

## Desert Places

There is the kind of oblique courage suggested in the final lines of Frost's poem – "They cannot scare me with their empty spaces/Between stars--on stars where no human race is..." that children have when, spitting their you-can't-scare-mes on the schoolyard to bolster their courage, they cry out a similar defiant challenge to the world. They know, of course, that their words are hollow, and that all the courage is in the cry. Yet knowing the vanity of their challenge, and throwing down the gauntlet in spite of it all is, in some strange human way, empowering. Likewise when we as adults, like Lear in our moments of futile rage, shake our puny fists to the heavens and declare, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!" we too know that we stand as "poor servile slaves" to the universe and that our rage is more bluster than courage.

It is of course draining, this constant back-to-the-wall, requiring more of us than we can possibly give, and so we journey on, head down, eyes averted, with the insouciance of youth and the banality of the quotidian harbouring us from our damascene moment on the heath where we might recognize that we are no more than a "poor forked animal". A dull existence - unless, perchance, we stumble upon our "own desert places" forcing us to flail against the taunting jeers of the universe; in these moments of wide-open terror, we are truly alive.

Happily there are moments when art has the courage to expose these "desert places", and Hammer's prairie photographs, whose narratives remind us that for all our bravado and posturing and empire building we are lonely creatures on this planet, rouse

us from our somnolence. These photos, of those “empty spaces, where no human race is”, with the heavens roiling in a cold brightness, provoke what Wordsworth called an elemental fear. It is either the elements that frighten us, or, more telling perhaps, it is what the elements reveal to us about ourselves, our “own empty spaces”, that we fear. At one time we would have built a theogony on our fears, but Hammer does not allow us this opportunity – there are no gods in these mountains, in these clouds, to assuage our vertigo. In some photos there is so much sky that we must grasp greedily to the little land there is in order not to lose our equilibrium. And in those photos where we have more land, it is often a trompe l’oeil – mountain lakes and prairie dugouts reflect the sky so thoroughly that we are left standing, dizzy, our backs against the wall with the abyss taunting our fears.

Hammer also puts to rest the lie of the ethos of the frontier that Canadians have grown up with, which reads that we brought civilization to the uncivilized, god to the godless, and hospitality to the inhospitable. When his eye falls on civilization it reveals its decrepitude and finiteness. Old buildings are not only failed dreams, they are witnesses to our failed rapacity – the elements have prevailed. We have come and gone, but the land remains. There is in these pictures the kind of apocalyptic tone that McCarthy’s western trilogy evokes. There might have been men scrabbling about – those “forked animals”, but there are none now. It is a hard tale, made harder by the unblinking truth of these photos.

So is it a cliché to note that the storm is always pending, and that we are finite and that the universe is not? From someone with a lesser talent this might be the

danger, and then we are left with great photos for a calendar. But Hammer has more courage than that; he turns his face away from the safe and easy in these photos, and addresses our loneliness. The vertigo we feel is his vertigo, not some trick the camera has played on us. Light falls on a small patch within a corral and we are drawn in, caged, alone, with the edge of the world just beyond the fence; sagging telephone lines leading from nowhere to nowhere whisper echoes of forgotten word; buildings, covered with runic signs of long ago commerce, stand like Stonehenge, testaments to some long-forgotten god. And when, we in some attempt to push back, leave some mechanical lines, furrows on a hill, cemented roads and overpasses, city streets, Hammer shows us that gesture too is thwarted by the organic power of the elements – weeds through asphalt, lines that always draw us to a convergence of sky and land that is never faded nor blurred from view, but clear and cold.

In the end these photos of the Canadian prairies are all the more prophetic and ironic because they are not of some easily characterized place in peril, but because they are of a place where we arrogantly and blindly assume that we have achieved immortality. Hammer opens our eyes, if we have the courage to see, and reminds us that we are oh so mortal.

Larry Paetkau, Winnipeg Canada

February 12