Editorial

An American couple driving in Canada on vacation are lost. The woman suggests that her husband ask someone. He sees some pedestrians, stops, gets out of the car, and walks over to question them.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where we are?"

"Saskatoon, Saskatchewan."

The man gets back into his car.

"It's no use, dear, they don't speak English."

YOU NON-CANADIANS probably wouldn't know that Saskatchewan is a largish province in the middle of the country. It's deep prairie, topographically challenged: saying it's flat is an understatement. "Here was the least common denominator of nature, the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky—Saskatchewan prairie" (W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*). Its population amounts to less than four percent of Canada (which is sparse anyway). It's almost entirely rural, white, white-bread. It's the empty back of beyond; in the middle of nowhere.

But Saskatchewan shows up surprisingly strongly in Canadian consciousness, perhaps because it seems to represent Canada to Canadians: ordinary, moderate, clean, bland, straightforward, nice. This is, to a large extent, an identity based on what is missing—the extremes associated with other countries, especially with its behemoth next-door neighbour. We're not-them. We are what we aren't.

Canadians like their Saskatchewan. It may look like nothing to outsiders, they tell me, but it's a plenitude to us. And they like the Saskatchewanity of their country. I know several Canadians who recall with patriotic pride a news item printed a while ago concerning a yearly poll taken among news reporters to determine the most boring country to be assigned to as a foreign correspondent. Switzerland won on one occasion, but Canada won every other

year. Canadians rather enjoy the rest of the world's ignorance and unconsciousness of everything Canadian, represented in the joke above. They gleefully tell each other stories about foreigners who arrive with their skis in August, or who get off the plane in Vancouver and ask a taxi driver to take them to their cousin's house in Halifax (a taxi ride of about 6000 kilometres, in case you didn't know).

When I told Ron Huebert, the once-and-future editor of this Journal, that this issue was to have a Saskatchewan theme, he suggested that it should therefore be printed with several blank pages in the middle. (He's from there, by the way, so he's allowed to make jokes about it.)

"Sweet Saskatchewan" shows up in Doug Schulz's poem "Meadowlark," and plays a central role in Beverley Bie Brahic's poem "Going Back to Saskatchewan" in which Mother must return to the place, though people say there is nothing to see there.

Michael deBeyer's story "Shopping for Meat in Winter" doesn't mention the province itself, and probably doesn't even take place there (it has the requisite enormous empty fields covered with snow, but it also has a non-prairie thick forest). But I think of it as Saskatchewanian anyway: it's full of ordinary, aggressively banal objects. What's important in this story is what's missing. Nothing means anything—everything just sits there, being nothing more than what it obviously is.

DeBeyer's story has strong affinities with an important contemporary Canadian school of painting, whose best-known practitioners are Christopher Pratt, Alex Colville, and Ken Danby. They have been called "magic realists," but they do not share the Latin American magic realists' preoccupation with the supernatural. The Canadian uncanny arises from the extremely—preternaturally—normal. The Canadian magic realists paint everyday objects and generic, sometimes faceless, people, larger and clearer than in life, as if seen through the clean dry air of the Canadian prairies, disquieting in their heightened ordinariness and bland inexplicability. Their meaning is lack of meaning. It's no use, dear, they don't speak English.

RM