

Andrew Suknaski / PHILLIP WELL

in prairie spring
i stand before a wheeltightener
(two vices held by a single bolt)
thinking of phillip well
found in his woodshed on the edge
of wood mountain —
a rusty 22 still held in his arms
like a young woman
this very first day of the thaw

i ask my village: who was this man —
this man who left us?

in 1914 he & my father
walked south from moose jaw
to find a homestead —
slept in haystacks along the way
(nearly burnt to death once
waking in the belly of hell
only saved by the meuling mice
& their song of agony —
a homesteader thought he'd teach them
a lesson)

phillip well & father
lived in the side of a hill —
built fires to heat stones each day
(hunted & skinned animals to make blankets —
threw redhot stones into the cellar
& overlaid them with willows —
then slept between hides)

father once showed me a picture —
nine black horses pulling a plough
with phillip well riding behind —
breaking the homestead to make a home

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well was a quiet softspoken man —
loved horses & trees
(planted poplars around his shack
when the land began to drift away)

in hard time well bought a wheeltightener
& tightened wheels for grasshopperthin men
of the prairies —
tanned hides & mended harnesses
(later moved to wood mountain
to be near people who could take him to a doctor)

today as men of wood mountain
(their faces altered by well's passing)
drink coffee in jimmy hoy's cafe
no one remembers if he ever had a sweetheart —
though someone recalls a dance one christmas
in a school near the montana border —
well drunk sleeping on a bench
in the corner as the people danced —
well lonelier than judas after the kiss
(the heart's sorrow like a wagonwheel's iron ring
tightening around the brain
till the center cannot hold
& the body breaks)