

**A Prairie Folk · N. E. Davis**

I.

A decrecent moon westers, candle sockets singe fingers.

Grave patriarch to future begettings  
yokes horses  
knots ropes, unchucks wheels.

She sleeps yet within, fit to “set all the eyes of court a-fire,  
like a burning glass,  
and work them into cinders.”

Land little tramped by castor furseekers and Frenchmen, treatybound to newcomers  
from one land of ice to another it will seem in six months’ time  
but ohsoblazing hot in but a few hours.

The wagon slips harbor at dawn  
and emptiness yawns before the prow.  
Of a sudden he Adam east of Eden.

A wide and prairie sea bowing in obeisance ahead of an untamed wind  
disperséd  
isolate  
hanging onto world’s eave two thousand miles long.  
Desperadoes not yet inveterate of heartache busting sod drinking playas.

Not yet a score of years  
(a small tally)  
they’d all have been throatcut bedecked with feather fletching  
before they’d gone twenty miles  
Another small tally until the land is bound in asphalt bands, laid in seeming chaos but how  
otherwise could they have come forth?

Not yet a score of years Holy Joe Smith passed here  
twice  
in a righteous anger, battalion wrathmade to free his fledglings  
in flight by dead of winter, night, jailsprung to build locus for relief  
on the Mississippi.  
(Wrongly they called his death a sacrifice. The germ of his death was sown in upstate New  
York when the old spirit called to him three times in the night.)

West so far that one step further and the world  
overwelts.  
To these windswept steppes, of all places the end of the glaciers in fertile and graveled  
strata  
not the fruitless stony soil the Pilgrims worked in woe, allochthonous in form and habit  
nor yet the Regnum Lapideum of the Comanche Apache Moqui  
only patience through all the long years of the ice age whilst men shivered in sealskin  
crisping and sharpening flint for the fight

patience to grind the mountains of Saskatchewan into careful riversilt strewn at hazard &  
yet regathered in spangled bands  
    this moraine in guise of humble hill yet last reaching finger of the Arctic dark  
        (which waits certain of its return,  
            some longfuture or perhaps near at hand season  
when the glaciers gather strength like the tolling of a final bell  
and strike down in chase of skein  
    to join hands with their brethren across the zeroth parallel  
)

## II.

They lay down álamos against river fords  
serry logs crosswise on the high ground  
notch logs for mutual receipt  
breakback travail of an inland sea  
    a man would sell his soul for a good axe and a stone to whet it  
a good dog to keep the lonely night watch  
    a good woman.

She'd a cousin gone to Indiana to dredge her living from the  
    great swamp which when men found it drained it sanded it planted it  
        banished it from this world  
for no real thing could essay in success the haunting name Limberlost.

    The well  
weeks without relent  
rock bucket teetering overhead  
    the bucket of Damocles, she called it then  
    and he was glad for her smile in the waste.  
A stone gorget broke against his spade.

    this dirt black like God's own nightsoil  
    groundwrought  
    baronial  
Later the men of science come in ranks to probe the soil  
        naming it in series teased forth  
    Catlin Onarga Xenia La Hogue  
    loam to eighteen inches, then silt and clay to bedrock  
inexhaustible fertility  
    encompassed to turn oil into maize and back into oil  
    only our sorry merit to use thus a philosopher's stone.

## III.

The Old Country had a tale.  
    The Wild Hunt  
        some called it

the gods in majestic array pursuing across the sky  
some stag or boar  
pageant *argent-vive*.  
It's easy to believe that here,  
never seen so much sky  
but sky still softened  
hazy indiscriminate.  
Out here you can see so far that parallel tracks defy geometry to meet.

Water everywhere on the horizon cerulean lies  
distant trees root in the firmament  
and nightfallen bitterns and owls plea stiff & stark & strong  
in kindred and perennial contest.

IV.

Johnmas High Summer  
segue of wakefulness into discomfort  
wet cloth hanging in the corners to cool the thick air

Hwæt! vagrant cloudburst caterwaul  
spills a god's ransom of icy pearls to bear down the crops  
and bewitch again the hope of man.

It's early enough yet and there's seed corn though we meant it for food not planting.  
Broken cornstalks write runes in a hand no man can read.

The next morning he found a drowned possum on the walk before the house. He was not  
the only one to make the discovery, startling a large masassauga who'd investigated a  
decaying heat but turned away chagrined.  
(Had it not been a dugout perhaps Old Scratch would have concealed himself  
in crafty fatness underneath planked floors.)

Now tongueflicked air vibrates  
each canny beast undergrasps all in a gelid moment  
and two paces apart they stare struck dumb  
one unblinking the other unable.  
Christ, what a monster! Seven feet if it's an inch.

Around the cabin corner comes his boy  
& callow ebullience meets *aculebrado*.  
Crossed at the heels now his father sucks the poison out, spitting blood and bitter venom as  
the toddler heaves and hurls.  
He passes from violent fever to clammy stillness  
a heart's beat's breadth from breath to air.  
They lay him to rest behind the new barn, a board of dry wood modestly marking name  
and dates so also in the family Bible.  
His mother comes often here over the years resounding  
her hands stained with black walnut knead a knotted towel between them.

His father less so but he comes.  
He remembers.

There is a promise  
they look forward to when  
of a sudden petrichor and the cold shower of rain will wash out salten tears.  
He shall awake and arise on Resurrexion Morning.

V.

Prairie metes malice and caprice in equal measure  
surges together  
Indian and pioneer; these take a fair champaign in crashing massacre  
but tamed at last & broken to the uses of plow and pasture  
uplifting in long godly thrust every people that above her walk.

Broken cornstalks write runes in a hand no man can read  
but the letters are written by the hands of men.

Drawn to Frontier like moth to starren,  
In endsaying these men who crossed a continent landlocked high and dry  
Pass back ever a joyful word for those who come along upcountry:  
Thalassa! Thalassa!