all references to dryness in government publications.

*Ronald Rees, New and Naked Land*

May 11: The weather was overcast.

May 14: The weather was clear, and the air sharp.

August 15: The weather was now clear.

August 16: The weather continued to be the same as yesterday.

*Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Voyages through the Continent of North America*

There were books that would have told him (though he might not have believed) that the reduction of the annual rainfall by a single inch, or a shift of the period of greatest precipitation from spring and summer to fall, could mean the difference between a good crop and a



burned field. The winds, hail, and cyclones he would believe as soon as he experienced them once. But the large lesson that he would have found most useful—the marginal nature of agriculture on the arid Plains—was precisely the one that as a pioneer he found unacceptable, because it denied his hope.

His hope was involved with the myth of the Garden West. Franklin and Jefferson had formulated it, politicians and speculators and railroads had promoted it, the ignorant faith of hundreds of thousands of home-seekers had kept it alive well into the industrial age and out into the dry country where it had little chance of coming true. The dream that circulated vaguely in the heads of people like my parents had something to do with the corncribs and pigpens of Illinois and Iowa, but little to do with the arid Plains furred with their curly grass and seared by blowtorch winds. If the frontier had been continuous either as to people or as to experience, Kansas might have taught them something, the Dakotas where they had tarried briefly might have given them a hint. But apparently no matter how hard a time hope may have had in earlier settlements, the opening of any new frontier, even a marginal one, revives it intact and undiminished.

*Wallace Stegner, Wolf Willow*

6.

'You see, gentlemen,' he said suddenly, restraining himself with difficulty, 'you see—I listen to you and I seem to be haunted by a dream—you see, I sometimes have such a dream—a curious kind of dream—I often dream it—it keeps on recurring—'

*Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov*

Dreams! dreams! golden dreams: endless, and golden, as the flowery prairies, that stretch away from the Rio Sacramento, in whose waters Danae's shower was woven;—prairies like rounded eternities: jonquil leaves beaten out; and my dreams herd like buffaloes, browsing on to the horizon, and browsing on round the world; and among them, I dash with my lance, to spear one, ere they all flee.

*Herman Melville, Mardi: and A Voyage Thither*

dreams that go uncomforted  
escape into a stranger landscape

*bpNichol, Y*

By a route obscure and lonely,  
Haunted by ill angels only,  
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,  
On a black throne reigns upright,  
I have reached these lands but newly  
From an ultimate dim Thule—

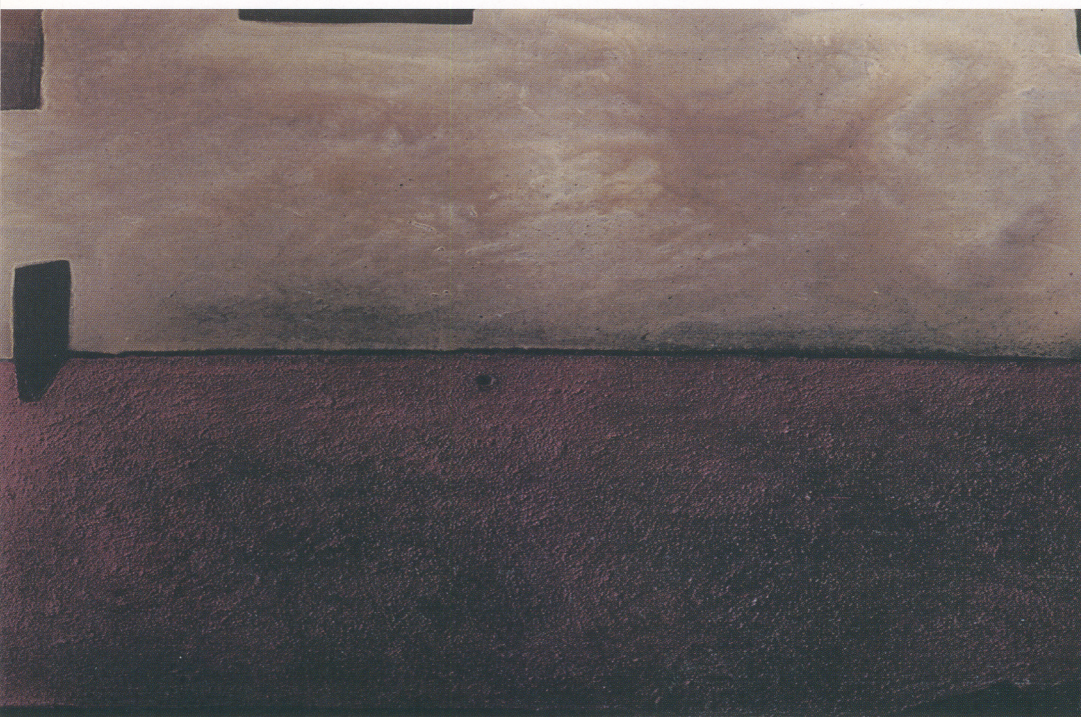


From a wild clime that lieth, sublime,  
Out of SPACE out of TIME.

...  
With forms that no man can discover  
For the tears that drip all over;  
Mountains toppling evermore  
Into seas without a shore;  
Seas that restlessly aspire,  
Surging, unto skies of fire ...

*Edgar Allan Poe, Dreamland*

Stories were told of herds of buffalo so dense that one could mistake them for a newly ploughed field, mountains the color of blood that fell out of great tears in the sky, lakes that foamed with the silver froth of leaping fish and forests upon whose canopy one could walk a thousand miles. The thirst for the horizon had come early to this young nation, fed by icons of startling visions of matter and light whose extent was only the sublime shadow of the limits of knowledge.





Yet, despite the overwhelming desire and optimism shared by these images of plenty, furtive accounts of a different nature continued to surface in the popular imagination. These concerned the curious 'desert seas,' vast regions of stillness that existed seemingly out of time, gaps in the fabric of desire that shrouded the vision of this new land, a dead echo to the unbounded optimism that was projected upon the horizon.

From our present time these dark reflections can only be understood as an inevitable reaction to the positivist utopia that had gripped the soul of this nation, a prescient doubt that persisted through the vision of unbounded optimism. By designating nature as the godhead we had in fact established the groundwork for its extinction. The materialism of the Arcadian Vision could only lead to fulfillment by consuming the very landscape from which it sprung.

*Dan Hoffman, Reports of Explorations and Surveys of the Thirty-Fifth Parallel*

## 7.

Ethics is a dream set up by those who fondle the thought of a definite aim.

*Frederick Philip Grove, Rebels All: Of The Interpretation of Individual Life*

A. J. Russell, Inspector of Crown Agencies in Canada, deplored "negative generalizations," and in a book published in 1869 he suggested, without having seen the West, that Hind and Palliser might well have underrated the agricultural potential of the grasslands ...

Macoun's flattering assessment of the grasslands passed quickly from the official into the popular thought of Canada. The Governor General, Lord Lorne, visited Manitoba and the North-West during the summer of 1881. At a subsequent lecture in Ottawa, he noted that until the publication of Macoun's maps the grasslands south of Battleford had been consigned to the Great American Desert, whereas in fact they constituted a region that "could not be excelled for agricultural purposes." Restraint had collapsed. A region known to be spare, dry, and cold became "the flower garden of the continent whose climate was very much the same as it was in England thirty years ago."

Henry Youle Hind, who had advocated "a gradual process of cautious settlement, consistent with the extreme character of the climate and the very scanty fuel and water resources," was so disturbed by the excesses generated by Macoun's assessment that he emerged from semi-retirement in Windsor, Nova Scotia, to mount what proved to be an extraordinary attack on a set of scientific conclusions. In a series of published letters, previously written to government officials, he accused Macoun of falsifying climatic data, misquoting responsible authors, making spurious generalizations, and describing enormous tracts of country that he had never seen. The larger enemy—Macoun's employer, the Department of the Interior—he accused of subverting science to create a more favourable image of the West. Although disturbed by what he saw as the "progressive depravity of a once proud department," Hind's greater concern was for the prospective victims of government excesses: the "hundreds and



thousands of unconscious immigrants waiting to be decoyed by the glozing tongue of the 'agent' with 'official' report in hand."

Against the hosannas that greeted Macoun's new map of the West, Hind's lone steadying voice had no chance. The new map was a promoter's dream, a *tabula rasa* on which proponents of immediate and rapid settlement, now freed from awkward physical realities, could create the West of their dreams.

*Ronald Rees, New and Naked Land*

He had bought a large map representing the sea,  
Without the least vestige of land:  
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be  
A map they could all understand.  
"What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,  
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?"  
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply  
"They are merely conventional signs!  
Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!  
But we've got our brave Captain to thank:"  
(So the crew would protest) "that he's bought us the best—  
A perfect and absolute blank!"

*Lewis Carroll, The Hunting of the Snark*

## 8.

After examining the entry and cancellation figures for the years 1870–1927, Chester Martin discovered that forty-one out of every hundred homesteaders withdrew before they had even acquired patents to their homesteads.

*Ronald Rees, New and Naked Land*

The houses are empty.  
Only the sparrows visit them.  
In the wind and tall grass,  
They might be pale, yellow ships  
Searching for generations of dreamers  
Lost in the endless wastes of America.

*W.D. Valgardson, The Carpenter of Dreams*

Did you ever hear of "loneliness" as a fatal disease? Once we picked up a man who had lost his way. He was in a terrible state. It wasn't the result of being lost. He had "loneliness." Born on the plains, you get accustomed to them; but on people not born there the plains sometimes have an appalling effect ...





You look on, on, on, out into space, out almost beyond time itself. You see nothing but land and grass, and then more grass—the monotonous, endless prairie! A stranger traveling on the prairie would get his hopes up, expecting to see something different on making the next rise. To him the disappointment and monotony were terrible. “He’s got loneliness,” we would say of such a man ...

*John Noble, The American Magazine, 1927*

Loneliness, thy other name, thy one true synonym, is prairie.

*William A. Quayle, The Prairie and the Sea*

Frederick Niven, the novelist, told of meeting a distraught young man in a city hotel who had recently decided that he was “through with” the prairie. He gave as his reason the view from his pioneer shack, and to demonstrate this he pointed to a window sill. “If you just focus your eyes on that window-sill,” he remarked, “and imagine, you’ll have the view from my homestead. The front of the sill is the beginning of the prairie outside my house; the farther side of the sill is the horizon. Got it?” He quit the homestead on a day when he was working outside and, desperate for the sight of some object between himself and the horizon, rushed inside to look at a wall. He washed the dishes, then made up his mind to leave.

*Ronald Rees, New and Naked Land*



"*Praeter solitudinem nihil video*," wrote one early explorer—"I saw nothing but solitude." And yet, fatal shipwreck after shipwreck, bankruptcy after bankruptcy, the expeditions continued, strung out on the thinnest hopes, with the most sanguine expectations. Men of character continued to sail to their death for men of greed.

*Barry Lopez, Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*

MEPH.                    A raging flood of fire ...

The crimson surf

Regurgitates,

Surges up to the gates ...

The damned swim madly,

Hoping for relief ...

Such interesting sights

To see,

In odd corners;

So many terrors

In such a space!

You're right

To give the sinners

A terrific fright;

They think it's a dream,

They just can't face

That they are where they are.

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust*

The cold statistics on the successes and failures of homesteading testify to the large number of people who did not fulfill their dreams in the "last best West." The rate of attrition—the failure of the homesteader to "prove up" and thus obtain a patent for his quarter section—was extraordinary. Almost half of those who tried to bring their dreams into reality had those dreams shattered in a nightmare of failure. For them, the prairie west was not "the promised land." Their story is often lost since it was unpopular to write about failure, especially in a land that had promised so much. They were denounced as "knockers" in a society of boosters.

*R. Douglas Francis, Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies*

"Look: a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, another the other way ..."

"Then why torment thyself so, dearest Pierre?"

"It is the law."

"What?"

"That a nothing should torment a nothing; for I am a nothing. It is all a dream—we dream that we dreamed we dream."

*Herman Melville, Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*





One cannot but feel that it was a shame to have lured such people out into the wilderness to make shipwreck of their lives. But failures of many kinds are too common there to attract much attention or excite much pity.

*Adam Shortt, Some Observations on the Great North-West*

The prairie madness is perfectly recognized and very common still; the "bachelors" suffer worse, and the women ... The fancies come, and suspicions, and queer ways, and at last the young Mounted Policeman comes to the door, and carries her away to the terrible vast "Sanatorium" that hangs above the Saskatchewan [River]. There is still that kind of loneliness on the prairie.

*Elizabeth Mitchell (member, Britain's Garden Cities Association)*



9.

GOD turn every dream to good for us! For to my Wit it is Wondrous, by the rood, what causes dreams by night or by morrow; and why some be fulfilled and some never, why that is a vision and this a revelation, why this is one kind of dream, and that another, and not to every man alike; why this one is an illusion and that an oracle. I know not, but whosoever knows the causes of these prodigies better than I, let him divine; for I certainly wot naught thereof ...

*Geoffrey Chaucer, The House of Fame*

"The bloodiest absolutely bloodiest climate on the face of the bloody earth!" Mr. Portingale bawled. "And by God something's bloody weel got to be done abaat it!"

*Edward McCourt, Saskatchewan*

"If lengths had been correctly measured," wrote the Surveyor General in his annual report for 1913, "the land survey of the Dominion would have been the most perfect and remarkable one in the world."

*Ronald Rees, New and Naked Land*

"Maybe," said Hearn, "I've sounded too blue. Feeling a little down today. I've just been over the land again and there's no moisture and the tractor needs a new bull pinion. I suppose we're lucky we're not being bombed. It's all right for a young man. If I was young, I'd move up north. They get moisture there."

*Bruce Hutchison, The Unknown Country*

Our wide, dry  
     sea affords  
 no purchase for  
     action. We have  
 got used to  
     being overwhelmed.  
 We assume it all  
     will pass, that  
 there is room  
     on either side  
 and anyway time.  
     So we just wait  
 for what's next,  
     and make up the past.

*Kenneth McRobbie, In Open Prairie*





Manitoban Steve Santini holds a crystal wine glass and a life preserver, two of the artifacts from the Titanic he owns. The collector has gathered 150 pieces of memorabilia from the ship.  
*Robert Tinker/The Globe and Mail*