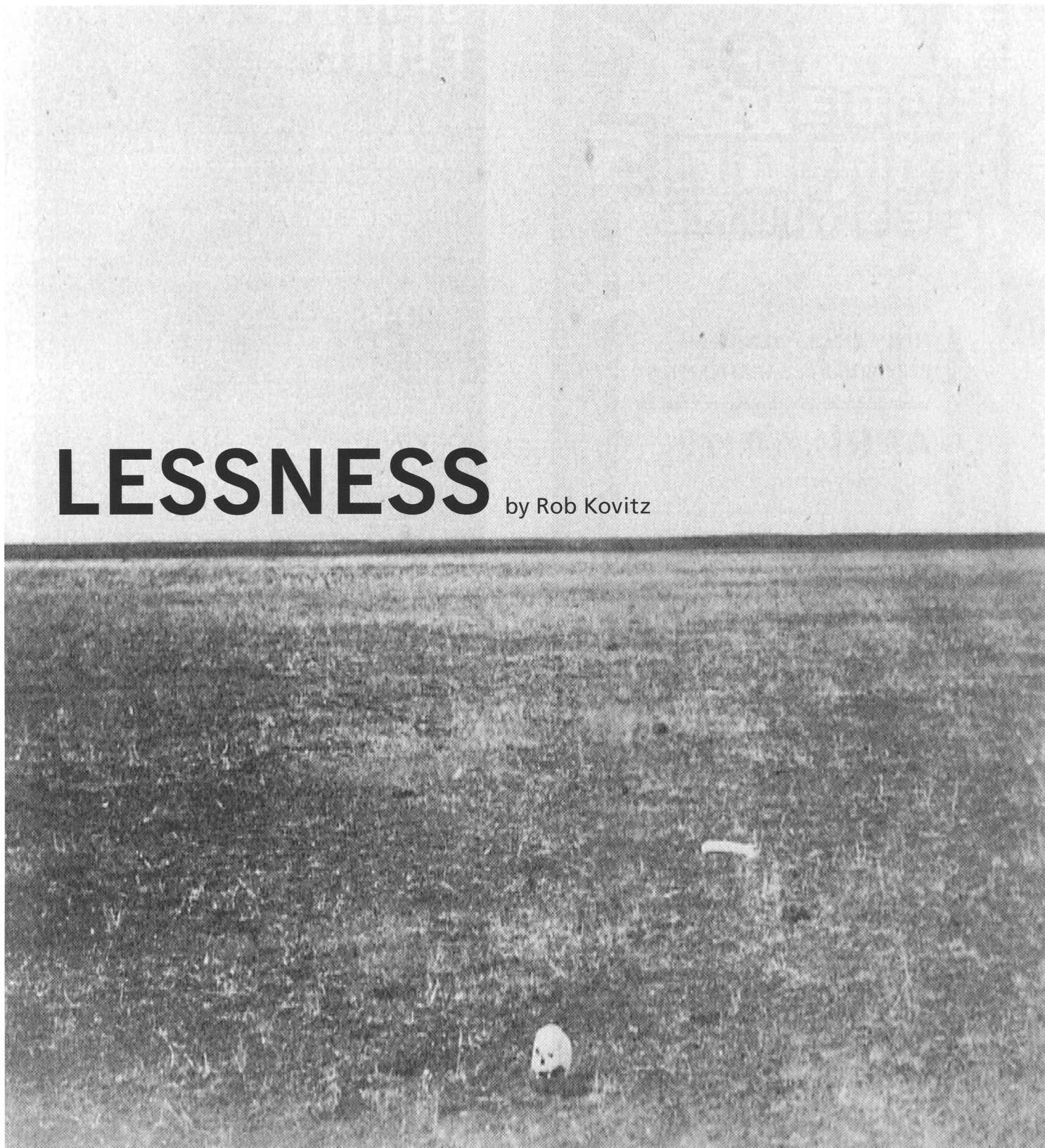


# LESSNESS

by Rob Kovitz



**FLATNESS** Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? *The Book of Job*. So he leads me, far from the sight of God, panting and broken by fatigue, to the middle of the plains of Boredom, profound and empty. *Charles Baudelaire, Destruction*. An irremediable flatness is coming over the world. *William James, On Some of Life's Ideals*.

**WEATHER** "Climate" as a word began with the Greeks—, a slope. Various differences in the growth of trees and plants, in the time of fruiting and ripening, in the flavor of edibles and the bouquet of wines, and in the comfort of people and animals doubtless engaged the attentive speculation of early Greek agriculturists. Probably the comparative advantages and disadvantages of slopes facing north and east, or south and west, of slopes at high elevations or of slopes near the sole of the valley, were discussed with much argument about the variation of sunshine and wind, and drainage of air and water in relation to slope and earliness or quality of crops. At least such discussions may be heard often to-day in the valleys of British Columbia where the merits of lower, middle and high "benches" or slopes are often the subject of conversation or of writing. No doubt this was so centuries ago in Greece and so the "climatic" or "slope" features of a piece of cultivated soil, from involving at first some considerations of the effect of weather upon the slope, became by gradual changes in usage of speech at last a criterion of the beneficence of the weather-sequences upon the land no matter which way it sloped nor whether there were any slope at all. *A. J. Connor, The Climate of Manitoba*.

**FLATNESS** When you drive westward through northern Ontario, you are in rugged Shield country, your horizon closely bounded by forests and rocks. Then at Richer in eastern Manitoba, at a dazzling white beach ridge of former Lake Agassiz, the black earths of the plains open endlessly before you and your head spins from a new sense of space. *John Welsted, et al., The Geography of Manitoba*. Here was the spaciousness, you might say, of the raw materials of creation. *Richard E. Byrd, Alone*. In many tallgrass prairies, the break between forest and grassland was shockingly abrupt. There was no gradual thinning of trees, no transition in which prairie grasses mingled with open groves. A man would walk through forest, and then suddenly he would break out into an open world of limitless sky and distance. At his back were the familiar trees and flowers of the Old States; out front was a vast sea of grasses in an entirely new plant association. In ten strides he had passed from one world to another, across what was probably the sharpest, clearest boundary between any of the major floristic provinces of the New World. *John Madson, Where the Sky Began*. This country is so level. *Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Voyages through the Continent of North America in the Years 1789 and 1793*.

**WEATHER** The northerly situation of Manitoba and its location in the centre of a large land mass give the province a continental climate. It has long cold winters, short hot summers, and an annual precipitation of slightly less than 20 inches (50.8 cm), with a little more in the south than in the north. Precipitation in the winter is in the form of snow, but although this is limited in amount, the cold temperature causes it to accumulate. *Keith Wilson, Manitoba: Profile of a Province*.

**EMPTINESS** 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*.

**ANALYSIS** How will human beings be able to endure this place? she thought. Why, there isn't even a thing that one can hide behind! *O. E. Rølvaag, Giants in the Earth*. A few speculative images / shyly define our place / trying to embrace our world / the necessarily outrageous flats / pitted against the huge sky. *Peter Stevens, Prairie: Time and Place*. The specification of a criterion measure is central to the investigation of any construct. Derivative observations are of scientific or practical merit only when the criterion accurately reflects the phenomenon of interest. In the context of scenic quality analysis, the phenomenon of interest is the aesthetic response of individuals to visually perceived features of the landscape. Although the nature of aesthetic responses is far from being understood or agreed upon by researchers, they can generally be considered to be affective or evaluative responses (Wohlwill, 1976) that reflect pleasure or displeasure (Berlyne, 1974). Defined in this manner, aesthetic responses may be assessed through verbal, psychophysiological, and behavioral measures (Berlyne, 1974; Wohlwill, 1976).

*Nickolaus R Feimer, Environmental Perception and Cognition in Rural Contexts*. **WEATHER** Of all its geographical characteristics, cultural or physical, Manitoba is perhaps best known for its climate. Its long, harsh winters are known far and wide, and the reputation of Winnipeg's Portage and Main intersection as being Canada's coldest corner is legendary.... The climate is characterized by variability and extremes, not only in its temperatures but also in its weather in general. It subjects Manitoba to cold snaps, heat waves, droughts, floods, blizzards, thunderstorms, tornadoes, waterspouts, ice storms, hailstorms, and innumerable passages of fronts associated with pressure systems. Because of this variability, there is no doubt that it is one of the world's more interesting climates. *Danny Blair, The Climate of Manitoba*. [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 in the Years 1789 and 1793*.

**ABSTRACTION** The western landscape is one without boundaries quite often. So you have the experience within a kind of chaos, yet you have to order it somehow to survive. I'm particularly interested in the kinds of orderings we do on that landscape. *Russell Brown, An Interview with Robert Kroetsch*. One means to do this was through abstraction. Abstract painting is not, of course, a prairie invention, but it could very well have been. *R. Douglas Francis, Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies*. To touch this land with words requires an architectural structure; to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or skyscraper over and into space. *Rudy Wiebe, A Novelist's Personal Notes on Frederick Philip Grove*.

**FLATNESS** He stood, a point / on a sheet of green paper / proclaiming himself the centre, / with no walls, no borders / anywhere; the sky no height / above him, totally un- / enclosed / and shouted: / Let me out! / He dug the soil in rows, / imposed himself with shovels / He asserted / into the furrows, I / am not random. / The ground / replied with aphorisms: / a tree-sprout, a nameless / weed, words / he couldn't

understand. / The house pitched / the plot staked / in the middle of nowhere. / At night the mind / inside, in the middle / of nowhere ... / In the darkness the fields / defend themselves with fences / in vain: / Everything / is getting in. Margaret Atwood, *Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer*. Every prairie man gallops, / A cossack, into the sky. / But the horizon betrays him / Endlessly. His horse falters, / The distance too great, / The sudden rush reduced / To prairie skills / Not hot blood but patience, / Not swiftness but endurance, / A husbanding of resources. / Without realizing it, the rider / Complies, becomes someone else, / Becomes reserved, cautious, / Realizes the demands of vast distances, / Abandons dreams of quick victory, / Prepares for winter. W. D. Valgardson, *The Carpenter of Dreams*.

**WEATHER** Measurements of wind, and therefore predictions of wind, are based on the wind speed over water or open ground at a height of about thirty feet. Wind, however, is strongly affected by terrain, and by what it blows through and against. Everything that the wind moves, or fails to move, eats up some of the wind's kinetic energy and potentially changes its speed and direction.... And the closer one gets to the ground, the more befuddled the wind becomes—even on a brisk day the wind speed at the ground is nearly zero. On my desk is a scientific study of wind flow in stands of trees. Terms like “inhomogeneity,” “turbulence,” “skew,” “eddy,” and “shear” suggest that there may be exceptions to the wind standards established by large geophysical forces. All weather reporting is simplification, but proclamations of wind speed need to be taken with a huge grain of salt. A prediction of wind speed of ten kilometres per hour on the weather report, even if it is correct at a height of thirty feet, does not tell me what the wind is doing in my back yard. Ken Luther, *I Have Seen The Wind*.

**FLATNESS** We can't comprehend the prairie flattened into need; we feel it Peter Stevens, *Prairie: Time and Place*. Sometimes I think the land is flat because the winds have leveled it, they blow so constantly. William H. Gass, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. Whatever the pioneers may have been before their migration, they soon became more meditative, abstracted, and taciturn. John L. McConnell, *Western Characters*.

**ABSTRACTION** Here it's so desolate and frightening on the wild prairie. It is like the ocean. We are a tiny midpoint in a circle.... You will ... understand that it looks terrifying, more than you can imagine.... Letter From Danish Immigrants in Western Canada, quoted in *Scandinavian Experiences on the Prairies, 1890-1920*, by Jorgen Dahlie.

Little void mighty light four square all white blank planes all gone from mind. Flatness endless little body only upright all sides earth sky body ruins. Four square true refuge long last four walls over backwards no sound. Never but this changelessness dream the passing hour. Samuel Beckett, *Lessness*. Several times he sank to his knees, bending his body low, crouching in an agony of misery. Had anybody met him and asked him, sternly, “What is that thought which is lurking beyond the edge of your world, ready to rise above the horizon?” he would have searched in his mind, sincerely, honestly; yet he would have found nothing but a painful, raw void to face, to probe into which without encountering anything was baffling, infinitely tormenting. Frederick Philip Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh*.

**NAKEDNESS** If man must wrestle, perhaps it is well that it should be on the nakedest possible plain. Herman Melville, *Pierre, or, the Ambiguities*. We are floating. In the depths of the space which is called Sheol and which extends outside the limits of creation, without light or darkness, in every direction, in an endless curve. Here we may talk, says Lucifer; there is no God here and none of his creatures, be they spiritual or corporeal; this is the absolute nothing, and the nothing has no ears. I am not afraid, I say to him. Lucifer smiles, his usual crooked smile. Whoever wants to change the world as you do, he says, has every reason to fear for his welfare. A slight breath of wind seems to be touching us; but it is no wind, it's a stream of particles, infinitely small granules of nothingness which are moving from one nothing into another. Stefan Heym, *The Wandering Jew*.

**ABSTRACTION** We love what is beautiful for submitting to us, for being less than we are; we react with dread and awe to what is sublime because of its appearing greater than we are, for being *more*, and making us acknowledge its power. Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*. The prairie horizon is the perfect metaphor for the furthest boundary, the ultimate reaches of earth-bound consciousness. On the prairie one twists around and around till the straight horizon line turns into its opposite, a circle, and the visual turns visionary. George Melnyk, *Radical Regionalism*. The ascent to the heights of Non-Objective art is arduous and painful, but is rewarding nonetheless. The familiar begins to recede into the background. The contours of the objective world fade more and more, step by step until finally the world, everything on which we have lived, becomes lost to sight. No more likeness or reality, no idealistic images, nothing but a desert. I was fearful of leaving the ordinary world of will and idea, but the promise of liberation drew me onward, onto a desert filled with the spirit of Non-Objective sensation, where nothing is real except the feeling. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematism*.

**WEATHER** And there is no end, and never can be— ... no end to Space and all the things that fill it, or all would come together in a heap and smash up in the middle—and there is no middle! no end, no beginning, no middle! no middle, Gogo! think of that! it is the most inconceivable thing of all!!! George Du Maurier, Peter Ibbetson. Desolate? Forbidding? There was never a country that in its good moments was more beautiful. Even in drought or dust storm or blizzard it is the reverse of monotonous, once you have submitted to it with all the senses. You don't get out of the wind, but learn to lean and squint against it. You don't escape sky and sun, but wear them in your eyeballs and on your back. You become acutely aware of yourself. The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, as enigmatic as a question mark. It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones. At noon the total sun pours on your single head; at sunrise or sunset you throw a shadow a hundred yards long. It was not prairie dwellers who invented the indifferent universe or impotent man. Puny you may feel there, and vulnerable, but not unnoticed. This is a land to mark the sparrow's fall. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow*.

**FLATNESS** You come all this way and then when you get here there's nothing to see. John Cage, *Silence*. Face to calm eye touch close all calm all white all gone from mind. Never but imagined the blue in a wild imagining the blue celeste of poesy. Little void mighty light four square all white blank planes all gone from mind. Samuel Beckett, *Lessness*. There's a good deal more scenery wanted in this country, ain't there. Edward Roper, *By Track and Trail Through Canada*.





The virgin land-shortgrass plains and an old buffalo wallow (Manitoba Archives).