

IN A NORTHERN LANDSCAPE

by Timothy Mason

Emma (16) - Thorson (19)

The Play: The northern landscape of the title in Timothy Mason's haunting memory play is a farming community in Minnesota in the late 1920's. The story concerns the love between a brother and sister and the shocking, untimely consequences that result. Samuel and Emma are the children of Matthew and Charlotte Bredahl. Mr. Bredahl teaches Philosophy at the local college, the same college that Samuel attends. The mother is devoted to her family, her poetry, and is guided and comforted by the Bible, which she quotes from generously. Samuel and Emma's life is like the landscape, bleak and isolated. The inability to find connections with any of their contemporaries drives them closer together as the story is told in flashback. We first see Samuel's horrific fate at the jaws of a pack of wild dogs, then the charred remains of the family home, a chilling metaphor for the shell of the family that is left after Samuel's death. The play crosses back and forth between time over a two-year period to reconstruct the events that led to such an end. But the story is never a simple matter of "what went wrong," or "who was right." Throughout the play we struggle to understand the complexities of the Bredahl family, which is not unlike any family. The philosophy that drives the father is no more reassuring to Samuel and Emma than the words offered in the mother's Bible lessons. What seems to Emma and Samuel as pure and right and constant is the love they share. The chemistry between the siblings ignites a passion in them which destroys them before they can understand it. It is this twist of fate and honesty that brings the condemnation of the community and ultimately leads to Samuel's death and the collapse of the family. When it is over, the townspeople are forgiving, the evil has stopped, but what remains can never be the life Emma, Charlotte, or Matthew would have wanted. In the end, we are left to question the strength of our own convictions, if not the very texture of our lives.

The Scene: Emma's rabbit has recently been killed by wild dogs. Anders Thorson, a college student in Mr. Bredahl's class, has just come in from burying the rabbit. It is obvious that Thorson is interested in Emma. It is perhaps not so obvious, but never-the-less true, that Emma is not interested in him.

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(The lights become cold and angular. After a moment, Anders Thorson, dressed in a heavy winter overcoat and wearing a fur cap with earflaps, backs hurriedly out of the kitchen door. He obviously has just recently come indoors, and is still showing signs of the cold.)

THORSON: *(Shouting through the kitchen door.)* I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't mean to track up your kitchen. I'll...I'll take them off out on the porch. *(He exits out the screen door and returns a few moments later without his heavy boots. Alone in the room, he seems ill at ease, as well as cold. Eventually he moves to the closed kitchen door and talks through it.)* The earth was like flint. Well, hard as rock, anyway. I had to chip away at it for almost an hour, even to dig such a shallow grave as that one was. *(Emma enters from the kitchen, wearing an apron. Her hands are covered with flour and bits of dough, which she is wiping off with a cloth.)* I didn't get more than a foot down, I'm afraid—I just couldn't manage any more—but anyway they should be safe from the dogs now.

EMMA: I appreciate it, Anders.

THORSON: It's strange, having such a hard frost so early in December. They're not burying *anyone*, you know. Not for months to come. They send 'em to the big ice house in Dundas, to wait for the thaw. Up in the loft they are, I've seen 'em. It's strange. The earth just isn't ready for them, so there they are in a row, covered up with stiff white sheets, just waiting. And that row just keeps getting longer. People got to be strong out here, but they just aren't strong enough, it seems. I don't like what's happening, two hangings in two months, and that old woman from Faribault who set herself on fire, it's unnatural. My brother told me about one of them, one of those that hanged herself—she was just a little girl, Emma, fifteen years old maybe, and my brother said that when they found her in the barn, they could tell that the rope had broke twice. Two times it broke and three times she strung it up again, the rope getting shorter and shorter, but the third time it worked. That bread sure smells good.

EMMA: She must not have had anything to live for... What a terrible thing, not to have anything to live for. Oh, if only I could have sat beside her, and held her, and talked away the darkness from her eyes. Only fifteen. Just a child, really.

THORSON: And it's not just your rabbits. Already they're calling it

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an epidemic. Some disease killing off all the rabbits, and those that do live—you don't dare eat their meat. I mean, not that *you* would, but lots of people keep 'em for their meat, live off of them in the winter, but now nobody dares. It's strange. I'm sorry about your rabbits, Amma.

EMMA: I'm not. Oh, of course, I'm *sad*—very sad to lose those sweet quiet things. But I know they're in heaven now.

THORSON: Rabbits?

EMMA: Of course, Anders. What more perfect creatures for heaven than those soft, silent, gentle beasts. Don't laugh, now, Mr. Thorson, I mean it. Not a sound they make. And they always look to me so ancient—like some creature that is from some other age, and with some other wisdom than ours... I think you *are* smiling at me, thinking I'm foolish, aren't you?

THORSON: I am in love with you, Emma.

EMMA: *(After a beat, stern.)* Hush.

THORSON: What? I'm leaving school at the end of this semester, Emma. It's not the place for me, I know that now. I used to resent it... I used to resent your father *and* Sam, I thought they were just acting superior. Well, they *were* superior, it seemed. *(Brief, nervous laugh.)* Not just in their minds, but everything about them, I always felt so clumsy when I was with them, they made me feel like a fool, like a big clumsy dull witted giant, but I'm not all that big, I know that now. I'm just average, but whenever I'm With Sam he makes me feel huge and ugly and slow. Like some big side of beef, you know? And I hated it, I almost hated him for that, *and* your father. Like when I would laugh and your father would look at me the way he does, looking out at me from under those eyebrows, not moving a muscle. Just looking. It would make me go all red...and then...very, very cold. Like I just wanted to wait for the day when I could look at *him* like that. But not any more, no...no I know now that I'm just as good as they are, no better, no worse, just different from them, that's all. Golly, Sam is so...sort of graceful almost, when he moves. It used to make me sick to watch him with you, compared to him I felt like an oaf, you know? But not now. I'm leaving school at the end of the semester, in January... Your father was right all along, he didn't mean any harm, he was right about me not belonging there. I've already got

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a part-time job in sales, and there'll be a full-time sales job with a good salary waiting for me at the end of January, I'll really be making some money, Emma. And I know now that I'm not such a worthless sort as they used to make me feel. I'm all right, don't you think, Emma? They didn't mean any harm, did they? *(Long silence. Emma looking at Thorson.)* Emma?

EMMA: Please don't talk that way.

THORSON: You used to do it to me, too, the same thing. Making me feel... *(Pause.)* I am in love with you.

EMMA: Stop that talk! *(Beat.)* I am very happy for you, Anders, in your plans for the future. The future does not much concern me, but I think that now you have something to live for, and that's really all any of us needs, isn't it? I wish you all of the best.

THORSON: That's not what I'm saying... Don't you care for me, Emma?

EMMA: And now I have a job, too—isn't it grand? Whoever would have thought that Emma Bredahl would be a working girl? Mr. Ferguson was sceptical at first, I could tell, but Sam taught me so very well, teaching me everything he knew about the job, so I could take over for him when he returned to college. I may not have a college education—neither of us will, will we, Anders—but we'll both be working, isn't that a nice thought? *(Small pause.)* The future does not much concern me—not nearly so much as now does. But you have found something, I hope, and I have found something... You see, Dilsey didn't have anything to live for after the dogs got to Jack, so it's just as well she and her babies went to heaven. *(Samuel enters from the second-level L. door, and stands unnoticed at the top of the stairs.)*

THORSON: What do you live for, Emma? That job at Ferguson's?

EMMA: *(After a pause.)* It's a secret. *(Thorson sees Samuel standing at the top of the staircase.)*

THORSON: *(After a pause.)* I think maybe this house is too full of secrets. *(Small pause.)* Remember what I told you, Emma. Think about it. *(He backs towards the screen door.)* Please. *(He turns towards the screen door but turns back just as he reaches it. He looks up at Samuel again, and at Emma.)* I left the shovel leaning against the shed.

(Thorson exits.)