

Going Wild in the City:

Four Variations on Themes From aneco

By Candace Savage

***A city is nothing but streets and edifices
teeming with memories.***

Winnipeg filmmaker Guy Maddin,
Globe and Mail, Sept. 8, 2007

Saskatoon may be the only city on the continent, or even in the world, that is named for a berry. Not for us the borrowed splendor of a hero like Captain Vancouver or the dignity of a place name imported from Europe, as Calgary and Edmonton were. No, when our town was formally incorporated a hundred-plus years ago, the leadership opted to launch their new metropolis under the sign of a wild purple fruit. This decision was lovably eccentric—an act of poetic daring—but really: what were those old geezers thinking?

Cast your mind back a century, to the time when the choice was made. Imagine a scrawl of clapboard buildings on the banks of the *Kisikaciwan Sipi*, and a big land filled with light: sunlight by day, starlight by night. Notice the tangle of berry bushes along the river and the flocks of small birds feeding on the fruit. Listen to the friend who tells you that these berries are called *misaskwatomina* (an old word, the same in both Blackfoot and Cree) and that these bountiful shrubs had helped to sustain life on the prairies for hundreds of centuries.

To the ancestors, the saskatoon bush had been a mainstay, along with the buffalo. Not only could the berries be eaten out of the hand--so juicy and sweet--but they could also be dried for winter and mixed with fat and

powdered meat, to make pemmican, or added to soups and stews for an extra burst of nutrition and flavour. The bark could be made into medicines for treating the complications of childbirth or combined with other plants for contraception. The woody stems were ideal for tools because they were straight and tough, and they were valued by women for digging sticks and by men for weapons. In the right hands, an arrow of saskatoon wood, tipped with a point of stone, could bring down a buffalo.

Long before anyone thought of constructing a city, the stretch of riverbank on which Saskatoon now stands already had a name. In a letter to the Saskatoon *Daily Star* in 1919, the Rev. Edward Ahenakew explained how, in the old days, his people—the Plains Cree bands who wintered around Fort Carleton—had come this way every spring to cut shafts for arrows and bows, before continuing south to hunt buffalo. They called this place *Mane me sas kwa tan (manimisaskwahtan)*,” Ahenakew wrote, or “the place where the saskatoon willows are taken from.” “This is the explanation given by my people who have been in touch with the place for generations.”

The people who founded the city, by contrast, had not been in touch with this place for long. Perhaps, by choosing to echo the old name-- *saskwahtan*, Saskatoon--they were expressing their need to belong here, on the banks of this ancient river. Or perhaps they were voicing a longing to create a city that knows where it is, mid-way between the past and the future. Any place that is named for the saskatoon deserves to be exquisite.

***They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot.***

Joni Mitchell,
“Big Yellow Taxi,” ca. 1970

Hold on to the thought of *manimisaskwahtan*. You may find that it is a pleasant distraction the next time you are stuck in traffic in the city's North End or trudging across a parking lot on the outskirts of Big Box hell. For whatever its founders had in mind, the Saskatoon of the early twenty-first century does not always live up to the promise of its prairie-berry name. However much we may love the place, we have to admit that life in this city—or any city—is sometimes bleak.

The process of urbanization always comes at a cost, not all of which can be tallied in dollars and cents. The more we gain in creature comforts, the more we seem to lose in intimate day-to-day contact with the natural world. What would it be worth to us to wake up on a Saturday morning in summer and hear the humming of bees and the quiet song of birds, instead of the weekend chorus of lawnmowers--or to look up at night and see stars flooding across the Milky Way, instead of the strange ambient glow of the city? What does it cost us to walk on pavement, instead of on the earth? At its worst, the city is a dead zone in which nature is a fugitive, always on the run. At its worst, the city makes us feel like displaced persons, out of touch both with ourselves and with the rest of creation.

From its beginnings as a cluster of frail structures dwarfed by a wide prairie sky, Saskatoon has grown into a sprawl of office towers, strip malls, apartments, condos and luxury houses that now consumes almost 145 square kilometers, or 56 sections, of land. Truth to tell, however, our collective ecological footprint is much larger than that. The municipal landfill,

that rising monument to our misuse of the Earth's resources, lies outside city limits, in the Rural Municipality of Corman Park, but make no mistake about it: the garbage is all ours. What's more, much of the stuff that we ultimately consign there has been drawn from the four corners of the world, at an unseen cost to the quality of air, water, wildlife habitat and human health in distant places.

According to a report on the "Ecological Footprints of Canadian Municipalities and Regions" released by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in 2004 (with an update the following year), the average resident of Saskatoon uses the resources of 7.23 hectares of land and water per year. Given a global resource base of only 1.9 hectares per person, that means we are consuming almost four times our share and more than the planet can possibly sustain into the future.

For the first time in history, more than half of the world's human population now lives in cities, and the proportion will surely go up, as millions more people crowd into slums and suburbs around the world each month. What if those billions of new urban dwellers all want to live like us? Imagine: a billion more cars spewing exhaust into the atmosphere, worsening the trauma of climate change and ozone depletion. Imagine: a billion more cast-off TVs and computer monitors lying in the dump, leaching toxic metals into the soil and water. Or stop for a minute, and imagine a charming middle-sized city on the banks of a shining river. Imagine: something better.

***There is nothing unnatural
about New York City.***

David Harvey, *Justice, Nature
and the Geography of Difference*, 1996

Human beings are as natural as any organisms on Earth, as much a part of the living world as the birds or the bees or the berry bushes. We are a social species with an innate need for one another's company. Just as ants make anthills and prairie dogs live in colonies, so humans have an inclination to construct towns and cities. Although a tract of bi-levels with two-car garages is no doubt an extravagant response to this urge, there is nothing inherently unnatural about the desire to have close neighbours. And while urbanization is inevitably destructive--often transforming the original ecosystem almost beyond recall--the process also creates new opportunities for nature to take hold. At its best, a city is an ongoing collaboration between its human residents and the wild things that move in to share our living space with us.

No city can close its doors to the natural world. Saskatoon, in particular, lies open to wind and weather and is accessible to any critter that chooses to walk or swim or soar along the river. A complete census of the city's population would have to include not only the people who live here but also the pelicans at the weir and the cormorants that roost on the cables at Spadina and 33rd St. It would take note of the gulls that cry on the sandbars in spring and the sandhill cranes--gangly, gargling--that drift overhead in the fall. It might have a special column for honoured visitors like otters and the cougars that, on rare and wondrous occasions, soft-foot it along the shore.

Even though the ecology of Saskatoon is very different than it was a century ago—even though much has been lost—life in its splendour goes on going on.

Some of the birds and animals that make their homes in the city are survivors from the native prairie: gophers, for example, have been gophering here since the Ice Ages. But many, if not most, of our nonhuman neighbours have turned up in recent years to take advantage of the new, urban ecosystem that has sprung from our efforts. Saskatoon is a garden city, as much planted as it is built, and a whole new suite of species has been drawn to the sheltering canopy of the urban forest. Tree-loving birds such as robins, chickadees and yellow warblers--rarities on the grasslands--are now among our most familiar and welcome companions. Even apparently desolate urban environments, like the scruffy margins of an industrial lot or a graveled alley, help to keep the world abuzz, by providing habitat for ground-nesting bees and other insects.

A saskatoon bush in a garden is still a saskatoon, and the bees that visit the blossoms still enable it to bear fruit. Let's sit in this garden together, let's walk these city streets, and talk about the future and its possible beauty.

***The Possible's slow fuse is lit
By the Imagination!***

Emily Dickinson,
Complete Poems, 1924

The people who cut saskatoon branches along the South Saskatchewan River hundreds of years ago could never have imagined this city, and we may be equally out of touch with the generations who will come after us. But we do

know, at the most basic level, something about what they will need: clean air, clean food, clean water. A connection with the natural world. An opportunity to share their memories, hopes and dreams with one another.

Whatever else a city may be—an ecological black hole that sucks up resources, a vibrant garden where life can find refuge, both or something more—it is fundamentally a place where human beings come together. At night, we dream our private dreams. By day, we wake up, wash our faces, get dressed and go out in public. By bringing our private thoughts into public spaces, as the artists of *aneco* have done, we engage one another in conversation about the things that matter to us. Who we are. Where we come from. What inheritance we'd like to leave for our great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren.

If Saskatoon currently has a collective vision of the future, it seems to be to grow up and become a *real* city—another Calgary, perhaps—with lots of tall buildings, people rushing around, and a constant humming of cash registers. But while we've been chasing this ambition, by expanding our retail capacity and servicing suburban sprawl, the City of Calgary has been taking a good hard look at what it has become. Shamed by the highest per capital ecological footprint in the country, the municipal government has decided to take its foot off the gas and invest, big time, in conservation. Meanwhile, plans are afoot to extend the green-up beyond City Hall and transform the whole booming conurbation. If they can go wild in Cowtown, why not in the Big Berry, too? Just imagine the best that we could do!

There was a time when Saskatoon was nothing but an optimist's dream. What were the chances that a city would flourish way out on the northern plains? Yet over the last century, we've seen that hope take root. It is now up to us to make sure that this place bears sweet and bountiful fruit.