

Why is it that travelers across the middle of America scurry from the forests to the next clump of trees, or hop and skip from city to city by way of the unsurprising freeways, making haste across the open-skied grasslands as if through a dangerous minefield? *Where*, I ask myself, on miles of one-lane road across the heart of the spacious Sand Hills wherein I neither meet nor pass a car nor see another living human being for hours at a time, *where do the dangers lurk, if not among the trees or in the cities?*

I am at ease here on the shelterless plains under the unblinking gaze of the sun. I have nothing to conceal. I do not require distraction from the perceived monotony of grass or the trackless sweep of naked horizon or the shocking curvature of the earth's great fluxing spine. This is what I have



come to see, these very tableaux that cities, freeway designers and progress have conspired to bypass.

There are ancient stories being told here by the grass and repeated by the wind: a hero's quest, an illusive grail, promised lands, plagues, famines and other senseless acts attributed to the will of an otherwise sensible God. Does the land ever laugh, I wonder, at the thought of so innocently foiling our misplaced ambitions? At the counter-productivity of draining an aquifer to grow shallow-rooted perennial crops on

sun-pummeled land? All across the Great Plains I noticed that corn planted outside the reach of the rotary sprinklers was baked beyond value even as silage for cattle. Under what illusions do we persist in such stubborn folly?

The plains are not a place to travel if you are in search of a sense of invincibility. They are, however, the ideal classroom for instruction in the frailty and impermanence of mortal endeavors.

The desiccated bones of mammoth cottonwood trees, the great divining rods of the prairie, mark the spot where water—inch by inch and drought by drought—took its bittersweet time passing away. Any vacant building once lovingly crafted of scarce and costly lumber is now wind-bleached, life-leached, and played to ruination. Homesteads fold into irregular pleats around faulted foundations like the sprung elastic waistband of a skirt, a sagging impropriety for one who once stood so plumb-line-straight and proud, with lights twinkling in her eyes. A gimpy-legged, toothless windmill grimaces in the breeze, a mocking bouquet of nettle and bur springing up through clefts in the rusted stock tank at its feet. And on a back-broken barn, a loose flap of tin roofing dangles rusty-red like a partial amputation, waving a forlorn farewell in the perpetual prairie wind. These mark the final resting places of aspirations, hopes and inheritances. The county courthouse is crammed with brittle quit claim deeds, the death certificates that testify to the demise of dreams.

There are not many, I suppose, who pass this way and dare to think that every plot of corn is a Flanders Field of unmarked graves for the grasses that fell in the Great War to civilize a continent. I am alone in my seditious sorrow among the proud cornhuskers.

I thought many times of stopping by the side of the road and sitting cross-legged on the ground to interview the earth under neatly-disciplined rows of corn. The exchange would be, I imagined, similar to conversing with an elderly woman. *I feel so worn out*, says Grandmother Earth in response to my query about her well-being. *I don't seem to have the gumption I used to, and I just want to rest, but they pump me full of tonics and what-not, and I keep going on, though for the life of me I can't think of a single reason why I should.*

I did not stop to sit under the corn, apprehensive of the toxic mélange of pesticides and the muscular fertilizers used to impel crops up out of the sterile ground. I thought briefly but vividly of my North Dakota grandfather, whose progressive loss of muscle control attested to the rape and pillage of critical dopamine-producing neurons in his brain, a frighteningly common syndrome among rural residents, most prevalent among those who drink private well water and work with agricultural chemicals. There were many tiny deaths leading up to the final one, not least the unceremonious funeral for my dignified grandfather's ability to swallow the foodstuffs he once grew to feed so many of us.

I would not have minded resting amid the patient pasture grasses. Beef cattle, latter-day heirs to the niche left vacant by bison, still graze on what rough country escaped the persistence of plows. But a hundred years of fire suppression, drought and overgrazing has diminished even that most dependable of natural resources, these ten-thousand-year-old grasses. The vultures that hover now are as likely to be looking to subdivide as searching for supper. What is it about unbroken ground that stirs up the urge to plow, fence, build or, if nothing else, mow the irrepressible self-expression of grasses down to uniform length?



I am cleft between the ancient pull of farm blood in my veins and my new-found appreciation for the ingenuity and longevity of native prairie. I am torn between the sweeping symmetrical splendor of cultivated crops and my awareness of the terrible cost they exact on dwindling reserves, of the economic and mortal dues they have demanded of my own family. I am sad about small farm foreclosures and forced auctions, angry at the sprawling corporations who control what was once a way of life and has now become an industry, angriest because I am dependent upon the food they provide with such mechanistic efficiency, food devoid of the seasoning of sweat and tears, bereft of the touch of dedicated, reverent hands.

This Elegy for Grass is, as the name implies, a lamentation, but the pseudo-para-quasi naturalist-ecologist-historian is uncomfortable with a litany of losses that does not at least hint at a route to redemption. She writes:

If I were a musician I'd write a snappy tune and we could sing together to leaven this bitter bread a little: *it's hard to point a finger if we're all holding hands*. I happen to know that the Pilgrim is not assessing blame, only noting that great damage has been done and we as a people, a culture, a nation are caught in the jaws of a paradox wherein we are both victim and perpetrator, the proverbial snake devouring its own tail.

Environmentalist is more or less a dirty word among traditional farmers and ranchers and perhaps among the working class in general. We joke that it would be safer to declare yourself a vegetarian at the Flint Hills Beef Fest or a feminist at a meeting of the male-dominated Kansas Livestock Association than to tell your ranching neighbors you are an environmentalist. This is a sad symptom of the polarization by which our culture is so sundered: rich or poor, white or not-white, Republican or Democrat, urban or rural.

I happen to think that people who make their living from the land are the most likely and potentially most effective environmentalists of all, but unfortunately, the word itself has acquired an off-putting connotation, associated predominately with governmental regulations and the segment of our population possessing enough disposable income to afford whitewater raft excursions, mountain-climbing expeditions, vacation homes in spectacular settings and the leisure to champion the cause-of-the-month—not-so-politely dismissed as *damn tree-huggers* or worse.

I am not the first to consider that maybe it is not a love of the land we lack, but a common language to describe that reverence in such a way that everyone—from birdwatchers to bow hunters, conservationists to community gardeners, farmers to fly fishers, ranchers to rock climbers—realizes we're all saying much the same thing, the first step toward finding a shared agenda for change.

The pace of change in our world is bewildering and we have been broken to the bit of authority, trusting our local, state, national, industry and community leaders to know what is right for us. And perhaps more dangerous, we readily buy the products that marketers tell us we cannot live without. We could vote more effectively with our wallets if we cared to ferret out the details of what we are supporting with our spending. Few of us, I suspect, feel any sense of power or responsibility to set change in motion or put a stop to changes that intuitively don't seem quite right.

I often use the word *progress* in quotation marks to indicate that I do not think our notions of progress are always particularly progressive. Yes, progress is generally quantitative—a *forward or onward movement*—which is measured in our culture as bigger, faster, higher-technology and more profitable. But progress also connotes qualitative development toward a *higher, better, or more advanced stage*, which introduces a slippery judgment into the calculations. I think this challenges us to examine our advances in a different light, which is something Warren Bennis alludes to in *An Invented Life*: "Every organization tempts its leaders to become preoccupied with the priorities of the moment at the cost of ignoring the overarching questions that determine the quality of all our lives, such questions as: Is this right? Is it good for our children? Is it good for the planet?"

True progress is often, I think, non-linear. It rises, falls, swings from side to side, and frequently loops back on itself in search of perspective and wisdom. *Three steps forward and two steps back* has a negative, anti-progressive connotation, but it's actually a very reflective way of moving ahead by smaller increments, of making sure we have not left something important behind, of testing our assumptions.

Sometimes it turns out that the way your grandmother did it was really the best way, even if her method was long on labor and short on instant gratification.

A friend of ours from Matfield Green dropped by the other day. She was coming out this way to release a raccoon she'd caught by live trap in her garden and thought she might as well haul a few vegetables to us in the same trip. As we leaned on the back of her pickup truck and chatted about the weather and gardening, she volunteered that none of these vegetables had been treated with pesticides. This surprised us both a little, since Toots is of the generation that was growing up around the time the wonders of agri-chemicals for pest control were first being touted, the same age group who thought Rachel Carson was overreacting in the 1960s. "Well," Toots explained, "I borrowed this little book about natural ways to keep bugs and worms off the vegetables because I've gotten to where I don't really like the thought of putting that other stuff on something I'm going to eat, you know? So I sprayed my plants with soapy water and, by golly, it worked."

Change takes place one mind at a time.

Carol, our neighbor who lives by choice in a hermitage down on Little Cedar Creek without electricity, telephone or running water, came by yesterday. She and I usually end up in a rousing and instructive conversation about what's busted in the world and how to fix it. "They're always talking about how to address unemployment rates," Carol said, using expansive hand gestures that ended with her right hand pointing left and her left hand point right, "while at the same time, developing more sophisticated technology that puts people out of work. It doesn't make any sense." I agreed. I had just visited a website on the history of pesticides and read this sentence several times: "If it weren't for herbicides we would still have 10-12% of the population working on farms rather than the 2% to produce enough food to sustain the U.S. population." I finally concluded, based on the tone and content of the site, that this was not a lament, but a song in praise of pesticides and, perhaps without consciousness of the implication, unemployment.

Without consciousness is a justification that doubles as an indictment. What possible excuse can there be for wandering half-asleep in a world that is changing as rapidly as ours?

∞ AWAKEN, O SLEEPERS ∞

I am a wide-awake pilgrim on a less-traveled road.

I listen to the wind that buoys the harrier on his hunt and broadcasts the winged warrior's haunting cry: *kree...kree*.

I sense the wild mustangs before I see them, some answering rumble in my blood responding to the drummed thunder of a message sent by their hooves across the reverberant earth.

I stand witness to a remnant of the once-great Trumpeter Swan Nation blowing reveille on their ancient horns and rising from the water with sun flung gold against white feathers.

I am a solitary sailor on a sea of grass. I navigate by a five-billion-year-old star under whose uncritical light many tides of enterprise have risen and subsided.

