

Andrew Suknaski / HOMESTEAD 1914  
(SEC 32 TP4 RGE 2 W3RD  
SASKATCHEWAN)

axe  
saw  
hammer

*i*     *father*

father  
eight years old  
frightened by grandfather's stories  
the cossacks burning looting polish villages  
abusing women & hanging fathers —  
in his child's mind  
he knows they will reach his ukrainian village  
some dark night —  
while the children play  
he disappears into the forest  
runs away from home forever  
moving from farm to farm  
a nameless child  
till a foreign cobbler befriends him  
& teaches him a craft for four years —  
he finally moves to other countries  
makes shoes for ten years  
learns to breathe & love in twelve languages  
& when can no longer live in the old cities  
runs further to canada  
the european papers call it a land of promise  
with free land for a new life  
an easier life  
that for many becomes an illusion & ultimate failure —  
father being one of the fortunate)

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*ii mother*

mother  
the ship sails for the new land  
& she on it  
(the fare paid by a brother in limrick saskatchewan)  
dancing in the arms of some young man  
she remembers the polish village  
the day her mother is fatally struck by a car  
& her father  
years later in a church where he is bored  
with the endless mass —

how he ambles among the crowd  
joking with young women  
till the infuriated old women send someone  
for the village cop  
who summons him to the rectory —  
draws a sword  
delivering a blow to his head —  
leaving him unconscious on the rectory floor  
goes back to his sunday wine & tales of cossacks —  
how he rises  
& binds his splitskull with a rag  
torn from the priest's gown in a drawer  
& returns home to wait for the inevitable  
infection

she remembers being fourteen  
at the beginning of the first world war —  
how she & another girl walk twelve miles to work  
every three days  
to shovel coal onto flatcars for sixteen hours  
& walk home again thru dark forest lit by wolves' eyes

she remembers how the currency changes  
as the war ends —  
her money & several years' work suddenly worthless  
all this drifts away from the ship carrying her  
to the new land

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### *iii      homestead*

father arrives in moose jaw  
fall of 1914 —  
finds the landtitle office  
& is given the bearings to find the homestead  
east of wood mountain village —  
he buys a packsack & some provisions  
walks south  
sleeping in haystacks for first few nights  
  
finally arrives in the village  
& buys the homesteader's essentials  
axe saw hammer  
lumber nails shovel gun bullets food & other items  
(hires someone with waggon & horses  
to drive him to the homestead —  
builds the house floor & raises one wall that day —  
feeling the late autumn chill  
nails together a narrow wooden box  
in which to spend the first night) —  
  
next morning  
he emerges from the box  
& rises thru two feet on fresh snow  
to find most of the tools stolen  
(except for the gun bullets & knife inside the box)  
  
realizing winter is upon him  
he searches for a hillside  
& finds a spot to carve out a cellar  
where he will endure the first few years  
  
completing the cellar with the blunted knife  
he nails together a roof with a stone —  
the wall from the first structure  
becomes the north wall with a door  
hacked from the altered window

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(he now realizes he would never have heated  
the other place  
would have frozen to death —  
something that hadn't crossed his confused mind  
the first day)

he lives in the cellar for four years —  
phillip well being the closest neighbor

they build fires to heat stones each day  
& at night throw redhot stones into the cellars —  
overlay them with willows  
covering them with hides from skinned animals  
(use other hides for blankets  
& thus survive the winters till pre-emption time is up  
till the landtitle is secured —  
till the more suitable sod house is built)

father walks six times between moose jaw  
& wood mountain  
before the haggling civil servants give him his title —  
each time he carries a ten dollar bill  
sewn inside a pocket  
(is always afraid he'll be mugged & robbed  
while sleeping in haystacks along the way)

once he & phillip well nearly burn alive  
in a stack  
the farmer sets fire to  
to teach the homesteaders & transients  
a lesson

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### *iv      the marriage*

the marriage

it is uncertain

(no one knows the exact date)

following a saturday night hardtime dance  
they meet at her brother's place in limrick —  
are later married in a simple church  
& are driven home in a model-t  
to begin the new life

at harvest time the next year  
while they stock  
her labour pains begin —  
he panics  
runs back to the new shack  
& drags out a mattress —  
throws it in the waggon & harnesses the horses  
hitches them up  
& whips them all the way to the field —  
picks her up from where she sits crying against a stook  
places her on the mattress  
& slowly drives to the nearest neighbor —  
sweat descending like an august rain

stops at the shack  
knocks  
asks if the woman can deliver the baby —  
speechless & resembling a frightened cat  
she slams the door in his face

he drives to another neighbor and is refused again —  
then despondently drives home  
(carries mattress & wife into the shack  
puts water on to heat  
& brings out clean towels —

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then delivers their first son  
administers the requisite slap  
as the boy's cries mingle with the murmuring wind  
along the shingles)

other children arrive with the dry years  
the black blizzards foreshadow the grasshoppers  
that one day darken the sun —  
another year  
the cut worms flatten his only crop  
(a hail storm razes his crop the following year  
& something within him dies —  
between the noonday lantern & windrattled windows  
the distances grow)

he refuses to follow others who curse their God  
& travel north —  
he turns to something inside himself  
& builds a small altar next to the radio  
in the corner of the living room  
where he drinks his sunday chokecherry wine  
& prays in another language  
while the rest of the family walks to mass  
once a month in wood mountain

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### *v birth certificate*

the birth certificate —  
carrying it now in my pocket  
like my father's worn ten dollar bill  
i have been stopped by policemen in distant cities —  
have been asked:  
what do these letters & numbers mean . . .  
where is this place  
where were you born

### *vi the mirror*

the mirror  
the sioux thirst dance —  
a human wheel of young dancers  
moving within a motionless circle of people  
(the prairie sky  
a mirror for the medicine wheel  
reflecting birth life change death  
& all things)

wood mountain & the gods in these forests  
where i am an alien  
searching for the meaning of meaning  
in the ghostfilled histories  
circling my father's aging face