



Walking in the Ocean

By Taylor Brorby

Sage swirls in my nostrils amid dry dirt, the texture of baking flour. I squint from the top of Pretty Butte, gazing into Montana, Indiangrass brushing my sun-warmed calves. Indiangrass, what the Lakota called “red grass with fluffy light-colored end,” swings atop the crown of Pretty Butte, undulates like ripples across a lake. I grab the grass, run my dirt-coated hands along its weathered stock to the crown, where, like a firework, frills explode outward, giving the grass weight against the prairie wind that seeks to snap it to the soil.

*

Sixty-five million years ago, when dinosaurs were freshly extinct and the western half of North America buckled and folded like sea waves, sediment splintered as wind, ice, streams, and rivers shaped and broke the soil, creating the Rocky Mountains. The sediment slid down the eastern slopes of rough rock, was carried across the land through river and stream channels, and set down like seeds in North Dakota. Throughout Montana, Idaho, and South Dakota, volcanoes spewed and belched embers into the air.

Wind swirled and deposited ash among the mud and silt from the infant Rockies. Bit by bit, sandstone, siltstone, and mudstone settled amidst the emerging prairie. Plants blossomed and wilted as flesh and sand and bone and rock continued to press and crush across the millennia, coloring and contrasting different strata throughout the Badlands. Still, today, with annual rainfall of fifteen inches--most rain coming in downpours--water continues to shape and nourish the landscape of western North Dakota, quilting the prairie with grass.

*

In 2013, the North Dakota Attorney General, Wayne Stenehjem, created a plan to set aside eighteen Extraordinary Places in the state. Worry over the rapid and rampant development of shale oil in western North Dakota caused some residents to fear for their favorite geological features.

Pretty Butte, one of the eighteen, is bricked on the border of Montana and North Dakota. Solitary and rugged, the butte rises like a ship's sail on the horizon. Located dozens of miles south of Beach, North Dakota, Pretty Butte is the natural skyscraper in this uninhabited land. No road to Pretty Butte appears on a printed map.

In July, sweet clover carpets the prairie in golden regalia, creating an ocean of yellow. Badgers, jack rabbits, rattlesnakes, deer, sage grouse, and pronghorn antelope navigate among the wash of a lemon-colored landscape. Coumarin, a vanilla-scented compound, gives clover its characteristically sweet smell, draping the dusty and dry prairie in a baked perfume.

In childhood I never knew about Pretty Butte, traversing through the North Dakota Badlands on family vacations to and from Billings, Montana, along Interstate 94. Like other gems of the prairie, Pretty Butte is far from town.

I decided to travel to Pretty Butte, seeing this Extraordinary Place for myself. Growing up amid stories of Lewis and Clark, George Catlin, and Theodore Roosevelt I believed myself to be a hearty pursuer of beauty in a broken landscape.

Extraordinary is a relative term. In flyover country the scenery is often painted dull yellow at best and labeled drab brown. Ocher, sienna, and sepia stir little in many people's imaginations, reminding them of vintage family photographs shut away in shoeboxes in tucked-away corners of closets. It makes sense that few people covet the land of the northern Great Plains.

Near Pretty Butte clover ends and bentonite begins, a layer of clay commonly associated with coal, though the color varies from black, to ash, to bone-white, to grey. Subtly in hue is the speciality of the land surrounding Pretty Butte. At times, driving along Old Highway 16 feels something akin to the lava rock of Hawaii, where bends in the broken roadway reveal sweeping strawberry red scoria and onyx colored coal. Cottonwood trees mark rain-fed gullies and dry creek beds awaiting a summer slosh of rain. For miles the only sign of development, apart from the roadway, are rusted weather vanes marking former attempts at farming and ranching among the bad lands of western North Dakota.

*

I am from the land of fire, the land where metal meets rock and busts and breaks 400 million years of Earth's slow, slow process of decay and resurrection. In this place I

learned how to see, with a palette of colors too drab for the fast-moving world--sienna, burnt umber, sepia, ocher--and learned how to move across the bad lands of western North Dakota, over the quartz and mica, bentonite clay, through valleys veined with coal and rubbed like rouge with strawberry-colored scoria, tripping and falling across driftwood and deer bone, finding myself in a fit of delight in desolate terrain.

The thistles and brambles that stuck to my cotton clothes reminded me of my rootedness to place: How this land bore the blood of slain men and women who called this place home, who set teepees among sage and built earthen lodges from chocolate-colored mud and fallen cottonwood trees, before my ancestors arrived in rickety wagons from Norway and Russia. The smell of sage stung my nostrils as nature's perfume worked in me a fondness for fauna. The valleys and coulees shaped the contours of my imagination as I bound over hills, across fields, carrying myself to the faraway land of Somewhere, a place where I could paint with pastels, send fishing lures hurling through the air like shot-puts across the field.

But this land is now broken, pressed and pushed to give up its precious oil, black blood that feeds pocketbooks of plenty and lays the land waste. This land now looks different, looks like a woman whose face has bore the stress of years too burdensome to mention.

As I walk through the land of childhood delight, I am socked in the gut with adulthood concerns--worry of water in an arid land that blisters and never heals, bleary-eyed from witnessing the decapitation of buttes shaped from the rubble of the Rockies, carried over the streams and rivers of millennia ago, settling and shaping the Badlands of the prairie.

I want a place to call home, a place to return to that does not bear the burden of a fast-moving world, a place where I can stumble and trip over leafy spurge and gaze in wide-eyed wonder at bluebell flowers, where I can forget the history of my own destruction, my own needs and wants.

In the land of fire, where gas is burned and the dirt and clay is injected with saltwater like a patient needing a transfusion, I wonder where my voice is. Have I become immune to speaking out for what I love? For cottonwoods and sage grouse, pronghorn and prairie grasses, pallid sturgeon and wide open vistas.

As a child, I drank in the sky like a cup of cool water on a hot day. And now, as I step into adulthood responsibility, I wonder if my words fall upon deaf ears as I stand on the step of tomorrow, shouting out on behalf of everything I love.

*

Because we can stand over grass we believe ourselves to be dominate, to be in control, perhaps this is why we perceive grass to quiver in our presence, when it really sways.

*

Grass whispers on the prairie. Early in the morning, when I dream in the Badlands of western North Dakota, voices of sage, big bluestem, and switchgrass swirl in my ears, dance in the drums of my canals, and, as they finger their way over scoria and clay, head east across the Great Plains.

Grass contemplates growth. Before unfurling towards the sky, prairie grass shoots down deep roots, securing itself to the soil, sowing itself to the land before emerging.

The prairie, forever expansive, cannot be taken in; no camera picture recreates the grandeur and scale of the patchwork of grass. The prairie washes over you. The prairie, like the ocean, defies human perception. As a child, I ran towards the horizon, sprinted over the flowing hills, and through muddy creeks, trying to reach the line that was forever present and constantly elusive. Like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, I could never find it, but it seemed right under my feet, somewhere.

In western North Dakota, before the roughhewn palette of purples and pinks and grays and browns of the Badlands, the grass pulses, ripples and roils, whips and waves against a canvas of gold and brown and blue. The grass, when flicked by the wind, snaps against the sky. If I went hiking with you, showed you Indiangrass, Sideoats Grama, Junegrass, Buffalograss, and Foxtail Barley, would you care? Would you imprint their images upon your mind and recognize the necessity of a community of roots, and stalks, and stems?

*

Nearly one-third of the nation's National Grasslands are in North Dakota. 1,033,271 acres of the Little Missouri National Grasslands—the nation's largest grassland--envelope Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

*

On the prairie, ocher and sienna snap against a curtain of cobalt, creating a tapestry of tones, dancing across a line of sky. In a world of roots, there is security in color. Yet in my deep core there is a yearning for a rootedness to place, a place where sage floats and the sweet scent of bluebell whirls during afternoon hikes. The prairie of my childhood imbues my body.

*

When Melville stood on the banks of the Mississippi, gazing into what would become the Breadbasket of the continent, he stood stock-still in wonderment. The grass, he said, the grass is a mightier ocean than my Atlantic.

*

When the prairie was settled, men and women and children came from the East, hoping to find wealth in the land. Instead, many found frustration, aridity, and a deceptive isolation. What many didn't know is that the prairie's wealth lies underground.

Rootedness is the hallmark of the prairie, with over one hundred fifty feet of roots resting in a simple square meter of sod.

As Europeans came west, the tall grasses were clipped, were trimmed, were all but eradicated, a few islands of grass swaying in the wind. And as we pushed through Iowa and Minnesota, moving towards the mixed and shortgrass prairies of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Montana, we discovered that many do not know how to find beauty in a brownscape.

*

Clip, clip; trim, trim. Americans cut, mow, fertilize, design, and imagine their yards, their own miniature kingdoms of grass. Ribboned throughout neighborhoods from Phoenix to

Chicago, Atlanta to Bangor, Kentucky Bluegrass mats much of America; a grass that fits the framework of a one-size-fits-all lawn model.

When ships hauled Europeans to the New World, many brought Kentucky Bluegrass seeds and introduced it into the soil of North America. Centuries later, when grass became “managed,” we zoned and qualified roots based on aesthetic appeals, forgetting that there are more colors than green in a tapestried landscape.

*

From afar it looks huge: acres of wheat bursting through the soil, reaching towards the sky, vast and intimidating. I am eight and am enveloped in a sea of golden husks. Stiff and strong, they prick my face as I lie down. The sun is shining and a few clouds dapple the sky. I close my eyes and hear the rush of the wind as it streaks through the amber waves of grain around me. This is my America: quiet to most but insanely alive. I sit on the coarse soil. Some clumps of dirt give way to my weight and collapse into dust. I think of how unique this is; how I am the only one doing this in the field behind my house. I never see anyone else run and disappear in an ocean of wheat. While lying down I feel like a fox, unseen and easily able to surprise anyone or thing that comes my way. In the earth that crumbles there are worms, above me insects hover and hawks look for any field mouse who dares to mistakenly leave the safety of his burrow. I tend to think this field is chaos. It is, isn't it? I mean, from afar the reason I love running through it is because its hugeness invites me to; just like a lake, it begs to be disturbed. But from down here it's ordered. And this field is ordered: rows upon rows sewn into the broken earth, trusted by the farmer that his measly seeds will break through the earth yet again and bring in a bountiful harvest. I'm thankful for something as ordinary as this field: it brings me into the business of the bees and worms and grain constantly growing and changing and depending upon each other in the way that I long to depend on others--in a necessary way to let life keep on going.

*

I grew up among a delicate ocean of grass. In western North Dakota, where the land is dry due to limited rainfall, mottled waves of Big Bluestem, Yellow Indiangrass, and Switchgrass ripple across hills, through gullies, and over buttes. The land moves.

The grass, as if some nimble dance partner, tangos with the wind, sometimes sultry and other times upright and stiff, as if straightened by a dance partner's arm. I like this idea, the idea that the grass is rhythmic, feels the pulse of a beat, and sashays. I like that the horizon moves.

As a child, I thought people were dancing across the North Dakota horizon. The line where the earth ends and the sky begins appeared to be filled with moving bodies, as if dancers were swinging their partners on the stippled prairie. I discovered the horizon forever sways in North Dakota.

And yet I wanted to touch it, to reach out to the horizon, to grab hold of it and learn the dance steps. In my grandmother's kitchen I learned to polka and waltz while standing on her feet. As an honored dance partner I, as a four year-old, fell in love with dancing on the prairie.

*

The horizon of the prairie is untouchable. Expanding, it remains elusive, being both ephemeral and lasting.

In childhood, I ran through rippling wheat, stiff stalks of sage, and dusty dirt clumps, hoping to reach the edge of the horizon, hoping to see my place in the world. I wanted to feel as if I were standing on the edge of a flattened earth, toes tipping over a ledge, looking across the great ocean that shaped my perception.

But the prairie stretched on.

The prairie still roils on windy days, stirring waves of green, amber, and ochre, only broken by a solid line of sky. Perhaps this is why so many men from the prairie join the navy. Churning oceans do not intimidate wind-whipped people.

Grass, though, is little loved by many people. Less majestic than mountains, and devoid of forests, prairie grass is part of the limited vegetation that can spring back from the force of wind washing across the Great Plains.

The grasses of the Great Plains paint a patchwork of variety--Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indiangrass, Sideoats Grama, Blue Grama, Junegrass, Buffalograss, Switchgrass, Western Wheatgrass, Foxtail Barley, and Needle-and-Thread all root themselves to the soil of western North Dakota.

The Great Plains, though, are not great for human habitability. Arid and boundless, the plains prove to be difficult and demanding for agriculture.

*

In 2007, squatters started taking root in the National Grasslands of North Dakota. Pump jacks, well pads, and fracking sites started sprouting across the horizon of the prairie. Stiff and strong, these iron giants began pulling and sucking shale oil from deep beneath the strong prairie grass of western North Dakota.

*

And I wonder, too, if there isn't a lesson to be learned in the prairie. A lesson against verticality that highlights expansiveness. Bluffs, buttes, mesas, and trees imprint outlines against a billow of sky, furnishing vantage points in a fibered world of foliage. But the prairie proves too large for the eye's desire of height; sweeping against rugged rock, grass must be appreciated from the ground, where roots anchor sturdy, sleek stalks in crevices of clay and stone and dirt. A square-yard of prairie holds 150 miles of roots, weaving, coursing, meandering like a river of pleasure, searching and securing grass in a land of wind.

*

Now, when I look at the horizon of western North Dakota I do not see dancers, but a strip of fire flicking across the sky. I cry for water.

*

Perhaps this is why I return the prairie: While climbing and stumbling among the grass and scoria, sage and clay, I long for a place to call home, a place to return to that does not bear the burden of a fast-moving world, a place where I can stumble and trip over clover and gaze in wide-eyed wonder at flowers, where I can forget my own needs and wants, and root myself to the land I love.

