

FIRST CANTO: LANDSPACE

Vast blank canvas of a harsh land
hung tattered at the top from ice pole
and stretched below along a single latitude
taut into the framework of two oceans.
The seasons try their colour schemes here
always springing summer on us in passing
falling forever into winter sleep
between the skeletons of elms and maples
leaving the ground whitewashed so shroud bleak
it chills the light to the very bone of stillness.
What artist dare raise his vision from the dead
centre of creation against this dinosaur indifference?

North my love north
where the earth stands firm
against the continental drift
and whirls the stars about us
like a frozen wheel of fire,
look north for the future
in a chrysalis of snow.
In your seeing the sun exults.

The dazzled eye squints at all that purity
to find a fault on which to build a world
in that fierce white and random green geography:
in the beginning emptiness was moved to form
a point here a line there a shading –
time's puzzling doodles, a madman's scrawls
unparalleled in perspective, wanting sense
with shapes inconceivable in mind or matter,
his will unhinged perhaps and yet unbroken
in the chains of mountains lakes plains and forests
forged to confine even a race of titans.

Our passage takes us
north my love northwest
where darkness drifts
into our tracks of snow
the moon firmly traces
the charcoal sketches night draws
on the tundra's flat surface
to bring what passes into relief.

Perhaps the hand that marked these planes

refused to map such giant intersecting voids
or if such wilderness is map it took its measure
and direction by force of ice-aged waters
and glacial winds, savage even in their moments
of serenity, cutting the mind's space into myths.
Perhaps there was no hand to make signs or give
directions before Cartier's curse before the Viking sword
before stone-age nomads, even before Cain this was a world
continent, Pangea, before the lobe-fin half crutched
half crawled ashore from the Devonian sea.

North of passion my love
north of the touch of flesh
the sky burns black
candles in a winter sleep.
Wolves howl.
Wake up and cry quickly
when the white fire of their cuspids
strikes blood.

This is no country for a master race. Here
rivers run immemorial with the explosive
energy of glaciers, dwarf us even in our dreams
and sweep away the vain. Niagaras of sunlight
have pounded this rock into a shield to crush
pride by sheer weight and volume. Storms
ride the length of this continent shaking
with the hoof thunder of mammoth herds
of buffalo and caribou that once stampeded
the horizons to the imagined frontiers of infinity
leaving the landscape of the mind in awe.

North my love north
the lines are drawn
so that no trees
may reach the sky.
The blind heart rebels
and in a euphoria of conquest
marches northward
to the coyote's call.

The weight of snow cripples, breaks trees here
tall as ambition, lightning flicks its tongue
blazing into the August taiga to unleash a tempest
of flames inexorable as a nightmare or an ice rain

turns the boreal forest into a fairy-tale of glass
more rigid than death: the sky, its elbow deep
in Newfoundland's rugged coves kneels hard
on Rocky Mountain slopes and will not let go
its stranglehold – the sky is master of us all
and in a mockery of pioneer adventurer explorer
shakes the heart down to its primordial roots.

The sky puts out
the fires of the sun
that knows not south or north.
It is our love
creates the patterns
in this northern light
and maps the unknown
land between.